Myth Can Make Reality More Intelligible
by misterpointy (MaCall)

Summary

*SLOW MODIFICATION CAN BE EFFECTIVE; MEN CHANGE BEFORE THEY NOTICE AND RESIST. THE DECADENT AND THE POWERFUL CHAMPION CONTINUITY. “NOTHING ESSENTIAL CHANGES.” THAT IS A MYTH. IT WILL BE REFUTED.*

—Jenny Holzer, “Inflammatory Essays”

In which a girl named Mac returns to the night of the particle accelerator explosion after a legendary mission, only to learn that everything has changed. Also: Barry has a twin sister named Caroline, Laurel moved from Starling to Central after C. N. R. I. was destroyed in the Undertaking, Sara is the first masked vigilante to debut in the Gem Cities, and more.

Notes

(1) This is the sequel to *A Book of Myths in Which Our Names Do Not Appear*. It’s also a reboot, so YMMV on whether or not you want to read the first part of the series. If not, cool. Start here.

(2) Any resemblance to characters from the comics is totally intentional. Any divergence
from canon is also intentional. I’d say this is canon-compliant through Arrow 1x22 (“Darkness on the Edge of Town”), since I’m not actively rewriting S1 of Arrow, but it diverges after the Undertaking in a very non-canon way. Beware.

(3) ETA 5/08/2018: THIS STORY HAS BEEN REFORMATTED. If you’re using Chrome or Firefox, you should be able to read the annotations by hovering over the bracketed numbers. Otherwise, endnotes are in the last chapter.

(4) Story and chapter titles are scrumped from “Truisms” by Jenny Holzer.
“With a stroke of lightning, 
the spark of divine inspiration ignited cheap newsprint 
and the superhero was born in an explosion of color and action.”

Grant Morrison, *Supergods* [1]

No one speaks the universal anguish 
of love anymore. Cherubs pack heat. 
They no longer use quivers— 
anything that trembles 
is a natural disaster.

Daphne Gottlieb, “Why Things Move”

Shock Value
Part 2
*Myth Can Make Reality More Intelligible*
Book I
*With a Stroke of Lightning*
Chapter 1
Bittersweet Caroline
(1 of 3)

“When you’re a kid, being a superhero seems easy. After all, the good guys always win by the end of the issue or the episode or arc. Always. They save the people who need saving, no matter the odds. When you’re a kid who’s lost everything, that’s exactly what you need. But being a hero here in the real world? It doesn’t quite work like that.”

Faith Herbert
*Faith* Vol.1, No.2 (“A Hero in the Real World”)
August, 2016

I
The New Is Nothing But a Restatement of the Old

It’s official: we have a vigilante of our very own here in Central City. There are reports of a blonde woman in black leather fighting crime dating back almost six months, since the first week of June. Greg Briggs [2] (29) violated a restraining order his ex-wife Lia Clay [3] (25) filed against him on October ninth. [4] After the blonde vigilante stopped him from assaulting his ex-wife during that seven-hour traffic jam on Interstate 670, [5] people started calling her the Huntress of the Highway. [6] Two nights ago, she introduced herself to Eddie Thawne (28), a detective with the Central City Police Department, as the Canary. Then, before he could arrest her, she allegedly smiled and said “that’s cute” before she ran off into the night.
Superman took to the skies when he stopped a plane from crashing into the World Trade Center in 2001.\footnote{After that, the Batman appeared on the streets of Gotham City in 2005\footnote{and became more than just an urban legend in 2008.}} Then the Arrow swooped onto the scene in Starling City last year, and people started to speak up about crimes the police are consistently unable to stop, about justice that is never served. With the appearances of the Caped Crusader, the Man of Steel, and the Emerald Archer, vigilantism became a politicized issue.

It was only a matter of time before other vigilantes crawled out of the woodwork to protect their cities in ways law enforcement can’t.

From “The Huntress of the Highway” by Iris West
Originally posted to thelightoftruth.tumblr.com\footnote{on 1 December 2013}

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Caroline Allen\footnote{is eleven years old when her father murders her mother. Barry Allen, her twin brother, insists that he saw something impossible that night and persists in believing their father is innocent. Caroline, not so much. Someone has to be the realistic twin. Barry has spent most of his life running away from what she thinks is the truth. Caroline has spent most of her life seeing through a camera because she doesn’t want to look at the world. Not without a lens or a filter to keep her from seeing too much. While her brother tries to solve impossible cases, she’s the one who faces the facts. Maybe that’s why she became a forensic photographer: the camera never lies. No matter how ugly the truth is.}
is eleven years old when her father murders her mother. Barry Allen, her twin brother, insists that he saw something impossible that night and persists in believing their father is innocent. Caroline, not so much. Someone has to be the realistic twin. Barry has spent most of his life running away from what she thinks is the truth. Caroline has spent most of her life seeing through a camera because she doesn’t want to look at the world. Not without a lens or a filter to keep her from seeing too much. While her brother tries to solve impossible cases, she’s the one who faces the facts. Maybe that’s why she became a forensic photographer: the camera never lies. No matter how ugly the truth is.

This is what she sees:

Fact: Henry Allen murdered Nora Allen.

Fact: Henry orphaned his children in three easy steps—by stabbing his wife in the heart, getting caught with the knife in his hand, and going to prison. Joe is a great dad, but he’s not their dad. Nobody has ever let them forget what happened to their mother, or who their father is. Maybe that’s why Barry is obsessed with proving Henry is innocent.

Fact: Henry is the reason Caroline grew up without a mother. Only a headstone that reads:

\textbf{NORA ALLEN}
\textit{BELOVED MOTHER}
\textit{The time she had with her children was precious.}
\textit{Her memory will forever be loved and missed by all.}\footnote{None of these facts are true, but scientists know the facts are malleable. Hypotheses can be wrong, even if they’ve been the right answer for decades. New evidence is all it takes to make scientists change their minds.}

None of these facts are true, but scientists know the facts are malleable. Hypotheses can be wrong, even if they’ve been the right answer for decades. New evidence is all it takes to make scientists change their minds.

A fresh perspective.

A new pair of eyes.

Three days before the particle accelerator explodes, Barry calls in sick to work and buys a ticket to Starling City on his way to the train station. Caroline is waiting for him when he arrives ten minutes after the train has left without them. There are designer bags under her eyes, proof she didn’t sleep the night before. They do nothing to diminish the red and gold shine of the perfect strawberry blonde ringlets coiling over her shoulders. When she closes her book it sighs, the pages
Caroline rises, tilting her head up when she looks at him because he’s a foot taller than her when she’s wearing sensible shoes. “You’re late,” she quips, reflexively adjusting the straps of the bags looped over her shoulder. (Messenger bag. Camera bag. Overnight bag. Caroline is the kind of person who hopes for the best, but plans for the worst.)

Barry would make excuses with anyone else, but they’ve never lied to each other. Why start now? Instead he stuffs his hands in the pockets of his coat and gives her a sheepish, crooked smile. “You knew I was coming,” he says, because she knows him better than anyone else. Maybe even better than he knows himself. “Why didn’t you give me a ride?”

Caroline, unlike Barry, owns a car: it’s a monstrosous Buick from the sixties with delta fins, but it’s a car she bought with her own money when she was a teenager and she loves it more than most people. “Barry,” she yawns through the y and stretches it out into one long polysyllabic sound, “you know how pissed Joe gets whenever you do this. Us carpooling would’ve been a dead giveaway that you weren’t sick. At least I thought ahead and used my vacation days for this little trip. I’m not getting fired because you have bad coping mechanisms.”

Barry frowns. It’s an old argument, one they’ve had before. Caroline doesn’t approve of him hopping on trains to solve impossible cases in cities hundreds miles away from home; Barry can’t believe that she thinks their father murdered their mother. It’s something his sister only brings up when she’s looking for a fight, but if she wanted to fight, Caroline wouldn’t have planned on investigating the impossible with him. Then he remembers that December eighth is her anniversary with her fiancée, the one who went to investigate the vigilante a few weeks before the Undertaking and didn’t make it out of the Glades alive.

Of course she wouldn’t let Barry go to Starling without her. Not when that’s where her fiancée died.

“Carrie,” he says, her nickname heavy on his tongue.

Caroline frowns back at him, her whole face scrunching up. Nobody has called her Carrie in years. Their mother used to call her that. No one else can. Not even her twin. “I’m not missing the next train, Bartholomew,” she huffs.

Barry nods and doesn’t say another word until they’re miles from the station, from their city. Starling is six hundred miles from Central, he thinks, and this train is going at a hundred miles an hour…

Caroline tucks one ankle behind the other and adjusts how her glasses perch on the tip of her nose before she opens her book again. “It’s a six-hour train ride,” she informs him without taking her eyes off the page, “half an hour of which has elapsed.”

Barry smiles at her before he opens his own book: Harrison Wells’s autobiography.

When I was in college, he reads, I had a dream to create research laboratories unconnected to the government, unconnected to any business interests. Then I met Teresa Morgan—Tess—and found a partner who shared that dream. I wanted to name our laboratory after her, but she had a better idea. We decided to build the first Scientific and Technological Advanced Research Laboratory downtown, at the epicenter of Central City. We wanted to change the way you think about science.

We wanted to become the heart of the city. [13]
Barry has been lowkey obsessed with the Starling City vigilante ever since he showed up a year ago, to the point that he keeps a Moleskine notebook—one with a cover that deviates from the standard black to forest green, of course—specifically for collecting articles he folds between the pages, listing the multitude of theories he’s found online, and his own speculations. This obsession is part of the reason why he’s risking the wrath of Joe to investigate a case in Starling. Besides, if their foster dad gets angry enough, Caroline will shout his name in the same melodramatic echoing way that Captain Kirk shouted at Khan\(^\text{[14]}\) to defuse the situation, which always makes Iris laugh.

(Iris’s laugh is *sublime*. It’s always full of the warmth that means someone is laughing with you instead of laughing at you. Barry was bullied for most of his adolescence, so now he knows the difference. Oh, he would do just about anything to hear her laugh and know he made it happen.)

When the twins arrive in Starling, the clouds overhead have darkened from cumulus to nimbus and rain is pouring down in fat drops that splatter on the sidewalk. Caroline brought a raincoat and an umbrella, a black one festooned with bright red cherries, but it’s only big enough to cover her. Barry uses the latest issue of *Science Showcase* as a makeshift umbrella and goes to hail a taxi while Caroline slips out of her spiky peep toe heels and into a pair of galaxy print Doc Martens.

When she opens her umbrella and steps out from under the awning, Barry is soaked from knees to toes because a car drove past him through a puddle.

“Welp,” Caroline deadpans before she holds up her hand and a taxi stops in front of her a split second later.

After she slides in across the backseat and he tells the taxi where they’re going, Barry checks his traffic app while Caroline swipes her thumb over the screen of her phone to check her messages.

From: an actual rainbow\(^\text{[15]}\)

**You and Barry called in sick on the same day. Coincidence? I think not!\(^\text{[16]}\)**

From: ferris wheel\(^\text{[17]}\)

**I’m coming to Central to inspect our testing facility next month. Want to get dinner?**

From: world’s greatest dad

**Director Frye told me you’re taking a personal day. If you need to talk, I’m here.**

From: captain incredible\(^\text{[18]}\)

**Ms. Allen, do you know where the Clipper cases went?\(^\text{[19]}\) I can’t find the files anywhere, and no one signed them out.**

Caroline side-eyes her twin. “Barry,” she says, interrupting his argument with the driver over the fastest route to the loading docks, “did you forget to sign the Clipper case files out of evidence lockup again?”

Barry shakes his head. “Wasn’t me,” he tells her, “and you know I never forget to sign anything out.”

Caroline sighs. Of course her brother is scatterbrained, but he doesn’t break the rules willy-nilly. Only for things he thinks are important. Like investigating the impossibility of one man stealing an industrial centrifuge. “Okay,” she stretches the *y* until it hangs loosely on her tongue, “do you
know of anyone else at the C. C. P. D. who likes to read about serial killers for fun?”

Barry shrugs. “I don’t really talk to cops who aren’t Joe or Captain Singh,” he says, “but if I had to
guess, I’d say it was Officer Cheekbones.”

Officer Cheekbones, otherwise known as Danny Doyle,[20] is a beat cop with great cheekbones
who works in the bullpen at the C. C. P. D.—and he’s one of two coworkers that Caroline has
carnal knowledge of.

After her fiancé died, she tried to use random hookups as a coping mechanism. It took about a
month for Caroline to realize that fucking her grief away wasn’t working. Instead she started
throwing herself into her work, photography, and investigating the impossible with her brother. It’s
been great for that portfolio she keeps in a place of honor on the messy desk in one corner of her
apartment, but she’s never actually shown her photographs to anyone, so that point is moot.

Barry didn’t approve of her grieving process, but he’s only slept with two people—Becky Cooper
in high school,[21] and a test pilot for Ferris Air that he dated when he was getting his C. S. I.
certification in Coast City—and Caroline is kind of a slut by comparison. Which is what happens
when your twin is a late bloomer and demisexual to boot.

To: an actual rainbow

i’d congratulate you on your detective work, except i’m embarrassed the actual detective in
the family hasn’t figured out what we’re doing yet.

To: ferris wheel

dinner would be great. i miss you.

To: world’s greatest dad

thanks, Joe.

To: captain incredible

I’m sorry, Director Frye. I don’t know where the Clipper case files went.

I hope someone forgot to sign the files out by mistake, Caroline thinks. Otherwise the C. C. P. D.
has a huge problem, because evidence going missing would mean we have a security breach.
Internal Affairs would have to investigate everyone at the precinct. It’d be such a mess.

“Caroline,” Barry hunches to nudge her shoulder with his, “we’re here.”

Caroline squares her shoulders before she follows Barry through the side door into the Applied
Sciences building. Unidac Industries built the earthquake machine that killed the love of my life,
she thinks. It was a subsidiary of Queen Consolidated. Now I’m here and…is that Oliver Queen?

What she knows about him is all headlines screamed at her in capslock from the front pages of
newspapers or clickbait articles she read at four in the morning on nights she couldn’t sleep. Still,
everyone knows something about him. After all, he did come back from the dead.

Fact: Oliver was a billionaire playboy who brought his girlfriend’s younger sister on a yacht
voyage that ended in a shipwreck.
Fact: Oliver spent five years stranded on a hellish island, where he must’ve seen and done unspeakable things.

Fact: Oliver returned to the island after his best friend died in the Undertaking. Queen Consolidated has been flirting with bankruptcy since he left.

Oliver is dressed in a dark suit that probably cost more than her Buick, he has what looks like a few days’ worth of stubble on his face, and he moves with the watchful efficiency of a predator trying to blend in among prey. Whatever happened to him on that island, it echoes in how he holds himself and in the lines on his face. Worry lines. Frown lines. Harsh lines. Still, he’s handsome in a brooding sort of way. No wonder he’s such a heartbreaker. If she liked angsty guys, he’d be exactly her type.

*It’s like he never smiles*, Caroline thinks. *I’m getting depressed just looking at him.*

Beside him is a black man with gorgeous brown eyes in a more affordable but no less dashing suit and a blonde woman in glasses, a hot pink dress, and a bright purple jacket. Caroline snaps portraits of them all more out of habit than anything else before she zooms in for a closeup of the scene of the crime.

“All any idea what these guys were so hot to break in here for?” a black lady cop whose nametag says *Liza* asks. "Maybe you left a spare earthquake machine lying around?"

Caroline watches one of the local C. S. I. guys approach with a tablet and show them what she assumes is security footage of the culprit breaking in. “That’s the only guy we got on video,” she overhears him explain, “the rest of the crew must’ve come in after him.”

“Actually,” Barry steps out from behind one of the support beams and goes to stand next to his twin, “it was only one guy.”

Awkward silence ensues. Caroline tries not to cringe noticeably. Then her brother starts babbling.

“Sorry I’m late.” Barry stuffs his hands in the pocket of his coat to stop himself from gesticulating all over the place. “Actually, my train was late. Well, the second one, the first one I did miss, but that was our cab driver’s fault. I’ve got this great traffic app, and…” his tentative grin wilts when he notices the glare the lady cop is aiming at him, “but he thought that he was right. I’m here now, though, so.”

“Great,” Liza snaps, “who the hell are you?”

“And do your parents know that you’re here?” Oliver wonders, sounding like he’s genuinely concerned that an overly enthusiastic teenage boy might’ve wandered into a crime scene unsupervised.

Caroline sighs and stops looking at everything through her camera. “I’m Caroline Allen,” she says, looking Oliver dead in the eyes and congratulating herself on winning after he looks away to glance at her twin, “and this is Barry. We’re from the Central City Police Department.”

“We’re with the crime scene investigation unit,” Barry adds. “We’re working on a case with some similar unexplained elements in Central City, so when the report of your robbery came over the wire, our captain sent us here.”

“And you think one guy ripped through this door like it was tinfoil?” Liza wants to know.

Barry nods. “One very strong guy, yeah.”
Caroline watches Barry find their copy of the autopsy report from the break-in on his tablet. “It takes approximately twelve hundred and fifty foot-pounds of torque to break someone’s neck,” she explains while they’re looking at a photograph of the corpse the robber left behind, “the bruising pattern suggests the killer used one hand.”

“I’m guessing you don’t know how hard it is to break someone’s neck,” Barry says, his tentative grin unfurling again.

“Hmm?” Oliver looks up from the photograph and blinks, clearing his head. “No,” he says mildly. “No idea.”

“We’re going to need a list of the entire inventory here to figure out exactly what was stolen,” the C. S. I. guy interjects.

Oliver nods and opens his mouth to ask someone to get on that.

“Actually,” says Barry, “I think I know what was stolen: a centrifuge.”

Oliver shuts his mouth.

“Specifically an industrial centrifuge,” Caroline clarifies.

“Probably the Kord Enterprises 2BX 900,” Barry elaborates.

Caroline presses her lips together and hums her agreement. “Maybe the sixth series,” she walks over to where the centrifuge ostensibly stood, “it has a three column base.”

Barry nods. “Here,” he flails one hand at the jagged metal fingers of broken wires reaching up out of the concrete floor, “you can see three sets of broken bolts where the thief just…ripped it out of the ground.”

“Um,” Felicity blurts, “are you two related, by any chance?”

“We’re twins,” Caroline tells her.

Felicity smiles. Caroline looks from the blonde to her brother and narrows her eyes, shifting her focus. Barry hasn’t dated much, but it’s not because people haven’t been interested in him—it’s because of his persistently hopeless crush on Iris. Whether he notices that people are interested in him is another story.

“And what exactly is a centrifuge?” Liza wants to know.

“It separates liquids,” Felicity explains, “the centripetal acceleration causes denser substances to separate out along the radial direction.”

“And the lighter objects move to the top,” Barry adds for clarification.

Felicity looks at her brother like he’s in color when everything else is stuck in black and white. “What did you say your name was again?” she asks.

“Barry,” he says, “Allen.”

“Felicity,” she says, “Smoak.”

Barry flushes a pale shade of pink and gives her a wide, warm smile that doesn’t show his teeth. Caroline squashes the absurd urge to pinch his cheeks like their grandmother used to and ruin the
moment. Oliver arches his eyebrows until they can’t arch any higher. Barry actually gulps, his Adam’s apple bobbing in his throat, and looks away.

“Um,” he blurts awkwardly, “you can see the cracks heading towards the door. Footsteps. One guy.” It’s obvious they don’t believe him, but he’s used to that by now. “Anyway,” he says, his shoulders hunching dejectedly, “it’s just a theory.”

“One backed by a lot of evidence,” Caroline points out as Oliver sinks into a crouch to get a closer look at the broken bolts. Barry smiles, one corner of his mouth ticking up. Caroline smiles back.

Fact: she gives him a lot of shit, but no one gets to make her brother feel small.

“There has to be another explanation,” Liza retorts.

Barry shrugs again. “Yeah,” he says, “I’m sure you’re right.”

Oliver is still on his knees staring at the bolts. Caroline snaps a quick picture of him to capture the dawn of comprehension that he’s desperately trying to hide.

*There always is, she thinks.*


3. Lia Briggs first appeared in *Batman and the Outsiders* Vol. 1, No. 25 (“A Serpent in Eden!”) September, 1985. Briggs is her married name, so I decided her maiden name was Clay because everybody has a twin in this version of the story. I imagine my version of her as Alexandra Breckenridge.

4. *Arrow* 2x01 (“City of Heroes”) 9 October 2013.

5. I-670 is the interstate highway in between Kansas City, Missouri (i.e. Central City) and Kansas City, Kansas (i.e. Keystone City).


7. *Supergirl* 2x01 (“The Adventures of Supergirl”) 10 October 2016. It’s confirmed in this episode that Clark is twelve years older than Kara in show canon. Kara crash-landed on earth in 2004, so Clark has been Superman since the early 2000s, and he probably tried to stop 9/11. I’m just saying.


10. Iris’s blog title is a quote by Ida B. Wells from a lecture she gave in 1892: “The way to right wrongs is to turn the light of truth upon them.”

11. Carrie Allen first appeared in *Superman & Batman: Generations II* Vol. 1, No. 3 (“1986: To Hunt the Hunter”) October, 2001. Carrie is Barry’s daughter on Earth-3839 in the comics, but if the show can have Wally be Iris’s brother and not her nephew then I can do what I want. I imagine my version of her as Sarah Greene.


[15] Iris is a goddess from Greek mythology who links the gods to humanity as their messenger. Also, she’s rainbows personified. I know Iris from the comics was probably named for iris the flower, but I like the symbolism of her as being named after the goddess better.


[18] Darryl Frye first appeared in *The Flash* Vol. 1, No. 285 (“If, at First, You Don’t Succeed”) May, 1980. In the comics he’s a police captain with the C. C. P. D. Here he’s the director of their C. S. I. unit, so he’s Barry and Caroline’s boss.

[19] The Clipper first appeared in *The Flash* Vol. 2, No. 20 (“Lost, Worthless, and Forgotten…”) December, 1988. While he was a hero in the comics, he was named “The Clipper” because he clipped the ears of the criminals he stopped. Which sounded a lot like a serial killer taking trophies from his victims to me. Hence, his role in this reboot as a notorious murderer.


[22] Liza Warner first appeared in *1st Issue Special* Vol.1, No.4 (“Lady Cop: Poisoned Love”) July, 1975 and in *Arrow* 4x04 (“Beyond Redemption”) 28 October 2015, where she’s portrayed by Rutina Wesley. I loved her, but I hated what the show did with her. Which is how I feel about the Arrowverse most of the time, tbh.
Well, it all makes for interesting conjecture; and it occurs to me that what is crucial is to believe in effort, to believe some good will come of simply trying, a good completely untainted by the corrupt initiating impulse to persuade or seduce—

What are we without this? Whirling in the dark universe, alone, afraid, unable to influence fate—

What do we have really? Sad tricks with ladders and shoes, tricks with salt, impurely motivated recurring attempts to build character. What do we have to appease the great forces?

Louise Glück, “The Empty Glass”

Bittersweet Caroline[23] (@DirtyPillows)[24] • Dec 11
Fact: There are over 30,000 particle accelerators in the world. This isn’t a new thing.

Bittersweet Caroline (@DirtyPillows) • Dec 11
@CERN has four operating currently, including the Large Hadron Collider.

Bittersweet Caroline (@DirtyPillows) • Dec 11
@TheRealSTARLabs If you’re reading this, chances are you’re using a particle accelerator. 1/2

Bittersweet Caroline (@DirtyPillows) • Dec 11
@TheRealSTARLabs cathode ray tubes—components of any TV screen or computer monitor—are tiny particle accelerators. 2/2

Bittersweet Caroline (@DirtyPillows) • Dec 11
@TheRealSTARLabs FOR SCIENCE!
Caroline slips Felicity a piece of paper with Barry’s cell phone number written on it in hasty, smudged black ink. Approximately thirty seconds later, she texts him that her boss wants to conduct the investigation on the premises, so the twins take one of the elevators up twenty-five floors instead of leaving the building. Felicity is happy to see them. Oliver, not so much. “Can we help you with something, detectives?” he asks.

Barry smiles at Felicity, oblivious to the deathglare that Oliver is giving him. “Oh,” he says, “C. S. Is aren’t actually detectives. We don’t even carry guns. Just some plastic baggies.”

“I do carry a gun,” Caroline folds her arms and cocks her left hip, “but I don’t have a concealed carry permit for this state, so I didn’t bring it with me. I still have bear mace, though.”

Diggle gives her a wide-eyed look. Caroline gives him a smug, slow smile that oozes sweetly. Like molasses. She’s small and objectively adorable with her huge green eyes, strawberry blonde hair, and petite curvy figure. She’s also smart enough to carry protection of all kinds with her wherever she goes.

“Uh,” Barry says, eyeing Oliver warily after he notices the deathglare, “where should I set up my equipment?”

Felicity takes a step toward them, tablet in hand. “I’ll show you.”

“What’s going on?” Oliver wants to know.

“Uh,” Barry clears his throat to avoid mumbling, “your assistant said you preferred to keep the investigation in house, so I cleared it with our captain to give you a hand.”

Oliver takes Felicity aside to glower at her ineffectually before she inevitably goes to show the twins to their workspace.

“Ooh,” Caroline whispers, eking the word out into polysyllables, “she wants to show you where to set up your equipment.”

Barry snorts. “Only you could make an innuendo out of a forensics kit,” he whispers back fondly.

Caroline smirks. “I do have a gift,” she says.

Instead of third wheeling while her brother analyzes soil samples and tries to flirt by sharing his theories about the Starling City vigilante, she leaves them to their mutual nerdiness and goes questing for a cheeseburger. Then she kills time by walking in the park and taking pictures of the city skyline at sunset, the combination of clouds and smog and lights creating a surreal cacophony of bright color that fades out into darkness.

After she drops a bag of takeout off at Applied Sciences for Barry, she checks into a hotel and spends the rest of the night staring at the cracks in the ceiling. At some point she falls asleep, because she wakes to thunder bumbling ominously across the cloudy sky. When she looks at her phone, she sees Barry has texted her seventeen times.

From: too little, too late

7:15pm

I found a crystalline structure in the dirt he tracked in
7:22pm

C12H22O11

10:13pm

how can people think one guy lifting an industrial centrifuge is impossible when Superman exists

10:57pm

what if that guy from Ancient Aliens was right [25]

12:01am

what if somebody figured out a way to clone Superman by hybridizing Kryptonian DNA and human DNA
stranger things have happened probably

1:18am

asdfsfljk

7:30am

the vigilante
is working
our case!!!

7:31am

is this the real life
is this just fantasy [26]

8:04am

I told Felicity about him
about Dad
I didn’t tell her about the man in yellow

It’s eight-fifteen, eleven minutes after he sent those last texts. Caroline muffles a groan in the pillowcase before she puts her glasses on and gets out of bed.

Okay, she thinks as she wanders into the bathroom and clumsily takes a long drink from the faucet without bothering to use a cup. \( C_{12}H_{22}O_{11} \) is the chemical formula for sugar. Which must be what he found in the dirt. I wouldn’t be surprised if someone like Maxwell Lord[27] or Lex Luthor was trying to clone Superman. Actually, I wouldn’t be surprised if the government was funding that research project.

When she’s been in the shower for several blissful minutes, it hits her like a thunderclap out of the blue: Felicity doesn’t know about the Allen murder. No wonder Barry is making goo-goo eyes at her.
Caroline knows there are people who don’t know about what their father did to their mother, but people were the worst for about a year after Nora’s death and Henry’s incarceration. Oh, the adults tried to console them, but then they’d talk about the twins behind their backs. When the kids at school followed their parents’ bad example and whispered about them for weeks, Caroline stopped in the middle of the hallway and screamed.

What she remembers most about that day is this: Iris didn’t flinch. Instead she stood up for Caroline and held her hand as she started screaming, too.

Caroline walks into Applied Sciences and walks back out after she overhears Felicity ask Barry to a “work function” party as her plus one. This is absolutely not something she can handle until she’s had at least one cup of coffee.

Barry is grinning from ear to ear when he finds her waiting in front of the elevator. “Felicity asked me out!” he whispers excitedly.

Felicity comes up behind him half a second later, smiling at her brother as the elevator arrives. Caroline valiantly fights the urge to snark. It’s not that Caroline doesn’t like Felicity. There’s nothing wrong with her, in her limited experience, but…

Fact: long distance relationships are hard enough without the added pressure of one or both people in that relationship living in close proximity to someone else they have unrequited feelings for.

Fact: if Barry hasn’t gotten over his thing for Iris by now, he probably never will. It’s not like he hasn’t had numerous opportunities.

Fact: those feelings aren’t as unrequited as Barry thinks. Caroline has thrown up inside her mouth more than once after she noticed Iris surreptitiously checking Barry out. It’s obvious that her sisterly feelings for Barry and however Iris feels when she looks at him aren’t the same thing. Who knows what might happen if he actually told her that he loves her, that he’s in love with her?

Fact: a blind person could see that Felicity has a crush on Oliver and that it won’t end well.

Caroline flips her hair back over her shoulder as the elevator doors slide open. Felicity is drawn to her desktop computer like a moth to a flame, one hand on the keyboard, the other catching the mouse. Barry stands next to her, looking over her shoulder as she pulls up the live broadcast of Channel 52 news.

“Central City is just a day away from making history when the controversial S. T. A. R. Labs’ particle accelerator is finally turned on,” Bethany Snow informs them.

Barry grins wider. “Pretty cool, right?” he asks.

“You know there’s been a hundred percent increase in earthquakes since they turned on the Large Hadron Collider,” Felicity points out.

Barry scoffs and shakes his head. “That data is misleading,” he says.

“Oh,” Felicity says in a tone that’s half flirtation and half skepticism, “do tell.”

Oliver walks into her office with a metaphorical storm churning around him that rivals the real one brewing outside. “And you know all about misleading, don’t you?” he accuses.

“What are you talking about?” Felicity asks.
“He’s not a full C. S. I.,” Oliver tells her. “He’s an assistant whose bosses don’t know you’re in Starling. And there is no similar case in Central City. So tell me, what are you two really doing here?

Barry swallows thickly. Caroline watches the smile on her face vanish bit by bit, siphoned away until Felicity isn’t smiling at all. “Our mother was murdered,” she tries to explain, and is amazed by how steady she sounds when she feels like she might just shake out of her skin.

“By your father,” Oliver says.

Barry clenches his jaw and steps out from behind the desk to look Oliver in the eyes, standing his ground. “He didn’t do it,” he retorts.

“You said that the police didn’t find the man who killed her,” Felicity says quietly, like she doesn’t want to believe that Barry could’ve lied to her.

“Barry doesn’t think the police found her killer,” Caroline tells her softly.

“Our father has been serving a life sentence at Iron Heights,” Barry says, hanging his head, like it’s his fault that Henry is still locked up. “They didn’t believe me.”

“About what?” Felicity asks in a voice that comes out surprisingly gentle.

Oliver gives her brother an expectant look after he doesn’t answer immediately. Caroline huffs before she moves in between them, making Barry shuffle backward while Oliver looks down on her. “You need to back off,” she says in a tone which conveys that it’s an order, not a request.

Barry turns back to Felicity. “I was eleven,” he begins after Oliver steps back, “one night something just came into the house like a tornado—a blur—and somewhere inside the blur, I saw a person.” Then he turns to look Oliver in the eyes again. “Our dad went to fight it,” he says. “I tried to help him, when suddenly I was twenty blocks from the house, and nobody believed me. They thought I was trying to cover for our dad, but what I saw that night was real. As real as the man who ripped down that metal door with his bare hands. As real as Superman, or Batman, or the Canary, or the Starling City vigilante. That’s why I look into cases like this, the ones nobody believes are possible.” Then he turns back to Felicity, almost like he’s begging for someone to believe him. “Maybe if I can just make sense of one, I might be able to find out who really killed our mother and free our father.”

Oliver turns and looks at Caroline. “What do you think?” he asks her quietly.

Caroline forces herself to look at him instead of the floor. “Barry didn’t lie about how he somehow ended up twenty blocks from our house,” she tells him. “He wasn’t there when I came downstairs and found our father with his hand on the knife. It went in the intercostal space between her third and fourth ribs. He was a doctor. He would’ve known exactly where…” she exhales loudly and closes her eyes. “I can still feel her blood on my hands. It was so warm, like crawling into bed with her after I had a nightmare. I was trying to stop the bleeding when Joe came and took him away. It was stupid, so stupid…” she opens her eyes and murmurs, “our mom was already gone.”

Barry puts a tentative hand on her shoulder and squeezes gently. “You never told me that,” he whispers.

Caroline reaches up, her palm covering his knuckles as she squeezes the back of his hand. “You didn’t need to know,” she whispers back.

It doesn’t take very much to make Oliver feel out of place in his office these days. Queen
Consolidated is his legacy, but he isn’t sure being a CEO is what he wants anymore. Maybe he
never wanted that at all, he just thought he was supposed to. Still, he feels intrusive watching them.
Would he feel like this if he ever let anyone see his own scars? Not the physical evidence on his
body, but every mark on his soul.

“I am sorry I lied to you,” Barry tells him. Then he bites his bottom lip before he turns back to
Felicity and says, “better find another plus one.”

Felicity keeps texting Barry, asking if he’s okay, but it’s Oliver who calls him when they’re in the
middle of dinner at Big Belly Burger. Caroline takes the phone because her brother is still chewing
on a ginormous bite of cheeseburger, his cheeks stuffed full and puffed out like a nutty squirrel’s.
Oliver tells her where to pick up a rental tux that would suit her brother and invites them to a party
at his family’s mansion.

“Okay,” Caroline raises one eyebrow at the screen after she hangs up, “that happened.”

“What?” Barry asks. It comes out like Whrr? because his mouth is still full of cheeseburger.

Caroline eats a few of her fries and takes a long slurp of her vanilla milkshake before she answers.
“There’s a party at a rich dude’s house,” she tells him.

Barry smiles at her. “Let’s do it.”[29]

While her brother holds Felicity’s hands and sways with her to soft classical music, Caroline makes
herself at home by the bar and orders a cocktail called the Last Word: three quarter ounces of gin,
Maraschino liqueur, Green Chartreuse, and fresh lime juice shaken with ice, then double-strained
into a cold glass. Watching her brother dance with a girl whose eyes are practically shining in the
mood lighting is making her green with raw, unadulterated envy.

*I was supposed to get married yesterday,* she thinks as she tilts her head back to look at the
translucent bottom of her glass. *There’s no justice in the world.*

After her third cocktail, Barry informs her that the analysis of the blood sample the vigilante got
from the thief who stole the centrifuge is finished. Diggle takes Felicity and the twins back to
Applied Sciences so they can see the results.

Director Frye calls to yell at Barry when he’s packing up his forensics kit. Caroline plucks the
phone out from between his shoulder and his ear to say: “Director Frye, please don’t be mad at
Barry. It was my idea.”

What she isn’t saying practically echoes down the line. *I was supposed to get married yesterday. I
should be on my honeymoon right now. I had this bright idea about how my future was going to
look, and now all I have is memories, and grief, and a pile of wedding gifts that I can’t bring
myself to open or return.*

Director Frye sighs. “I expect to see both of you at work tomorrow, Ms. Allen.”

Caroline gives her brother a thumbs up and tries to smile, but it’s more a grimace than anything
else. Barry does smile, though, as the tension seeps out of his shoulders. “Thank you, Director
Frye,” Caroline tells him sincerely, “we will be there.” Then she hangs up and turns to her twin. “If
we don’t leave now,” she says in a flat voice that hints at how frazzled she is, “we’ll miss the last
train.”
Barry says goodbye to Felicity while Caroline goes to hail a taxi. Of course they don’t arrive until ten minutes after the last train has left the station. After all, it’s been that kind of day—this is the only way it could possibly end. Caroline folds herself onto a wooden bench next to Barry and nestles her head against his upper arm. Barry heaves a sigh and rests his cheek on top of her head, mussing her hair.

“Do you think we’re ever going to stop running and hiding?” he wants to know.

Caroline yawns. Which isn’t an answer, but it’s all she has to give him at the moment.

Barry intertwines his fingers in his lap, twisting them together to keep his hands occupied. “It feels like I’ve been running toward something impossible since we were eleven,” he murmurs, “and you’ve been hiding from anything that might hurt you like you think Dad hurt Mom. I don’t know how to stop. Do you?”

“No,” Caroline whispers just before the tranquilizer dart lodges in the side of her neck. “No, I don’t.”

When she opens her eyes, Caroline winces and blinks at the phosphenes detonating behind her eyelids. Wherever she is, their fluorescent lights are so bright that it hurts to look directly at them. Then she sees the arrows. With green fletching and green arrowheads.

“Oh,” she gasps. “Oh my god.”

Barry is stunned into awestruck, discombobulated silence. Then he sees Oliver Queen, decked out in green leather and lying unconscious on top of a shiny metal table.

Diggle is watching the twins warily from the other side of the table. Felicity steps forward slowly, like she’s trying not to spook them, and says: “Please save my friend.”


[25] From *Know Your Meme*: “Ancient Aliens is a series of image macros based on History Channel’s TV series with the same name starring alien expert Giorgio A. Tsoukalos, who often tends to explain inexplicable phenomena as the direct result of aliens or extraterrestrials being on Earth. In a somewhat similar fashion to Bill O’Reilly’s *You Can’t Explain That* series, the Ancient Aliens macros exaggerate Tsoukalos’ beliefs to such an extent that they become humorous.”


Oliver is going into cardiac arrest, the heart monitor attached to him beeping like an alarm at the beginning of the worst morning. When he starts convulsing, the table rattles underneath his body. Caroline looks at Diggle, who is unequivocally the strongest person in the room. “Hold him down,” she says as she surges up from a chair to the table.

“He’s not going to make it,” Diggle says.

“He will,” Felicity insists, “we just have to find out what’s in his system.”

“I…I…” Barry runs one hand through his hair, the stutter he developed in junior high returning with a vengeance, “I usually only work on dead people.”

Caroline reaches out to squeeze his forearm. “Barry,” she enunciates his name in two distinct syllables, “breathe.”

“Okay.” Barry exhales sharply before he grabs a flashlight from his kit and goes to test pupillary response. “I can think of four possible diagnoses for what’s causing his body to react this way.”

“Three,” Caroline says after she notices the purpura on his arms.

Barry nods. “Two,” he says after he eliminates more variables, “start chest compressions.”

Diggle folds his hands together and assumes the position. “Got it,” he says. It’s obvious he has a minimal amount of medical training, probably from the military—he clearly carries himself like a soldier.
“It’s DIC,” Caroline says as her twin draws some blood from Oliver’s arm.

“What?” Felicity asks.

“Disseminated intravascular coagulation,” Caroline informs her. “Whatever he was injected with is causing a massive clotting cascade in his bloodstream.”

Barry nods again. “It’s like maple syrup,” he explains.

Felicity holds his gaze. “You can save him, right?”

Caroline glances over her shoulder at a box of rat poison and goes to get it, checking the ingredients in case the brand of rodenticide they’re using is a phosphide or a calciferol instead of anticoagulant. Barry starts diluting the warfarin once she gives him the box.

“You kidding?” Diggle shouts. “That’ll kill him!”

“He dies if I don’t,” Barry retorts.

Diggle makes a low frustrated noise and looks at the blonde. “Felicity…”

“It’s fine,” Caroline says as Barry injects Oliver with the anticoagulant, “just the right amount of this stuff will act as a blood thinner and get his blood circulating again.”

“He’s crashing!” Diggle shouts.

Oliver turns, his eyes wide open, and reaches out with one hand. Caroline reaches back, taking his large hand in both of hers, and holds it. When he wakes up, he flinches with his whole body and yanks hard enough to make her let him go. “What the hell is going on?” he yells hoarsely.

Felicity stumbles over to his side, not bothering to take careful steps despite her high heels. “You were injected with a strong anticoagulant,” she tells him.

“You would have stroked out,” Barry elaborates, “but fortunately you guys had a very effective blood thinner handy.”

Caroline folds her arms across her chest, a defensive posture masquerading as offensive. “Warfarin,” she clarifies, “better known as rat poison.”

Oliver looks over his shoulder at the other people on his team. Diggle looks back without flinching. “They saved your life, Oliver,” he says in a tone that’s both gentle and firm, leaving no room for argument.

“This is the point in a lifesaving emergency where you thank the person that did the lifesaving,” Felicity adds.

“You told them who I am,” Oliver says brokenly. “That’s not your secret to tell, Felicity. I decide who finds out my identity.”

“Well,” Felicity swallows thickly and circles around the table to get closer to him, “we didn’t have time to get your input, what with you unconscious and dying.”

Oliver sighs and looks away. Felicity looks like she’s about to cry. Diggle just looks exhausted.

“In her defense,” Caroline says, “Felicity didn’t actually tell us you’re the vigilante. It was self-evident.”
Oliver ignores her. “What happens if they leave here and go right to the police?” he asks Felicity.

“They wouldn’t do that,” Felicity says.

“I wouldn’t do that,” Barry echoes.

Caroline says nothing. *I don’t have anything to prove to these people, she thinks, and I don’t owe them anything.*

Oliver keeps trying to stay angry at Felicity for saving his life and keeping his secret identity a secret from the city at large, but eventually his phone buzzes and cuts through the tension more efficiently than any blade. It’s like all of the fight goes out of him, and he slumps. Like his body only just remembered that his heart almost stopped beating. Then he leaves abruptly, because apparently he hasn’t noticed that he’s still in his leather getup with his shirt open.

Caroline arches her eyebrows. “That man is a beautiful disaster,” she quips. “Seriously, did Kelly Clarkson write that pop song about him?”

Felicity exhales a quiet gust of weary laughter. “Never meet your heroes, right?”

It takes most of the day for them to finally leave Starling. Barry gives Oliver a green domino mask as a parting gift, an early Christmas present. Caroline sleeps until the train arrives in Central, the hood of her raincoat tugged over her eyes and loud snores crawling out of her throat.

“There was a robbery at the bank ten blocks from here,” Barry informs her after she wakes up, “we should meet Joe at the crime scene.”

Caroline nods slowly and scrapes the rheum out of the corners of her eyes. “I’m still on vacation,” she tells him with a yawn, “I’ll get dinner and meet you back at the lab.”

Barry glances down at his suitcase, trying for subtlety and failing epically.

Caroline rolls her eyes at him. “I’m not carrying that,” she snarks, “if you don’t want to bring it with you to the crime scene, then you can put it in my car yourself.”

Barry nods and opens his mouth to say something else.

“Yes,” Caroline huffs, “I will drop you off at the bank.”

Barry smiles. “You’re my favorite sister,” he says.

“I’m your only sister,” Caroline retorts before she smiles back at him.

There are six other people in their C. S. I. unit: Darryl Frye, the departmental director. James Forrest, the youngest assistant director in the history of the department. Patty Spivot, forensic blood analyst. Kristen Kramer, forensic science technician. Angela Margolin, the other assistant C. S. I. deputy, and Jennifer Novak, the other crime scene photographer. Caroline stops at Jitters to get coffee for everyone before she enters the crime lab. If they’re full of warm caffeinated beverages when Barry returns from the scene of the crime, they’re not going to be as angry with her brother as they might’ve been otherwise.

Jim is a tall, thin black man with gorgeous brown eyes and a large collection of brightly patterned
bowties. Patty is a pale blonde whose father owns a small shoe store, and she’s still bitter that no elves have ever come to help them with their financial problems. Angela is a tiny Chinese-American girl who will hug anyone who gets close enough if she thinks they look like they need it. Jenn is a willowy biracial woman who looks like she belongs in a high fantasy novel as a sídhe warrior queen, despite her habit of wearing jeans and a t-shirt to work every day instead of anything dressier. Caroline likes her coworkers, especially since they let Barry keep his conspiracy board in their shared workspace. Oh, most of them don’t indulge her brother, but they’ve never made him feel unwanted or freakish.

When she arrives, Kristen is on her way out. McKenna Hall[37]—one of the policewomen who works at a desk in the bullpen and Kristen’s girlfriend—is waiting by the door. McKenna worked as a detective with the Starling City Police Department until the Huntress shot her. Then she went to live in Coast City with her sister, went through six months of physical therapy, transferred from the S. C. P. D. to the C. C. P. D., and started dating Kristen. Which was good for Caroline, since Kristen is the other coworker she hooked up with and there were some hurt feelings on her side before McKenna showed up.

McKenna gives Caroline a nod. “Hey,” she says.

“How’d you know I’d be here?” she asks.

“Kristen told me your sister was flying in tonight,” Caroline answers. “Melody, right?”[38]

McKenna nods again. Kristen sips her chai and says, “I’m meeting the whole family after we pick her up from the airport.”

Caroline tries not to make a face that says oh, shit and fails. Miserably. “Have fun,” she says, elongating the word fun awkwardly before she retreats into the crime lab.

Patty is also on her way out. Danica Williams,[39] her girlfriend, is meeting her at S. T. A. R. Labs to watch them activate the particle accelerator. “Tell Barry that I hope he makes it!” she says as she grabs her coffee and bolts down the hallway in hot pursuit of scientific advancement.

Barry returns with evidence from the robbery after the director, Jim, Angela, and Jenn are gone. Iris arrives while he’s analyzing the samples he took using Detective Chyre’s pen. “Okay,” she says, “I am ready to see this atom smasher…smashing.”

“There was a shooting today,” Caroline informs her before she takes another bite of her cheeseburger. This is the third cheeseburger she’s eaten in two days, and yet she isn’t sick of them. It’s awesome.

“Your dad needs me to process some evidence,” Barry adds. “Which means I don’t know if we’re going to be able to make it to S. T. A. R. Labs.”

“But seeing this thing turn on is your dream,” Iris points out as she steals a few of his fries, “your sad, nerdy little dream. Besides, I cancelled a date for this.”

“Hands off my fries!” Barry snatches them away from her. “Unbelievable.”
“I am stress-eating over my dissertation,” Iris tells them. “We started selling cronuts at Jitters. I ate two today, and if I don’t graduate soon, I’m going to be more muffin top than woman.”

Caroline snorts. “Oh, please,” she mutters.

“You look amazing,” Barry says, shyly and sincerely.

Iris scoffs and changes the subject. “What’s so important about this particle accelerator, anyway?”

Barry flails at his desk. Not that he’s stopped moving since they started this conversation—he’s been walking around the crime lab, checking on his analysis, looking at Patty’s cell cultures and Kristen’s latest invention—but this is a whole new level of perpetual motion. “Harrison Wells’s work in quantum theory is lightyears ahead of anything they’re doing at CERN. Just…” he walks over to a transparent board and draws a dot with a dry erase marker, “imagine that dot is everything the human race has ever learned until this moment—”

“Does that include twerking?” Iris wants to know.

—and that,” Barry ignores her skepticism and draws a lopsided circle with the dot in the middle, “is everything we could learn from the particle accelerator. It’s a whole new way of looking at physics. It will literally change the way we think about everything.”

“Okay,” Iris gives his shoulder a sympathetic pat, “you’ve got to get yourself a girlfriend.”

Caroline snickers until Joe shows up and they leave the office after Barry tells him that the bank robbers—a criminal duo called the Mardon brothers—are hiding out on a farm in Smallville.

“So,” Iris links arms with Caroline and Barry as they move through the crowd in front of S. T. A. R. Labs, “did you guys find proof of the impossible in Starling City, or did you just make my dad mad for no reason?”

“Actually,” Barry mumbles, “while I was away I had a chance to think about, you know, relationships. And, well, I’m not in one. And you’re not in one, either. And you’re my best friend, Iris.”

Caroline side-eyes him. Seriously? she thinks, you’re doing this now?

“You’re mine, too.” Iris smiles at him before she turns to grin at Caroline. “You both are. Why else would I be here?”

Iris knows her brother so well, but she’s missing a crucial piece of information: the reason it’s awkward for Barry to talk to her about other girls is that he’s never thought of her as his sister. Not once in the past fourteen years.

Harrison Wells is heralded with thunderous applause when he steps onstage to give his speech. “Tonight the future begins,” he says, “the work my team and I will do here will change our understanding of physics. We’ll bring about advancements in power, advancements in medicine, and trust me…that future will be here faster than you think.”

When the clapping gets louder, someone in the crowd snatches Iris’s computer bag. Barry charges after the thief without hesitation. Caroline makes a frustrated noise and goes after him. Iris catches up with her to find Barry on the ground with blood dripping out of his nose, the thief on the other side of a fence he must’ve jumped, and a detective pointing a gun at him.
“Who is that guy, and what is he so proud of?” Caroline wants to know after they’re back at the precinct. Barry is stubbornly refusing to put a tampon in his nostril. Iris is clutching her computer bag to her chest.

“He’s a transfer from Keystone,” Barry informs her, his voice muffled by a wad of tissues, “started a few weeks ago. Eddie Thawne.”

“Oh.” Caroline gives Iris a smug, knowing look. “That’s Detective Pretty Boy.”

“What?” Barry asks.

“That’s what Dad calls him,” Iris explains. “He actually keeps score when it comes to arrests.” Then she looks at Eddie and bites her bottom lip. “He is pretty, though.”

Barry gets up and throws the bloody tissues away before he goes to lock up the crime lab. When his sister comes to find him, he’s on the phone with Felicity. “I was late,” he says, “as usual, but in the spirit of not being late again, if you ever decide that Oliver Queen isn’t the guy for you and if you decide you want to go on a date with someone else, you should know that guy, he’ll be on time.” Then he pauses to listen to her response, his mouth unfurling into a soft smile. “Bye, Felicity.”

Caroline smirks at him after he hangs up the phone. “I wouldn’t make promises you can’t keep,” she teases.

Barry slumps back against his desk. With everything that’s happened today, he feels like he needs to sleep for weeks to feel normal again. “Yeah,” he mumbles.

It’s raining now, heavy droplets of precipitation falling and making slippery veins of water on the windowpanes. Caroline flinches when thunder booms outside. Barry laughs and goes to close the skylight. “I can’t believe you’re still scared of thunder,” he says.

Caroline gets up and goes to help him. “I’m not scared of thunder,” she retorts, “thunder can’t actually hurt you. What I’m scared of, is—”

When she wraps her hands around the chains they’re using as a pulley, the particle accelerator explodes. Then she sees the chemicals in open containers floating out of their beakers. When she looks up, the skylight is falling and lightning is bringing it down on them.

“Oh,” she says. “Oh my god—”
I imagine my version of her as Nicole Beharie.


[38] Melody Hall (who doesn’t canonically have a name) was first mentioned in *Arrow* 1x17 (“The Huntress Returns”) 20 March 2013. I imagine my version of her as Tina Desai.

Time itself is another angle, distorting everything. If you want to get to the whole truth, just keep layering dimension upon dimension. Undo the tapestry when it gets tangled and start over. Use string and feathers and whatever clocks you have on hand. They say every writer has only one story to tell, and they tell it over and over and over, trying to get it right.

Mindy Nettifee, “What You Saw”

Shock Value
Part 2
Myth Can Make Reality More Intelligible
Book I
With a Stroke of Lightning
Chapter 4
Time After Time
(1 of 3)

“Something’s happening...in my memory...the story keeps changing.”

Diana of Themyscira
Wonder Woman Vol.5, No.1 (“The Lies, Part 1”)
August, 2016

I
A Single Event Can Have Infinitely Many Interpretations

I don’t know how I remember everything. I shouldn’t, because technically I wasn’t the one who altered the timeline. If it’s THE timeline instead of ONE timeline in a multitude of microverses. I’m a librarian, not a Time Master. I have theories, of course, but no proof. I don’t actually know how it works. I know I shouldn’t remember five different timelines, but I do.

Timeline #1: My name is Rose Russell. I’m engaged to a man named Cullen Powell—great-great-great-great-grandson of Francis Powell. I’m a journalist. I work for a magazine called Central City Science Today. I have an interview with Eobard Thawne, a professor at the Flash Museum who’s researching temporal mechanics. When he asks me out, I say no because I’m engaged. Then he kills my fiancée.

Timeline #2: My name is Rose Russell. I’m terminally single. I’m a journalist. I work for a magazine called Central City Science Today. I have an interview with Eobard Thawne, a professor at the Flash Museum who’s researching temporal mechanics. When he asks me out, I say no because everyone who’s ever tried to date me has gone missing or died tragically. Then he kills me.

Timeline #3: My name is Rose Russell. When I was five years old, my father was murdered in front
of me by a speedster in a yellow suit. I haven’t spoken a word since then. When I was ten years old, my aunt locked me up at Belle Reve because that was easier than having a metahuman child in her house. Eobard Thawne comes to visit me one afternoon and I recognize him as the man who killed my father. Then I kill myself because I never want to see him again.

Timeline #4: My name is Rose Russell. I’m a journalist. I work for a magazine called Central City Science Today. I’m engaged to Eobard Thawne, a professor at the Flash Museum who’s researching temporal mechanics. When he asked me out during our interview, I said yes because he quoted Shakespeare after I told him my name. Not Romeo & Juliet (Which I would’ve hated, because people have quoted the “that which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet” line at me ad nauseam in multiple timelines.) No, he quoted Sonnet 130. Which is about loving a woman for who she is, not what the speaker wants her to be. Ironic.

Timeline #5: My name is Mackenzie Snart. I’m a librarian. I was born in a future that doesn’t exist anymore. I grew up in an alternate universe where the Arrowverse is three TV shows adapted from a series of comics. I fell through a portal from Earth-33 to Earth-1 on the night of the particle accelerator explosion and became a fulgurkinetic metahuman. I was married to Leonard Snart, a world class thief. I’m a time traveler…and I’m a widow.

I remember them all, but only the last one feels real. It’s like being Rose was a dream, or a nightmare. I don’t know why. What I do know is this: I’m not Rose Russell anymore, but I’m not Mackenzie Snart either. Len is dead and I’ve left Eobard in the future to create a new timeline.

Timeline #6: My name is Mackenzie Howell. I traveled back in time to the night of the particle accelerator explosion, and I’m going to change everything.

From the Watchtower Archives Recorded 11 December 2013

Mac notices three things after she blinks away the dregs of sleep. Firstly, she’s a brunette again, and her messy hair is slithering over her shoulders like a knot of angry serpents. Secondly, there’s a ring on her finger set with a ruby instead of a blue diamond. (It occurs to her that rubies are her birthstone, the observation a zig in her zagging thought process.) Thirdly, she’s in bed with a comic book villain, but not the one she loves.

Eobard leans in for a good morning kiss. Mac squawks and generates an electromagnetic pulse with enough power to send him flying out of bed. Eobard goes whump when he collides with the opposite wall, all the air knocked out of his body in one blow, and he thuds when he hits the floor.

Welp, she thinks, at least that answers the question of whether or not I still have my powers.

Eobard snarls, the noise distorted when his eyes flash red in anger and he vibrates with his unstable connection to the speed force. Then he shakes it off. “Rose,” he says through clenched teeth, “what’s wrong?”

“I’m Mackenzie,” Mac tells him sharply, “not Rose.”

“Mackenzie.” Eobard says her name slowly, tasting the syllables and enunciating the consonants, tongue skimming against his teeth. “Do you know who I am?” he asks.

Mac nods, a quick descent of her chin. “Dr. Eobard Thawne,” she answers. “My…” she glances down at the engagement ring on her finger as she stretches the y sound out incredulously. “My
fiancée.”

Eobard smiles without baring his teeth, a soft unfurling of his lips. There’s love in that smile, and Mac has no idea how to handle it. Worse, she remembers what it feels like to love him back. How it feels to kiss him, to be in his arms, to have him inside of her.

Mac gulps and covers her mouth as nausea coils in her guts, twisting viscerally like spaghetti on the tines of a fork. *I hate wibbly-wobbly timey-wimey stuff,*[^48] she thinks. *I have no idea whether it’s rape if I consented to sex with him before I knew he was a murderer. Maybe it retroactively counts as rape by deception,*[^49] *since he changed the timeline to get into my pants? Why is this my life?*

Eobard crawls back in bed with her while she muffles Tina Belcher groans[^50] in the hollow of her palm and puts his palm on top of her other hand.

Mac flinches with her whole body and snatches her hand away from him. “I have to pee,” she blurs. Then she grabs her glasses from the bedside table, flees into the ensuite bathroom they share, and locks the door behind her.

Eobard sighs and gets dressed while she sits on the toilet and forgets how to breathe. “Mackenzie,” he says through the door. “I have to go to work, but we’re going to talk about this later.”

There’s a threatening edge in his voice. That’s paradoxically comforting. Being threatened by Eobard makes infinitely more sense to Mac than fucking him or holding his hand. That’s how messed up their relationship is, in the context of her meta-knowledge.

*It’s possible he didn’t kill my father in this timeline, Mac thinks. It’s also probable, since I’m not mute and/or a patient at Belle Reve. That doesn’t mean he didn’t kill his brother or his parents, and if we’re engaged, then he retconned the fiancée I had when we first met...so he’s a murderer no matter what and this is still creepy as fuck.*

When she looks at herself in the bathroom mirror, Mac sees sallow skin splotched with freckles, gray eyes like a brewing storm, glasses with chunky black frames, and frizzy tendrils of brown hair. Rose never wanted any tattoos, so the words she’d inked on her shoulder and wrist are gone, along with the heraldic lion that once roared on her left hip. No tarnished silver and chipped garnet ring on her right hand, but all her fingernails are still bitten to the quick. No piercings, not even a hole in each earlobe. No scar on her left wrist from her suicide attempt. Only striae that strike her belly and thighs like veins of pink lightning, and slubs on her feet and ankles from stimming by scratching her skin off. At least her arthritic joints still ache, the consistency of her chronic pain functioning like a fulcrum.

When she hobbles sideways and steps on the bathroom scale, it tells her that she still weighs approximately two hundred pounds. If she were younger, she might be disappointed by the lack of weight loss. Now it’s a guilty pleasure that she’s not a skinny bitch in any timeline.

When she closes her eyes against her reflection and opens them again, they’re whited out with electricity. Mac washes her hands despite the electrolysis that ensues and goes through the sequence of events in her head, trying to find the point of divergence and simultaneously distance herself from the horror of her past(s).

*Plot point: Eobard has a younger brother named Robern, on whom he blames all of his shortcomings,*[^51] Retconned.
Eobard uses his powers to keep his brother from being born. When he returns to the present, he has a job at the Flash Museum.

**Plot point:** Rose interviews Eobard and she says no when he asks her out because she’s engaged to Cullen. Retconned.

Eobard uses his powers to keep Cullen from being born. When he returns to the present, Rose is terminally single because everyone she’s ever dated has gone missing or died suddenly.

**Plot point:** Eobard asks Rose out and murders her when she says no. Then he uses his powers to go back in time and murders her father in front of her. When he returns to the present and visits her at Belle Reve, Rose kills herself. Retconned.

Eobard asks Rose out and she says yes. Apparently.

Vandal Savage dying at three separate points in time simultaneously must’ve resonated through the timeline so, paradoxically, she ended up here. Ostensibly the rubber band of history has snapped back to the shape it had taken before the singularity, only without an immortal psychopath to influence events that occurred after 1958. However that resonance has changed the world as she knows it remains to be seen, but none of it feels real to her.

*I touched the Oculus yesterday, she thinks. I remember five different timelines, dying three times, and loving three different men. No wonder I’m dissociating so hard. I’m probably still in shock.*

It occurs to her that she shouldn’t be able to process all of the information she’d gotten from the Oculus. No one is supposed to have so much inside their head.

Mac takes off her engagement ring and puts it down on the edge of the porcelain sink, the facets of the ruby refracting blood red shards under the harsh fluorescent light. Then she goes to get a pair of shoes and a bra from the bedroom closet, wrinkling her nose at the clothes Rose has (so many pastels, so little time) before she decides not to pack a bag. Anything she brings from the future to the past is proof that she doesn’t belong in the present. Oh, she knows she could stay in the future with Eobard, but: she also knows it’s only a matter of time before he hurts her. After staying in two abusive relationships—one with her rapist and then another with someone who emotionally abused her until she thought no one else was ever going to love her—she’s not making that mistake again.

Mac siphons power from ionospheric lightning to open a wormhole and travel from 2183 to 2013. Then she goes to Jitters because that’s where she went before—that is, in the other timeline. When she gets there, she deduces that no alternate version of herself is going to show up.

**Plot point:** Mac grows up in an alternate universe where the Arrowverse is a series of TV shows adapted from a series of comics, and travels from Earth-33 to Earth-1 through a portal after she graduates from college. Retconned.

If the version of her who was raised on Earth-33 never existed in this continuity, then she won’t have close encounters with her former self. It makes her heart ache to think that her family on Earth-33 never knew her, pulsing and raw, like she doesn’t have a ribcage to protect the soft parts of herself struggling inside her chest. Nothing can fix the hole where her past was, before. Mac wonders if the other people in the coffee shop can tell she’s undergoing open heart surgery in her head. Whether they can see how exposed she feels, how alone. Luckily, most people mind their own business and think about their own crap instead of intruding on the meltdowns other people are having.
On the bright side, no time remnants are coming back to haunt her. On the darker side, she doesn’t technically exist in this place or time.

Mac uses her powers to create a bus route in her head, circumnavigating the chaos that ensues in the aftermath of the particle accelerator explosion to rob various ATM machines around the city. ATMs have the capacity to contain approximately $100,000, but they can only dispense about forty notes at once. There’s also a withdrawal limit of $1,500 a day…if you have a bank account. Mac doesn’t, but that’s a situation she plans to rectify with the money she’s stealing.

*I remember when I used to pretend I wasn’t a criminal,* she thinks, *now I’m a murderer and a thief. Len would be…*

Mac wants to think he’d be proud, but that’s not true. Len didn’t want her to lose whatever he thought he lost after his first kill, didn’t want her to become like him. Cold. Calculating. Capable of killing without remorse.

It’s true she doesn’t regret killing Savage or Aion—^53^—the temporal bounty hunter who’d been Walker Gabriel[^54] before the Time Masters got ahold of him—since both men were trying to kill her at the time. Savage had actually killed her once *before*, and he was trying to create a timequake that would’ve destroyed the world as she knew it, so, in the immortal words of six merry murderesses: he had it coming, he had it coming, he only had himself to blame.[^55]

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McKenna is stuck in purgatory, chained to a desk because her disability makes her liability in the field. Walking the beat was something she used to hate. Now it’s the only thing she thinks about at work. Or it’s the only thing she thinks about that’s appropriate for the workplace. Kristen makes frequent appearances in her daydreams too, but she has a hunch that’s what her girlfriend was aiming for when she wore a miniskirt with a slit up the thigh underneath her lab coat.

Julie Jackham, her partner,[^56] got bored with her brooding on the second day of their partnership and used her legacy on Captain Singh. It was super effective. Joseph Jackham, her grandfather,[^57] retired from the force a few years ago, leaving his protégé Fred Chyre to partner with Joe West. Joseph was a detective for thirty-five years—he’s practically an institution. Julie, who is the kind of person who often does the wrong thing for the right reasons, uses her clout as his favorite granddaughter to get them assigned to a patrol car so McKenna can feel closer to the action.

When the particle accelerator explodes, McKenna is having a fancy dinner with her girlfriend, her sister, and their entire extended family. Meanwhile: Julie is nine weeks pregnant, she’s on patrol duty by herself, and she parked the car three blocks from S. T. A. R. Labs.

Laurel Lance is distracted from her fourth glass of merlot by the patrol car across the street flipping over and skidding a few blocks away. Instead of looking at the explosion or finishing her drink, she grabs her purse, throws a wad of cash on the table, and runs out of the restaurant. Halfway down the street she slips her heels off. It hurts to run barefoot even on the sidewalk, but Laurel doesn’t notice. When she kneels by the door on the driver’s side, the policewoman is swearing loudly to herself: a litany of what the fuckitty fuck fucking fucktrucks.

*Well, Laurel thinks, I guess that’s a good sign.* “Hey,” she says out loud as she experimentally tries to pry open the door, “what’s your name?”

“Julie,” the policewoman informs her. “Juliet Jackham, actually…my parents gave all seven of their kids Shakespearean names. Celia, Olivia, Cordelia, Miranda, Beatrice, Regan, and me.”
Laurel tries not to look appalled at the idea of seven kids in one house. Who even needs that many children? It just seems excessive.

“I’m naming my baby Joshua Joseph,” Julie continues as Laurel struggles with the door. “I know the alliteration is ridiculous, but those are my boyfriend’s grandfather’s name and my grandfather’s name. It’s not my fault they match.”

Laurel stops moving. “You’re pregnant?” she asks.

“Yeah.” Julie nods. “Nine weeks. I found out this afternoon.”

Oh, the pressure just got so much heavier. Laurel makes a frustrated noise when the door still doesn’t budge.

“Don’t worry,” a husky, vaguely familiar voice resonates from somewhere over her shoulder. “We’re going to get you out of here.”

Laurel looks up and watches a blonde woman dressed in black gear—it looks like leather, but upon closer inspection it’s lightweight body armor made of some high-tech synthetic fabric—leverage a silver baton to crack the door open. “You’re the Canary,” she blurts, still slightly tipsy despite the sobering experience of watching an explosion flip a car, “my sister had a pet canary. Until she set it free.” Laurel smiles, but it turns into a grimace while they wrench the door further open. “Sara couldn’t stand looking at a bird in a gilded cage.”

Sara smiles down at her sister. Laurel doesn’t recognize her, but then why should she? Sara Lance is dead; long live the Canary.

Leonard Snart spends two months in Opal City, Maryland pulling a job. Then he learns a member of the crew he put together for that job is a metahuman the hard way. Jake Simmons[58] wants the whole payout for himself, and has no qualms about killing half their crew for it. Len is the last one standing after he starts blasting with his laser eyes. Simmons glares at him, eyes flaring bright red. All he can think about in that moment is Lisa, who had once loved Emma Frost and hated Scott Summers with her whole eight-year-old heart. When he tries to kill Len, though, the blast ricochets and knocks Simmons out cold.

He leaves Simmons for the cops and escapes from the vault without the cash he came to steal. He convinces himself he had a few too many beers and hallucinated the laser eyes. He ignores the visceral squelch of fear lurking in his guts.

Lisa texts him Happy b-day, Lenny!!! and forty-one birthday cake emojis when he’s on the last train home later that night.[59] Looking at the selfie of her in his apartment eating ice cream cake warms the cockles of his cold heart.

Len doesn’t go back to his apartment when he leaves the train station. Instead, he goes to a strip club. It’s his birthday. After the night he’s had, he deserves a private dance with a “happy ending.”

Mick shows up when he’s had a couple of beers and says something about Len being a hero to him. (Which doesn’t make any sense, because they’d been partners in crime for a few years[60] before they pulled that job. Mick got burned. Len said they were finished in the aftermath. It’s been months since they saw each other last and he was planning to keep it that way.) He’s sitting at the end of the bar wondering what the hell happened to make his partner so sentimental when Angie Spica[61]—doctoral candidate by daylight, exotic dancer by moonlight—offers to take him to the
Champagne Room for a dance. Angie multitasks, talking to him while he watches and listens. When she’s topless, their conversation topic shifts from her dissertation to how her girlfriend Lia suffers from acute intermittent porphyria.[62] Then, as Angie gets on her knees in front of him and palms his half-hard cock through the thick material of his jeans, his phone vibrates in the pocket of his winter coat.

“What?” Len snaps, biting down on the t sound irritably. After he listens to the answer to his question, he sighs and hangs up. “Sorry,” he drawls, “apparently I have business elsewhere tonight.”

Angie shrugs and tucks the wad of cash he gives her under her garter strap, into the top of one of her thigh-highs. “Well, it’s your money, Lenny,” she says. “I’ll see you on Wednesday?”

Len nods and goes to smack some sense into the uppity new members of his other crew—the more permanent one that he works with pulling jobs in his city—and he’s about to shoot one of them between the eyes (pow, right in the glabella, his brain supplies) when the particle accelerator explodes.[63]

Getting hit by the dark matter wave isn’t the weirdest thing that happens to him that night. Len dreams about a bespectacled woman with blue hair and wakes up cold, with a dry throat.

This isn’t the first time he’s dreamt of her. It won’t be the last. After all, he’s been dreaming about this woman for twenty-five years.

It started after he dropped out of high school: Lisa threw glitter all over the guidance office, he signed the dropout forms, and slipped on the floor on his way out. Then he went headfirst into a wall of lockers, broke his nose (again), and spent the night in the hospital because he had a concussion. Len dreamt of her that night, and he’s been dreaming about her ever since.

“I told you that you made me want things I didn’t want before,” he’d told the girl of his dreams. “Like wishing I could take back some of the things I’ve done. Like being a better man, the kind of man that you deserve.”

“No one is better for me than you,” his dream girl had said. “I’m not saying it’s easy to love you—it’s not, because you don’t tell me when you feel insecure or unworthy—but you’re the best man I’ve ever known. Don’t try to change the past to become something you’re not. Do better in the future because that’s what you want, not because that’s what you think I need. I love you—all of you. Don’t ever imply that you’re not good enough for me again. I will kick your ass. Don’t think I won’t.”

Things got heated after that. It felt so real, the smell and taste of her, those sounds she made. How he felt watching her come apart when he was inside her. How much he…

Len doesn’t let himself name the feeling. Instead he props himself up on his elbows, glances down at himself, and clenches his teeth around a hiss because he’s so hard he’s actually throbbing with the need to come. This won’t be the first time he’s jerked off to her. He made her up when he was asleep. He can do whatever he wants with the idea of her when he’s awake.

After all, his dream girl isn’t real.


Belle Reve first appeared in *Suicide Squad* Vol. 1, No. 1 (“Trial by Blood”) May, 1987 and it was first mentioned in *Arrow* 3x11 (“Midnight City”) 28 January 2015.


Earth-33, or Earth-Prime, is the “real” world in the DC multiverse. It first appeared in *The Flash* Vol. 1, No. 179 (“The Flash: Fact or Fiction?”) May, 1968.

The Watchtower first appeared in *JLA* Vol. 1, No. 4 (“Invaders from Mars”) April, 1997.

*Doctor Who* 3x10 (“Blink”) 9 June 2007.

One type of rape is **rape by deception**, or rape in the context that the rapist had consent, but obtained it through deception or other fraudulent means (i.e. Rose and Eobard were having sex, but Rose didn’t know Eobard was a murderer who changed the timeline at several points to undo [a] murdering her, [b] murdering her father, [c] her committing suicide to escape from him, and [d] her rejecting him in multiple timelines).


Aion is a Hellenistic deity who represents time in flux, as opposed to Chronos, who represents time as divided into the past, present, and future.


“Cell Block Tango” from the musical *Chicago* (1975).


Jake Simmons first appeared in *All-Star Squadron* Vol. 1, No. 21 (“A Tale of Three Citadels!”) May, 1983 and in *Arrow* 3x19 (“Broken Arrow”) 16 April 2015. Len doesn’t seem all that surprised to learn the “blur” he saw in *The Flash*1x04 (“Going Rogue”) 28 October 2014 was a person. Simmons is the only metahuman we know of who canonically had superpowers before the particle accelerator explosion and he owes Len money, so I don’t think it’s a stretch to headcanon that Len knew about the existence of metahumans pre-show.

Len’s birthday in show canon is June second, which is Wentworth Miller’s birthday IRL. I’m keeping Len’s birthday from the comics, which is December eleventh: the night of the particle accelerator explosion.

*The Flash: Season Zero* had a two-issue mini-arc that explained how Len met Mick. It was retconned when Len told Sara that he met Mick in juvie when he was fourteen in *Legends of Tomorrow* 1x07 (“Marooned”) 3 March 2016. I’ve retconned that retcon, because I’m a horrible person and I want the inevitable meeting of *Legends!*Mick and reboot!Len to
be as angsty as possible.


[62] AIP is a rare autosomal dominant metabolic disorder that affects the production of hemoglobin. It’s the second most common form of porphyria, which is nicknamed the Vampires Disease, because one symptom is extreme sensitivity to sunlight. Lia is a vampire in the comics. Hence, porphyria.

I turned my back on the story. A sense of superiority.
   Everything casts a shadow.
   Your body told me in a dream it’s never been afraid of anything.

Richard Siken, “Detail of the Woods”

Shock Value

Part 2

Myth Can Make Reality More Intelligible

Book I

With a Stroke of Lightning

Chapter 5

Time After Time

(2 of 3)

II

Confusing Yourself Is a Way to Stay Honest

21 people died because the S. T. A. R. Labs particle accelerator exploded last night.

Ronald Raymond.
Albert Rothstein.[64]
Mark Mardon.
Clyde Mardon.
Jerry McGee.[65]
Arthur Williams.[66]
Ezra Williams.[67]
Abner Williams.[68]
Ralph Dibny.[69]
Susan Dearborn.[70]
Grant Emerson.[71]
Beatriz da Costa.[72]
Jacob Davenport.
Daria Kim.
Will Everett.
Adam Thompson.[73]
Joseph Connor.
Ann Connor.
Roy Connor.[74]
Donald Bridge.[75]
Leonora Macdonald.[76]

Never forget.
When she buys a fake identity from the lovely Luna Nurblin, Mac asks her to fake a lease for a studio in one of the many apartment complexes destroyed by the dark matter wave. This way, it won’t seem odd when she checks into a hotel that night and buys all new stuff in the weeks that follow. Luna, in a stroke of genius, chooses a building where the owner died and creates a fake lease that was signed that morning. This way, no one will be suspicious if they learn that her fictitious neighbors didn’t know her.

Mac hobbles back to wait for the bus with a birth certificate, adoption records, a social security card, a bank account with a paperless history going back ten years and a fabulous credit score; medical and dental records going back almost three decades; a passport, two driver’s licenses (one from Washington issued in 2002 and renewed in 2007, and one for Missouri issued in 2013); homeschooling records from preschool to high school; a BA in English literature from Seattle University (the same one she got on Earth-33) and an MLIS degree from the University of Washington with false attendance records, official transcripts, disability services records, and graduation announcements that boast summa cum laude (because magna cum laude would be too good to be true); life insurance policies for each of her supposedly dead parents, and genealogy that goes back two centuries.

Luna instructs her to lay low for about a week while she gets her contacts in Seattle to break into various places—her bank, her doctor’s office, her dentist’s office, the Hall of Records at SU—and leave hard copies of the fake records she created, just in case anyone tries to run a background check on Mac at some point. Seattle is far enough away to keep anyone local from looking too hard at her fake backstory, though.

Mac watches her exhales condensate on the windowpane with every sharp lurch of the bus and uses her powers to learn that Hartley Rathaway has been staying with his grandmother since he was fired a month ago. (Geraldine Naydel set up a trust fund for Hartley when he was born, and unlike her daughter and son-in-law, her values aren’t so old that she disowned her grandson for being gay. Jerrie Rathaway—Hartley’s younger sister—is trans, and after seeing how their parents were to her brother when he came out of the closet, she waited until she got her trust fund and then preemptively disowned them before they could cut her off. Geraldine has been taking care of her grandchildren since then.) There are more immediate problems to solve now that she knows Hartley has people who love and support him, so she puts a pin in that and plans to ask what exactly Wells did to him later.

Mac checks into a hotel, orders room service, and conks out after dinner. Then she wakes up and notices her hair is falling out in thick dark clumps. This has happened before, after she went supernova. Only in this timeline she doesn’t have the technology to regrow her hair in seconds, so she spends a few days without eyelashes and eyebrows.

On the bright side, laying low means she avoids the looting and rioting in the aftermath of the particle accelerator explosion. On the darker side, half the city was destroyed that night. Fourteen people died. Hundreds of people were injured. There’s a court date set for the case of Missouri v. Wells, at which the state is going to sue him for damages and take everything he has by invoking res ipsa loquitur—“the thing speaks for itself.” Not even paraplegia can save Harrison Wells from losing his company, so Mac makes an offer on S. T. A. R. Labs.

When he gets out of the hospital with proof that he severed his spinal cord, Eobard is going to have
several offers to choose from. After all, companies like Palmer Technologies and Kord Industries want to acquire the designs and patents for some of their more lucrative projects under the research and development. (Kord Industries in particular is interested in the military applications of weapons like the energy blaster that Dr. Arthur Light[80] invented.) Mac is the only potential buyer who doesn’t want to sell S. T. A. R. Labs for parts, nor does she plan to accept government contracts. If he wants to keep the main branch open in the heart of the city and maintain the level of discretion he’s so fond of, she’s his best option. It’s mercenary, but she’s not wrong.

There’s still a lot she can do from the hotel room, even if she can’t open her eyes because microscopic grit keeps invading her optical space. Including anonymously donating millions to the relief fund to pay volunteers saving the day all over the city. Oh, she could take credit for that, but visibility isn’t part of her plan. It’s enough to know her technopathic ability to create theoretically infinite money is helping the people of her city through this crisis. This is exactly what she should’ve done, before.

Mac opens her eyes and sends a text message to Lisa Snart that reads: Your father had another daughter in 1995. Your sister’s name is Louise Aqila Lincoln.[81]

Lisa texts back: who the hell are you?

Mac cackles into the hollow of one palm and winces at the pain in her arthritic wrist. If only she knew how to answer that question. After everything that’s happened to her in every timeline she can remember, Mac has no idea who she is.

All she knows is what she can do.

Saints & Sinners can’t seem to decide whether it wants to be an arcade, a pool hall, or a dive bar. Len thinks of the place as a second home. (When he thinks of home, he sees his dream girl. Not his apartment in Keystone City. Not his grandfather’s old trailer or the house on Hadley Avenue where he grew up. Just her.) Megan Lockhart,[82] who’d been his mother’s best friend since they started going to Hebrew school, owns and runs it. After she lost her enthusiasm for being a private investigator, she went to the city of angels to become a big star. Then her father died unexpectedly, so Megan returned to Central, and she inherited the bar.

Megan was there when Liane met Lewis, who’d worked security at their synagogue when he was still a cop—and unlike his stepmother Layla, she stuck around after his sister was born. Lisa learned to crawl on top of the pool table and took her first steps on the dancefloor. Len spent so many afternoons at this bar when he was a teenager sitting in the corner booth with a bottomless order of free fries and hanging out in the walk-in freezer when he got overwhelmed. It reminded him of his grandfather’s Polar Ice delivery truck, the only place he’s ever felt safe.[83]

Lisa knocks back a shot of tequila. It goes down like battery acid until she sucks on a lime to squeeze the bitterness out of the taste. “So,” she tells Len after she does her second shot, “we have a sister.”

Len arches one eyebrow at his sister and swallows a sip of beer, his throat working softly. “Dad always was a bastard,” he deadpans, “he married your mom after he found out she was pregnant with you, but he never stopped cheating on her. I’m not surprised he has other kids out there somewhere.”

Lisa shakes her head. “Louise isn’t out there somewhere,” she tells him, “she’s here, Lenny. In our city.”
Louise. Len snorts. Of course their father named her after himself. Still, he can’t help but wonder what she’s like. Despite the friction between them, Lisa is the best thing that’s ever happened to him. Having another sister doesn’t sound so bad. Assuming she’s nothing like their father.

“She’s a sophomore at CCU,” Lisa says. “She’s double majoring in Forensic Chemistry and Social Justice.”

Len arches his eyebrows. Lisa was the first and only person in their family who went to college, and the first to graduate *(magna cum laude)*, because his baby sister is ruthlessly competitive, and she wanted gold honor cords to match the Star of David pendant she got at her bat mitzvah. Len dropped out of high school when he was a sophomore because their grandfather couldn’t watch Lisa while he was in class, and he didn’t want to leave a two-year-old alone with a violent drunk. Lewis was a cop, and then a criminal. Liane was a secretary; Layla was a waitress. Lisa is a structural engineer who became a career criminal. There aren’t that many jobs for women in STEM fields, and none of them pay what crime does.

Louise isn’t like their father or her siblings. It sounds like she wants to be a superhero.

“Her mother died of cancer a few months ago.” Lisa steals his fries and eats all of them before she adds: “Her stepfather is Andrew Lincoln,[84] head of the Blackhawk Squad.”

Megan brings him another plate of fries. Len sprinkles them with salt and dips one in ketchup before he eats it. “How do you know all this?” he asks.

Lisa squeezes what juice is left out of the lime wedge and into her glass of water. “I had Axel look into her,” she answers.

Axel Walker is Megan’s son, but he was adopted by Special Agent Deena Walker[85] before he was born. Keith Walker,[86] her ex-husband, was abusive. Keith was also the first person Len ever killed without Lewis trying to teach him a lesson about murder. There are only two reasons to kill, as far as he’s concerned: if it’s kill or be killed, or if it’s an eye for an eye. It’s one of many things he and his father don’t agree on. Megan thinks her son is safe because he doesn’t know who his biological parents are. If only she knew he’s been writing to his father since he was fifteen.

Axel is a mad computer genius, so he’s who they call for technological crap they can’t hack by themselves. Lisa’s a structural engineer, not a systems engineer. Pressure vessels are her jam, and she’s better at mathematical equations than computers. Len takes whatever he can get his hands on apart to learn what makes things tick, but he’d rather beat a security system by outsmarting it than flipping a switch and shutting it off. There’s no fun in that, no challenge—but having the option makes for a good contingency plan. Which is why he keeps the tricky kid around, even though he has no idea Megan is his mother.

Len swallows the last of his beer and watches Lisa do another shot before he breaks the silence. “I want to meet her,” he murmurs, “our baby sister.”

Lisa spits a slick seed out into her napkin. “Sure,” she says, grinning and slurring the word, stretching it out. “S’not like our family can get any worse.”

Frederick Chyre’s funeral is a solemn affair. Joseph Jackam gives the eulogy. Joe cries, and Iris holds his hand while Caroline gives him tissues from the packet she keeps in her purse. Iris drives Joe to the wake at the funeral home, but instead of leaving the cemetery with the living, Caroline visits her mother’s grave and spends the afternoon with the corpses and a bottle of cheap single serve wine.
“Approximately five hundred people are struck by lightning every year,” Caroline informs Nora’s headstone, “ninety percent of them survive—” she pauses to take a drink, “—and eighty-five percent of the fatalities are male. Statistically, that’s probably why I’m conscious and Barry’s comatose,” she takes a longer swig before closing her mouth around a belch and pressing the hand she isn’t using to hold the bottle over the entrance wound between her breasts, “at least we’re both alive.”

Oddly enough, there was no exit wound. None of the doctors could explain why. Not even the expert on treating the aftereffects of lightning strikes they Skyped from St. Andrews in London. There’s no evidence of electrical discharge after the first bolt struck her. Only a scar branching out of her cleavage, like a leafless tree against a stark winter sky. It’s almost as if the lightning never left her body.

Which is impossible, she thinks, or is it?

Caroline sighs and spins the empty bottle in between her fingers. Then she catches it between her thighs after she drops it and holds it there with no hands. “Joe keeps missing shifts to watch over Barry,” she continues, “and Detective Pretty Boy has been covering for him. It could be because he’s Joe’s new partner now that Detective Chyre is dead. It could be because he has a crush on Iris. I think it’s both.”

Nora doesn’t answer. Like always. Caroline sighs and boops the epitaph before she rises from the grave. Then she yawns loudly, muffling the sound with the back of her hand, and leaves the cemetery.

After she grows her eyebrows and eyelashes back, Mac visits St. Andrews to check on the Mardon brothers. They’re in the recovery wing under the names John Doe and John Roe. Mac is pleasantly surprised they didn’t label Mark as a Jane Doe, because he’s trans and his top surgery scars are obscured by the blunt trauma to his chest. After a doctor takes Mark to the OR for more surgery, Mac sits by a comatose Clyde and fills out a stack of forms.

Plot point: Clyde gets out of the hospital ten months after the particle accelerator explosion, and robs banks to pay off the oodles of medical bills he and Mark accumulated in the aftermath of flying a plane into a storm and crashing. Mark breaks every bone in his body and when he comes out of his medically induced coma, his brother is dead. Retconned.

Mac plans to move the Weather Wizards to S. T. A. R. Labs where she can keep an eye on them eventually, but that won’t happen for a few months because they need time to recover in between surgeries. Unfortunately they can’t take their antipsychotics while they’re comatose, so she has to keep saving Mark and Clyde from themselves on her to-do list until they’re both awake and back on their meds. Mac puts a pin in that and goes to give the clipboard back to one of the nurses. (Michael Calhoun—also known as Mick Rory—is Mark’s emergency contact. Clyde’s emergency contact, to her surprise, is Dante Ramon. Mac wants to leave before they arrive.) Shawna Baez is one of the surgical interns at St. Andrews and she’s next on Mac’s to-do list.

Plot point: Shawna meets Clay in the ER about a week after the particle accelerator explosion and falls in love. Clay is arrested for murder and goes to jail, Shawna uses her powers to break him out, and Team Flash puts her in the pipeline. Retconned.

Clay is arrested by Julie—who gets an anonymous tip about the location of a wanted criminal—and incarcerated before he meets Shawna.

Bada-bing, Mac thinks. Bada-boom.
In his dreams, Len touches her and she shudders at the sensation of his fingers on the nape of her neck.

"Your hands are cold," she whines.

"You know what they say," Len murmurs, "cold hands, warm heart."

"I’m perpetually warm," she retorts. "What does that say about my heart?"

"Your heart’s mine, hmm?" Len whispers in her ear and smirks when she tugs her bottom lip between her teeth.

"Yes," she tells him softly. "Yes it is."

Then he wakes up alone, covered in cold sweat, with the blankets kicked off his bed onto the floor. It’s the first time he’s dreamt of her twice in one week. Len doesn’t remember most of his dreams if they’re not about her—and what he does remember are nightmares about his father that he’d prefer to forget—but they’re never this frequent. There are certain dreams that resurge, like history repeating, so he’s gone months and even years on reruns. Now he’s had two new dreams of her in such a short time, and they’re so vivid that he almost forgets she’s not real.

Len has always loved the cold, and he hates how much he wants to feel the heat of someone else in his arms—especially since the person he wants doesn’t exist. If he focuses, he can almost feel the warmth of her skin seeping into his fingertips. Instead he grabs the blankets and yanks them back over himself. Then he falls asleep in a futile attempt to forget that he woke up missing something he’s never had.


[71] Grant Emerson first appeared in Damage Vol. 1, No. 1 (“Who Is Damage?”) April, 1994 and he was first mentioned in The Flash 1x07 (“Power Outage”) 25 November 2014.


generation legacy Atom on Earth-9 in the comics.


[75] Donnie Trollbridge first appeared in *The Flash* Vol. 2, No. 59 (“Last Resorts”) February, 1992. Donnie was the son of Mason Trollbridge—the character Mason Bridge is based on—in the comics.

[76] Leonora Macdonald first appeared in *The Flash* Vol. 2, No. 59 (“Last Resorts”) February, 1992. Leonora was married to Mason Trollbridge—the character Mason Bridge is based on—in the comics.


[79] *In res ipsa loquitur*, one is presumed to be negligent if they had exclusive control of whatever caused the injury even though there is no specific evidence of negligence, but without negligence the accident would not have happened.


Sometimes Science Advances Faster Than It Should

Do I dare
disturb the universe?
In a minute there is time
for decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse.

T. S. Eliot, *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*

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Shock Value

**Part 2**

*Myth Can Make Reality More Intelligible*

**Book I**

*With a Stroke of Lightning*

**Chapter 6**

Time After Time

(3 of 3)

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**III**

Sometimes Science Advances Faster Than It Should

*In the past ten years, the world has changed. Things we thought were impossible—superheroes, aliens, smartphones—have become just another part of our lives. Skeptics are out there, but they can’t argue with the facts.*

*When the S. T. A. R. Labs particle accelerator was activated, Dr. Harrison Wells promised a new era of scientific advancement. I heard his speech, and he said the future would be here faster than we think. I saw that future today. I saw a woman with blue hair and white eyes, a woman who bent the electromagnetic spectrum to her will, a woman who saved my life.*

*Central City has another hero: our lady of the lightning.*

From “The Lady of the Lightning” by Iris West

Originally posted to [thelightoftruth.tumblr.com](http://thelightoftruth.tumblr.com) on 21 December 2013

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In 2010, Stephen Hawking postulated that an accelerator large enough to accelerate humans instead of particles could make the possibility of time travel a reality.[87] In 2180, Eobard was researching quark-gluon plasma when he found that article while excavating the *Daily Mail* archives. In 2003, he designed the research laboratory of Harrison Wells’s dreams in a circle with the intention of building a speedster accelerator in the basement. In 2013, the accelerator exploded to create that speedster and destroyed three quarters of the Ouroboros that contained it.

S. T. A. R. Labs is declared a hazardous zone the week after the explosion. Mac breaks into the wreck of the building about a week after that to absorb the lingering electromagnetic radiation so a construction crew can start rebuilding as soon as possible. There are dead animals in the streets among the other debris: rats, stray cats, pigeons, striped and spotted skunks, at least four kinds of bats, and even a few coyotes.
It should be cold inside the particle accelerator. Its superconductive electromagnets are usually cooled to -454.9°F—the same temperature as outer space. It exploded because the accelerator produced approximately three hundred million trillion electron volts, more powerful than the shockwaves created by exploding stars. No accelerator on earth has ever produced so much power. Only the Fly’s Eye cosmic ray event in 1991 beats that.\[88\] It should’ve destroyed the whole building, not just the centralized part of the accelerator that’s a gaping hole now.

Mac lowers herself onto the floor and folds her legs underneath her, getting comfortable before she inhales sharply and siphons what radiation she’s capable of absorbing without killing herself out of the building. It takes six hours, but no decaying pions remain once she’s done.

*I can’t believe it’s only eight in the morning,* she groans internally, mentally stretching out the suffix until the *ng* sound becomes exponential. Mac prefers her caffeine cold and her mochas decaffeinated, but sleep is not an option until she’s crossed off a few more things on her to-do list. If she accidentally vibrates into another dimension because of the espresso, well…it wouldn’t be the first time she’s fallen down the rabbit hole.\[89\]

*I need coffee,* she thinks. *In a vat.*\[90\]

Jitters is within walking distance of S. T. A. R. Labs for an able-bodied person—six or eight blocks, depending on which exit she leaves through—but she’s disabled and flying is out of the question unless she wants people to start calling her a goddess or a monster again. They’re already staring because of her hair. Superman told the world that he was an alien seven years ago, so for all the other passengers know, she’s from another planet and blue is her natural hair color. They’d be half right.

*I can’t keep taking the bus,* Mac thinks after she thanks the bus driver and hobbles onto the sidewalk, *not with all of this walking.* If the arthritis doesn’t get worse, she might get bursitis again instead. Neither possibility sounds fun. At least bursitis is curable with a cortisone shot. RA has no cure beyond gene therapies she couldn’t afford in the future, but they don’t exist in the present, so that point is moot.

*I might be overdoing it,* she thinks woozily as she opens the door to the coffee shop.

There’s a man with a gun in his pocket standing in line, buzzing with anxious bioelectricity. Mac groans externally as her eyes white out and the electroreception obvolutes her ophthalmoception. When he draws the gun with trembling hands, Mac paramagnetizes it out of his quaking grip and disassembles his weapon in midair, leaving the man discombobulated and twitching in shock. Then she hacks his banking app with her brain and surreptitiously puts a few thousand dollars in his account to stop him from trying to shoot anyone for money again today.

There’s a camera flash as someone captures the moment just before the parts of the revolver fall harmlessly to the floor. Mac whirls to face the photographer and sees a tall black man in jeans and a t-shirt holding what looks like an expensive digital camera. Next to him is a beautiful Lebanese woman with her black hair in a sleek bob and her sharp eyes fixed on a story.\[91\]

*James Olsen,*\[92\] her mind supplies, *so that woman can only be…*

“Lois Lane,” she says as she offers her hand to Mac with a gorgeously ferocious smile, “Daily Planet, and you are…?”

Rose was a journalist in the future. Lois Lane-Kent and Iris West-Allen were her heroes. There was
a picture on her dorm room wall of them alongside Linda Park-West—the author of a scathing tell-all book on rape culture in the world of professional baseball and Iris’s sister-in-law—Tawny Young,[93] ace reporter for KLAQ TV, and Pulitzer Prizewinning photographer Alexandra Dewitt, her girlfriend.[94] Mac experiences the memories of being Rose in black and white, but that picture is in full color. Rose liked to glance at the women in a place of honor on her wall, looking up to them. Those memories are hyperfocused, amalgamated into the emotional resonance attached to the image. It’s turning her anxiety up to eleven.

It’s beyond surreal to see Lois in person. This woman is well-known in two worlds. There’s a statue of her in the futuristic Metropolis. It was built in 2038, a century after her character debuted on Earth-33.[95] Mac is simultaneously gnawing on the inside of her cheek to keep herself from squeeing and trying not to have a panic attack from sensory overload. It turns out that accessing every device in a ten block radius is enough to give her a migraine.

Don’t tell her you’ve loved her since you were seven and she was dating Bruce Wayne, she thinks to herself. Superman: The Animated Series[96] isn’t a thing in this universe. No one is going to get that reference unless they’re from another dimension, too.

After she stops monologuing internally, Mac fries the memory card. James almost drops his camera at the discharge. Then she notices everyone at Jitters is staring at the lightning fizzling out from where it was striking over her skin. Including the barista who’s writing her dissertation on superheroes and what they mean for journalism. Also several people who recorded her using her powers on their smartphones. Mac sighs and fulgurkinetically erases their data. There was a vine of her that a few dozen people saw before she took it down, but nobody can prove she’s a metahuman. Mac could bullshit this by calling it a mass hallucination caused by the aftereffects of the particle accelerator explosion and it’d be her word against theirs.

This is fine, she thinks. “Um,” she blurts out to fill the stunningly palpable silence, “can I get a venti mocha with extra whip, two shots of espresso, and three times whatever the standard amount of chocolate is here?”

Iris stops gawking after Mac tucks her cane in the crook of her elbow and extracts her wallet from her messenger bag. “Of course,” she says, “it’s on the house.”

Mac nods awkwardly, a sharp descent of her chin. “Thank you,” she says.

“You’re welcome.” Iris smiles at her without baring her teeth and turns to the espresso machine. I wish Barry could be here, she thinks, this would have blown his mind.

Mac hobbles over to a table in the corner and flops into a chair that faces the room so her back is near the wall. Luckily the people who come to coffee shops around eight o’clock in the morning have to get to work by nine.

It takes fifteen minutes for most of them to get their lattes and leave. It takes all of ten seconds for Lois to sit down across from Mac.

James side-eyes her after he sits beside Lois. “What’d you do to my camera?” he wants to know.

“Nothing you can prove,” Mac deadpans.

There’s a cloud of tension forming between them, sharp and thick and heavy. Mac gnaws her pinkie nails to the quick and draws bright droplets of blood from one of her cuticles. Lois mentally notes that she bleeds red, but then so does Clark—the presence of hemoglobin protein in her
bloodstream doesn’t mean she’s not an alien.

*Whatever she is, Lois thinks, she’s something new.*

“I didn’t catch your name,” she says out loud.

“I didn’t give it,” Mac retorts. Then she sighs and exhales with enough force to flap her lips. “Okay,” she says before she heaves another sigh in a futile attempt to unclench. “I know I’m being rude, but I don’t have the spoons for this. I’ve been up since two in the morning and I still have a million things to get done today. I need coffee, not a reporter.”

Then, as if on cue, Iris says: “venti mocha for the mighty Thor, goddess of thunder?”

“Where’s your hammer?” James asks, only halfway joking. Whether she’s actually claiming she’s Thor or making a comic book reference instead of giving them her name, an earthbound Norse goddess makes as much sense as anything else he’s seen since he became Superman’s best friend.

Mac shrugs, one shoulder hunching towards her earlobe. “I’m unworthy,” she answers as she uses her cane to get back on her feet. Then she hobbles to the counter without looking back. “Thank you,” she says after Iris hands over her mocha.

This woman is proof that Barry was right all along. About the impossible being possible. About the man who killed his mother. With him in a coma and Caroline at the precinct, it falls to Iris to investigate her. “You’re welcome,” Iris says as she steps out from behind the counter and leaves one of the other baristas in charge of the register. “So how did you do that? With the lightning and the gun?”

Mac doesn’t answer because she’s trying to drink her mocha all at once.

“Barry—my best friend—believes in the impossible,” Iris tells her. “He was struck by lightning the night the particle accelerator exploded. He’s been in a coma for over a week, but they say coma patients can hear everything you’re saying when you talk to them. I want to tell him about you, to give him something to look forward to when he wakes up.”

Mac swallows with a loud gulping sound and shifts her weight off her bad ankle. “I’m not impossible,” she mutters. “I’m a metahuman.” Then she hobbles away without explaining herself any further.

“Wait!” Iris shouts after her, “What’s a metahuman?”

Superman is trying to fight a green fire downtown in the city center. Mac knows she can’t get there in time to keep him from putting it out, so she hobbles into an alley behind a Chinese takeout place called the *Golden Dragon* and slumps against a rough old brick wall. “I know you can hear me, Clark,” she says, “the fire you’re fighting is a person named Beatriz da Costa. I can sense her bioelectricity in the flames, and she will die if you snuff them out. I know how to help her, if you—”

Then he’s suddenly there with her, faster than a speeding bullet. When he lands in the alley in front of her, his cape flaps in the updraft before it settles behind him. Mac gapes—she can’t help it! After all, it’s *Superman*. Mac used to own a Superman t-shirt. Superman is a pop culture icon, his symbol is everywhere, and everyone on Earth-33 knows him. If meeting Lois Lane was surreal, meeting Clark Kent is out of this world.
“Um,” she blurts. “Hi.”

Clark smiles hesitantly at her, unsure whether she’s friend or foe—she used his human name to get his attention, but she isn’t attacking him or trapping him with kryptonite. Instead she’s looking at him the way most humans do. With awe. Like he’s a god among men. Like he’s a superhero. “Hi,” he says.

Then he scoops her up into his arms and flies back to where the green fire is still burning. Mac screams the whole way there, the winter sky swallowing the shrill sound. When he puts her down, she drops her cane and slaps both hands over her mouth. It clatters on the sidewalk with a hollow noise as nausea lurches up from her stomach into her throat. Mac hyperventilates until she notices the cameras: smartphones, traffic and security cams, a photographer from the *Central City Citizen*, and a crew filming the fire for *Central City Picture News*.

*Oh, fuck.* Mac heaves a sigh and glitches everything before she erases the five seconds of footage they got of her trying not to throw up all over the pavement. It’s exhausting, the damage control; she’s going to have to find another way to get things done, one that doesn’t involve being seen for what she is.

Clark kneels down beside her. “You’re sure that’s a person?” he asks, his voice apologetic because he forgot that motion sickness is a thing.

Mac nods and causes a localized strike of heat lightning that buzzes through the fire. It fades in until the green flames burn out, leaving Bea among the ashes inside the smoldering apartment complex. Clark speeds into the building and takes her to St. Andrews. It’s only a few blocks from the city center. Mac calls Tora Olafsdotter[98] to tell her that her girlfriend is alive—using an app to disguise her voice, just in case.

When the fire department arrives, sirens wailing, she grabs her cane and hobbles away. Clark watches her go from above before he flies off to help the people who need Superman.

Caroline has spent the past ten days taking pictures of dead things.

Of the seventeen people who died the night the particle accelerator exploded, only a dozen bodies were found. Caroline took photographs of them in the city morgue. Cecile Horton,[99] the District Attorney, is building a case against Harrison Wells—she and her prosecutors need to know exactly how and why these people died.

Ann Connor, one of the casualties, is—*was*, she tells herself, *was*—younger than Caroline. It hits her harder than she expected, looking down at the body of a nineteen-year-old girl on the autopsy table and taking her portrait. Like a death mask, but without the respect. At least her skull was still intact. Roy, her twin brother, wasn’t so lucky.

Fact: the S. T. A. R. Labs particle accelerator explosion destroyed half the city and killed seventeen people.

Fact: those people deserve whatever semblance of justice the Missouri State Supreme Court can offer them and their families.

Fact: Harrison Wells is responsible, and he needs to pay.

“Hey,” Iris says. Caroline almost jumps out of her skin. Iris laughs in spite of herself and holds out a to-go cup. “And that’s why I brought you decaf,” she informs her, “black with almond milk and
honey. Just the way you like it.”

Caroline takes the cup but doesn’t drink. Instead she holds it with both hands, letting the warmth seep into her palms. “Ally made brownies,” she hunches over to grab a paper bag from underneath her seat. “I saved you a middle one.”

Ally Gates, the medical examiner, makes excellent brownies. Joan Williams, her cousin, is a pastry chef who owns Iris’s favorite bakery: the Blue Canary Cake Emporium. Those brownies are a secret family recipe.

Iris makes a sinful noise at the first bite of her brownie, a low humming sound bubbling up from her throat. Caroline sips her coffee, careful to avoid burning her tongue, and slumps to shrug the tension out of her shoulders.

“Something happened today,” Iris tells her around a mouthful of brownie, “a guy pulled a gun when I was working the register.”

Caroline chokes on her coffee. “Oh my god,” she splutters, flailing to get a better look at Iris, “but you’re okay?”

Iris nods and licks the crumbs from her fingers. “There was this woman,” she says in a hushed voice, heavy with astonishment. “She had blue hair and white eyes. She saved my life. She saved everyone at Jitters.” Iris exhales a soft laugh, full of wonder. “She told me she was a metahuman.”

Caroline gives Iris an incredulous look. “What’s a metahuman?” she wants to know.


“Um…” Someone clears his throat. “Iris?”

Caroline turns to see a tall blond detective framed by the doorway. Eddie acknowledges her with a smile and a nod before he looks around the hospital room. “Joe is at home,” she informs him, “I spent most of the afternoon convincing him to go and get some sleep.”

“Oh,” Eddie says without taking his eyes off Iris, “good. That’s good.”

Iris glances down at Barry and goes to talk to Eddie in the hallway. Caroline rolls her eyes at them and tilts her head back to take the final sip of her coffee, slurping the last drops noisily. Iris hasn’t dated much, although not for the same reasons as Barry. In high school she was the editor of the school paper, star midfielder on the soccer team, and student body president. Then she went to college at Columbia University and got an internship at the Gotham Gazette. After she got her Masters, she returned to Central and got into the doctoral program at CCU. Iris has always been too busy for a serious boyfriend. Until now.

When she comes back, Iris has a date with Detective Pretty Boy.

Welp, Caroline thinks as she gives Barry’s arm a sympathetic pat, I totally saw that coming.


[88] In 1991, scientists detected and observed a proton accelerated to 300 EeV (3.2 x 10^{20} eV). It’s called the Fly’s Eye Event, and that particle is called the Oh-My-God particle. It was the highest-energy cosmic ray ever detected, and scientists had previously believed such energetic particles could not exist in the universe, because the popular scientific
theory said particles should rapidly lose their energy in collisions with the universal microwave radiation left over from the Big Bang.


[91] Lois Lane shouldn’t need a footnote, but: the CW is undoubtedly going to whitewash her on *Supergirl* if and when she eventually appears. I’m over 9000% not here for that. I imagine my version of her as Nadine Njeim.

[92] James didn’t come to work for CatCo on *Supergirl* until 2015. It’s 2013 at this point in the story, so ostensibly he’s still working at the *Daily Planet* with Lois and Clark. Which is why he’s here in this chapter, jsyk.


[95] Alexandra Dewitt first appeared in *Green Lantern* Vol. 3, No. 48 (“Emerald Twilight, Part 1: The Past”) January, 1994. Then she was murdered in *Green Lantern* Vol. 3, No. 54 (“Forced Entry”) August, 1994 and her body was stuffed in Kyle Rayner’s refrigerator. This plotline is where Gail Simone took her inspiration to name the Women in Refrigerators trope from. Alex isn’t going to get fridged in my story. Instead she gets to have a life, and a career, and a Pulitzer, and a girlfriend, because fuck everyone who thinks that women only get to exist to make men have feelings.

[96] *Superman: The Animated Series* 3x16-18 (“World’s Finest”) 4 October 1997. I used to own these episodes on VHS because DC released them as a movie.


Stop. Focus. Let me start again, slower.

Neurology: a study of the nervous. They have proved that the things we imagine are real. When we think we see, we are projecting our memories onto experience. Memory: a unit of measurement describing the distance between the past and present.

Daphne Gottlieb, “The Persistence of Revision”

Shock Value

Part 2

Myth Can Make Reality More Intelligible

Book I

With a Stroke of Lightning

Chapter 7

Enter the Lady of the Lightning

(1 of 3)

“I have to find another path…divine my own future…one uniquely mine. Not a page from someone else’s book. Not a fate that begins and ends on page one.”

Barbara Gordon

Batgirl: Year One Vol.1, No.1 (“Masquerade”)

February, 2003

Using Force to Stop Force Is Absurd

It’s been two weeks and some change since I traveled back in time to the night of the particle accelerator explosion. Here’s what has changed so far:

Divergence #1: Jim Spivot\(^{[102]}\) is alive and he owns a shoe store in Keystone City. Patty Spivot is a forensic blood analyst who works with Barry at the C. C. P. D. Mark never shot her father in the face, but Clyde did shoot Fred Chyre.\(^{[103]}\) Joe is going to shoot him twice in the chest to avenge his partner. Which sets a bad precedent for how the cops treat metahuman criminals that I want to change.

Divergence #2: Shawna Baez never met Clay Parker, and now he’s serving a life sentence for murder, so chances are she never will.

Divergence #3: Mark and Clyde have a private room at St. Andrews for the foreseeable future. Shawna promised to keep me informed, and to notify Julie that her boyfriend—and the father of their son—is comatose. Julie won’t think Mark is dead, their son won’t be born without his father or his uncle in his life, and no one is going to attempt to drown the city to avenge their dead brother. Crisis averted.
Divergence #4: Hartley has a support system. I don’t know if this is consistent with the other timelines or not, but I’m chalking it up to the butterfly effect from the plethora of timeline shenanigans between Eobard, Barry, the team aboard the Waverider (whom I assume are still out there, paradoxically, as time remnants), and me. [104]

Divergence #5: Len isn’t casing the special collections library at CCU, nor does he plan to steal the Catalogue of Women in this timeline. I won’t meet him at Saints and Sinners. We won’t dance to Joan Jett & the Blackhearts. We won’t meet again at the university. I won’t give him my phone number. Lisa won’t give me a concussion. We won’t kiss on my doorstep two nights later. I won’t invite him in. We won’t eat dinner together and talk. We won’t fall in love. I can’t date anyone with Eobard here…unless I want them dead. I won’t be the reason Len dies again. If he survives, it’s worth breaking my own heart a thousand times over.

Divergence #6: I’m like 97% sure everyone has a twin? Barry’s twin sister is Caroline, who has the common sense not to go by Carrie since it rhymes with her brother’s name and that’s just ridiculous. Caitlin has an identical twin sister named Roxanne,[105] Roxie for short. Cisco has a trans fraternal twin sister named Armanda,[106] Armie for short. Ray has an identical twin brother named Sydney,[107] Syd for short. I’m looking at his résumé as I record this, because this place cannot function with only four employees—including Eobard and me, excluding the once and future Team Flash because most of them don’t work at S. T. A. R. Labs—and everyone besides Caitlin and Cisco quit after the particle accelerator exploded. There are no severance packages for quitters, but some of them are suing for punitive damages since they sustained injuries on the premises that night. Awesome.

Divergence #7: Sara Lance is the first vigilante to make her mark on Central City. Why? Laurel Lance got a job in the district attorney’s office and moved here after C. N. R. I. was destroyed in the Undertaking. Tommy Merlyn still died in this timeline (I checked) but so did Quentin Lance. There was nothing left for Laurel in Starling City after that. Not with Oliver on the island doing his best to prove John Donne was wrong when he said “No man is an island, entire of itself, every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main.” [108]

Divergence #8: Len didn’t have his meet cute with Mick when he was fourteen and they were both in juvie. Instead they met when he was thirty-six and looking for a partner in crime. I don’t know what’s happened between them beyond Len ending their partnership after Mick set himself on fire, but I do know the history they had before the divergence has been retconned. Lisa is all he has in this timeline. Until he forms the Rogues, because he has no reason not to now.[109] I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t looking forward to that.

Divergence #9: Lisa won three gold medals in figure skating at the 2002 Winter Olympics and won the gold again at the World Figure Skating Championship in 2003. Lewis was still arrested for beating the crap out of Roscoe Dillon,[110] but he did it after they won. That’s why Lisa didn’t compete in any pairs events at the World Championship: she didn’t want a new partner.

Divergence #10: HIVE has begun construction on their ginormous underground bunker on the outskirts of Starling. Milo Armitage is going to attempt to buy the second Markov device, the earthquake machine that Malcolm Merlyn used for the Undertaking. Damien Darhk hasn’t acquired the Khushu Idol yet. I’m going to need someone to steal it before he does so I can destroy it. I might hire Selina Kyle. I want to meet her, okay? Don’t judge me. There’s a practical reason, too: the idol draws its power from death, and unlike my…unlike Captain Cold, Catwoman doesn’t kill.

From the Watchtower Archives
Mac uses her powers to break into the Wells mansion the night Eobard is released from the hospital. Once inside, she indulges her insatiable curiosity and snoop. Unfortunately, there’s much to sleuth through—the floors are eerily spotless, the walls have never been painted any color but white, and each set of sleekly expensive wooden furniture is more functional than decorative. (It looks immaculate, which is freaky. Houses that people actually live in shouldn’t be streamlined like a television set.) There’s scotch old enough to order its own scotch in the liquor cabinet, a few modern art pieces that would’ve been considered retro in the century they’re from, a turntable and an impressive collection of classical music on vinyl. (Eobard has always been a hipster, the sort of snob who insists that pop music from any decade is *puerile*—his word, not hers.) No personal items. No bric-a-brac. No loose threads to yank until something unravels.

There’s a picture of Tess Morgan on the desk in his office. Mac doesn’t know how to feel about that. Oh, she knows a side effect of the bodysnatching technology Eobard used on Harrison is cognitive transference; but it’s odd to feel jealous of a woman he murdered who isn’t coming back to haunt him like she is.

It took Barry a week to heal after Zoom broke his back, *before*. Eobard is still healing from severing his spinal cord, so the automated wheelchair he’s using isn’t for show. When he wheels into his bedroom after dinner, he realizes he isn’t alone.

“Hi.” Mac uses the hand that isn’t holding onto her cane to wave at him, her fingers softly fluttering into the hollow of her palm. “Miss me?”

Eobard is reluctant to admit that he did miss the woman who broke off their engagement and left him without a word. Oh, he was angry for so many years that she left like that. No trace of her, except the engagement ring he’d given her on the edge of the sink and an ensuite bathroom full of tachyons. Of course he blamed his nemesis, the Flash. After all, his research was focused on the speedforce—he never bothered to learn that fulgurkinesis can facilitate time travel.

“Eobard,” she says.

It’s been fifteen years since anyone has called him by his name. It feels like an eternity. If she were anyone else, he’d ask how she knows he’s Eobard Thawne, even though he’s rewritten his genetic code to become Harrison Wells; but she’s fulgurkinetic, and she can sense his ephemeral connection to the speedforce. There’s an unspoken question, and he knows she’s asking: *are you still Eobard Thawne, or are you Harrison Wells?*

“Mackenzie,” he says, an answer to a question he never got to ask.

Truth be told, he hasn’t thought of her as Rose in years. Rose—the version of her that loved him back—wouldn’t’ve left him. Mac left because she knows what he’s done to her in every timeline, but he can be himself now in a way he couldn’t ever be with her before. When she was Rose, she didn’t see him. After engineering his existence as Harrison Wells for so long, all he wants is proof that he hasn’t ceased to exist as Eobard Thawne. Mac sees him. She’s looking at him with eyes like a brewing storm. Her irises are darker than he remembers, the gray tinted blue in proximity to her hair.

It doesn’t matter that she left him. Eobard has a way back to the future, and she can go with him. They can go *home*. Together.
Mac has other plans. When she tries to electrocute him a few seconds later, it doesn’t work. When he tries to kill her, that doesn’t work either. Eobard tells himself it’s because she overpowered him, but he doesn’t want to kill her; doesn’t want to lose her when he’s just gotten her back; doesn’t want to watch her die all over again. Mac flops onto his bed and wheezes, the noise jolting him back to the present. Eobard glowers at her from the floor, where he fell after he tried to strangle her and his chair flew out from under him. Mac won’t look at him, but his chair wheels over to sit innocuous and empty until he crawls back up into the seat. Eobard takes the gesture as a truce, not as her surrender.

Why didn’t it work? Mac screams internally as raw fear churns through her, visceral and nauseating. Theoretically, it should’ve. Why didn’t it?

Eobard doesn’t ask her why—he knows what he did, even if he doesn’t know how much she remembers—but he doesn’t apologize either. “Mackenzie,” he says in a voice she knows but doesn’t recognize as his, “if you’re here to kill me, I suggest you do better than whatever that was.”

Mac sighs with enough force to flap her lips and folds her hands over her flabby stomach. “I’m not here to kill you,” she tells him. “I’m here because I want to buy S. T. A. R. Labs.”

That’s not at all what he expected her to say. Eobard narrows his eyes at her behind the glasses he wears, but doesn’t need. “What do you want,” he wonders slowly, part of him thrilled because he genuinely doesn’t know the answer, “with my company?”

Mac snorts and rolls he eyes at his bedroom ceiling. “Not yours,” she retorts, “you stole the idea for S. T. A. R. Labs like you stole the face you’re wearing.”

Eobard clumsily tries to wheel over to the edge of the mattress. It’s obvious he’s not used to the chair yet. Mac holds one hand out, splaying her fingers and paramagnetically attracting her cane to her palm. It buzzes with energy, the sound resonating through the hollow metal, the voltage making a weapon out of a mobility device. It’s the loudest do not fucking touch me he’s ever heard.

Sometimes actions do speak louder than words.

Their history is only remembered by them. Ten years of dead boyfriends and missing girlfriends. Twenty years wasted mute and traumatized. Two years of dating exclusively before he proposed to her. Fifteen years of anger permeating in the past. Eobard has no problem with killing her again if she interferes with his plans to return to the future, but that doesn’t mean he wants her dead. Not when he’s spent the worst part of two decades trying to get back to when and where she is. Whatever her name is now, this woman is his home.

“You could stay,” he tells her softly.

Mac uses her cane to get back on her feet and walk out on him again. “No,” she says before she leaves. “I couldn’t.”

Hudson University is one of two universities in Central City. It’s more scientifically inclined than CCU, and as such has a prestigious engineering program. Lisa got her degree from Hudson five years ago. Their sister is attending her alma mater, but she’s majoring in something completely different. Lisa hasn’t been on campus since before she graduated. Len stole a first edition of *On the Origin of Species* from their special collections library a year ago, but the job went so smoothly that no one but his buyer knew he took it.

Lisa side-eyes him. “Lenny,” she ekes the y out until it’s blatantly obvious that she’s judging him, “why are you wearing your reading glasses?”
Len folds his arms. “They aren’t just reading glasses,” he tells her. “They’re privacy glasses. I wear these, and facial recognition software can’t see me. This way, I won’t be making a teenage girl a target for anyone who might have a problem with me. Unless whoever told you about Louise is using her to set a trap for us.”

Louise isn’t a trap—she’s a skinny teenager with brown skin, wavy black hair, and the same blue eyes he and Lisa got from their father. It’s finals week, so she’s studying with her roommate at a coffee shop a few blocks from the main campus. When he sees her, déjà-vu makes his skin crawl, but he ignores it. Crystal Frost[111]—her roommate—is a tall blonde with mousy hair, hazel eyes, and a perpetual wrinkle in between her eyebrows. (They’re talking about the particle accelerator. Crystal has a cousin who works at S. T. A. R. Labs as the head of the bioengineering department, whose fiancée was killed by the explosion.) Len waits for Crystal to leave before he and Lisa approach their study table.

When she glances up from her notes, Louise doesn’t look surprised to see them. “Lenny,” she says before her gaze flicks from Len to Lisa, “and Ellie, right?”

Len snorts at the nickname. Lisa is short for Eliysheba,[112] but Lewis calls her Ellie. Which has never suited her.

“You knew about us,” Lisa deduces.

Louise nods, slowly. “I went to Iron Heights to meet our father after my eighteenth birthday, when my māmā told me that my bābā isn’t my biological dad. Lewis showed me the pictures of you that he has in his cell. I wanted to meet you, but he said you hadn’t visited him in years, so I didn’t know how.”[113]

Len shrugs. After all, he and Lisa use clean aliases—Leonard Wynters[114] and Elisabeth Gould, among others—so they can’t be found by people who don’t know where to look. Including their abusive father.

Louise glances down at her notes. “I can’t hang out until finals are over,” she tells them ruefully. “I have to keep all my grades up, or they’ll give my scholarship to someone else, and I won’t be able to afford tuition.”

Lisa opens her handbag and pulls out a glittery checkbook. “How much?” she asks. “I can pay for it.”

“Oh, Louise’s eyes go comically wide, “I’m not asking you to—”

“We take care of our own,” he’d told his dream girl years ago. “I learned that from you.”

“You’re our sister,” Len says with slow vehemence. “It’s the least we can do.”

Louise still won’t take the check, but he sees Lisa slip it into her school bag when she isn’t looking. There’s no reason she should have to struggle with money. After all, that’s what corrupted their father; he went undercover with the Santini family and they bribed him into working for them instead of the cops after they caught him talking to his handler. Snarts are greedy and selfish, but Louise doesn’t have their name. Maybe she doesn’t have to inherit the worst of their father, either.

Caitlin visited Eobard in the hospital before his surgery and offered to drive him to the courthouse for what they’re calling the trial of the century. It’s an exaggeration—they aren’t even fourteen years into the twenty-first century yet—but tabloid journalists have always had a passionate love
affair with hyperbole.

Mac hobbles up the steps to the courthouse through a crowd of press without answering any of their questions. After she talks the police commissioner into letting her oversee the rebuilding of Iron Heights (by offering to make a substantial donation to the local police charity), she sits beside Caitlin in one of the pews.

Caitlin side-eyes Mac, her brown eyes lingering on the blue sheen glinting off her short hair and six silver studs all along the shell of her ear down to her earlobe. “You’re her,” she says, “Mac Howell. Dr. Wells told me about you.”

Mac cocks her head and narrows her eyes behind her glasses. “What exactly did he tell you?” she wants to know.

Caitlin tries to smile, attempting levity, but it falls flat. “Only that you’re the reason I still have a job,” she says.

When she was sixteen, Caitlin graduated high school. Then she finished her bachelor’s degree in two years by overloading every quarter. When she was twenty, she went to medical school. At twenty-four, she became a board-certified neurosurgeon. Then her father died, and she couldn’t stomach neurosurgery anymore.

Eobard built the first S. T. A. R. Labs facility in 2001—a year after he murdered Nora Allen, Tess Morgan, and Harrison Wells. Caitlin came to work for him in 2011. It’s been almost three years since then, and the loyalty she has to the man she knows as Dr. Wells is absolute. He was there for her after her father died. He promised their particle accelerator would facilitate medical advancements that might cure things like multiple sclerosis. Caitlin thinks of him more as a dear friend than a boss or a mentor; so the way she sees it, Eobard is a victim and Mac is a usurper.

Mac cocks her head in concession. “I’m not here to destroy what you built,” she says lightly, “Dr. Wells did a pretty good job of that all by himself. I’m here to rebuild, to make something even stronger than before. I believe in what he created S. T. A. R. Labs for. I don’t want to ruin anything. I just…” she heaves a sigh and slumps in her seat, “my family is dead, and I don’t have any friends, but I have money. I need people to share it with. I need a place to belong. I want to help create that future he talked about, that’s all.”

Caitlin looks down at her lap before she reaches out and squeezes her shoulder. Mac smiles at her shyly, without showing her teeth. Caitlin smiles back as Cisco wheels the man everyone came to see into the courtroom. Eobard sits in his wheelchair behind the counsel table with his lawyer, Taylor Weathersby of Weathersby & Stone LLP. Then a hush falls over the room as everyone zooms in and focuses on him.

There’s no verdict that day, but everyone knows he’ll lose. It’s only a matter of time.

There’s a flatscreen TV behind the bar at the strip club where Len goes. It’s playing the local eleven o’clock news broadcast. Which includes footage of Missouri v. Wells. Len splits his focus between the screen and Angie onstage until he sees her. Libby Lawrence-Chambers, a broadcast journalist for Central City Picture News, is talking to his dream girl. Oh, her midnight blue hair is shorter than it’s ever been in his dreams and she’s wearing different glasses, but it’s her. Len would know her anywhere.

It feels like everything is falling into place all at once. He didn’t make her up. She’s real. She’s been out there this whole time. She’s here now, in his city. He can make his dreams come true.
“Ms. Howell.” Libby holds a wireless microphone out toward his dream girl. “There are rumors that not only has Dr. Wells accepted your offer to become his business partner, but he also agreed to give you a controlling interest in his company. Would you care to comment on that?”

*Howell is a common surname, Len thinks, but I doubt many people have the financial assets to acquire eighty percent of the shares in a multibillion dollar proprietorship like S. T. A. R. Labs. I have a name. I can find her. I can meet the woman of my dreams.*

When she answers, he actually pinches his forearm to make sure he isn’t dreaming.

“They aren’t rumors,” Mac says flatly. “I’m Dr. Wells’s business partner and CFO of S. T. A. R. Labs. Our agreement allows him to keep his position as CEO, on the condition that I approve every financial decision our company makes. I plan to keep the promises he made to Central City. I promise you a brighter future,” she glances at the camera, “and I always keep my promises.”

Then it cuts to a live broadcast. “That was Mackenzie Howell,” Libby informs her audience. “After her adoptive parents died last year in a tragic car accident, she inherited a substantial fortune and invested it wisely. Now she’s one of the richest women in the world and she’s looking to make a new start here in Central City. If nothing else, Ms. Howell structured her business agreement with Dr. Wells to keep the enigmatic billionaire from throwing all of his money into a device capable of destroying half the city again…”

Len texts Axel: **I need all the information you can find on Mackenzie Howell, and I need it yesterday.**

Axel responds: **aye aye captain**

*Captain, Len thinks. I could get used to that.*

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[104] I took a class on the mechanics of time travel and it made me hate the discontinuities in the Arrowverse even more than I did before. I know the show isn’t going to address this, but: killing Savage in 1958 should’ve erased everything he did afterwards and subsequently retconned the mission (in the same way that Eddie’s death and Eobard subsequently ceasing to exist should’ve reset the timeline he altered, but instead it created a singularity because the writers didn’t want to undo all their work…only now they’ve done it anyway with their version of Flashpoint). I was tempted to ignore S1 of *Legends of Tomorrow* because I thought it was…mediocre is the nicest way to put it…but I’m keeping my plot options ajar in case I don’t hate S2.


[107] *Legends of Tomorrow* 1x10 (“Progeny”) 7 April 2016.


[109] Len says he plans to form the Rogues after he sabotaged the frozen food truck Team Flash was using to transport their metahuman prisoners in *The Flash* 1x22 (“Rogue Air”) 12 May 2015, but it doesn’t happen because of *Legends of*
Tomorrow. I’m retconning that so hard.


[112] Eliysheba is the wife of Aaron in the Hebrew Bible: she’s mentioned in *Exodus* 6:23.

[113] Len mentions that he visited Lewis in *The Flash* 2x03 (“Family of Rogues”), and said that visit was the last time he was in Iron Heights before his incarceration at the end of that episode. I don’t know why he’d canonically visit that asshole, but in this fic that visit will be significant later.

[114] Leonard Wynters is the version of Captain Cold who appeared in *The Flash* 1x17 (“Captain Cold”) 6 April 1991.


Enter the Lady of the Lightning (2) Strong Emotional Attachment Stems from Basic Insecurity

I walked a forked road and took a wormhole back through the old woods where we fell into something, or fell out of something, and felt afraid either way—and I was touched by grief I hadn’t felt yet and the tendency to experience nostalgia after dark. It’s been a while and it still rattles in my head, how months are the same as minutes and how I fall asleep and we belong to the same time, a year where we are in love and not afraid of each other.

Mallory Pearson, “How to Time Travel”

Shock Value
Part 2
Myth Can Make Reality More Intelligible
Book I
With a Stroke of Lightning
Chapter 8
Enter the Lady of the Lightning
(2 of 3)

II
Strong Emotional Attachment Stems from Basic Insecurity

Bittersweet Caroline (@DirtyPillows) • Dec 31
I’m giving away the gifts for my wedding that never happened. Anyone want a Cuisinart? I have two. #NewYearsResolutions

Han Shot First (@GoodVibrations)[117] • Dec 31
@DirtyPillows give me the Cuisinart so I can take it apart to build battlebots!!! #NewYearsResolutions

An Actual Rainbow (@thelightoftruth) • Dec 31
This year, I’m going to investigate the impossible because my best friend can’t. #NewYearsResolutions

Electric Boogaloo (@luceonomuro)[118] • Dec 31
to live, to survive, and to know the difference between the former and the latter. #NewYearsResolutions
S. T. A. R. Labs is declassified as a hazardous zone\[119\] a few days after Mac officially has a controlling interest in the company. One of the three towers is still intact, since each turret was designed to function by itself. Conveniently, the bioengineering department is part of the functioning turret and there’s a workshop Cisco overzealously calls dibs on the second the elevator doors open.

Dr. Wells returns to his office on top of the turret, ostensibly to fetch the hard copies of S. T. A. R. Labs’ financial records for Mac to peruse. Caitlin goes to keep him company and flutter around him like a mother hen. Mac uses her powers to get all the permits she’ll need to rebuild everywhere else after she makes herself at home in the cortex. It’s going to take some time to push the paperwork through, but she can wait. There are other problems to solve in the meantime. One of their satellites is malfunctioning and it’s going to re-enter the atmosphere in a few months. Metahumans are coming into their powers all over the city. Barry is comatose, but he’s unconsciously causing electrical anomalies that are wreaking havoc with the technologies at the hospital.

It occurs to Mac that she was unprepared for how much goes into running a research laboratory. S. T. A. R. Labs was a proprietorship—a private company owned by one person—before she bought it. Now it’s a partnership between her and Eobard, who still owns twenty percent of the shares as per their agreement. There’s no transparency required, no obligation to disclose any valuable information, and no other shareholders. This is why billionaires are untouchable, and even though she’s working the system, she feels kind of gross for being complicit in how exploitative and corrupt the corporate world can be.

According to her research, Eobard has been approached by a plethora of people interested in forming a partnership or taking the company public. Mac is the only person who has ever successfully negotiated for anything with him and gotten the better end of the deal, but that’s because he has feelings for her. It’d be naïve to think otherwise.

Aside from the government contract he had with the army—which yielded a telepathic metagorilla—the research and development projects in progress at the main facility were put on the backburner to build the particle accelerator. Most of those projects were supplementary to building the accelerator itself, parts of the whole intricate machine. Three other facilities exist: one in Keystone, one in Starling, and another in Metropolis. Most of the people working at the facility in Keystone are working on their own research projects. (Silas\[120\] and Elinore Stone are working on next generation cybernetic prostheses,\[121\] Albert Michaels is studying nuclear fission,\[122\] Karen Faulkner is developing a drug to regenerate atrophied musculature,\[123\] and Kimiyo Hoshi is researching nuclear fusion.)\[124\] Jenet Klyburn oversees that facility.\[125\] According to them, no one there is going to terminate their employment as long as Mac continues funding their research, which she will. Emil Hamilton,\[126\] who runs the facility in Metropolis, says the same thing.

Meanwhile, the facility in Starling exists primarily for storage at this point. After the facility in Gotham was burgled by multiple Batman villains, Eobard had everything from there shipped to Starling. Their inventory is mostly located at that facility—even though it’s six hundred miles away.

Then it hits her like a thunderclap out of the blue: the lack of cosmic radiation in the aftermath of the explosion means it must’ve been absorbed by the Firestorm matrix. Oh, she thinks. I can’t believe I forgot about Ronnie and Dr. Stein.

“Cisco,” Mac says out loud, “could you please scan the city for thermonuclear anomalies once we’re reconnected to the satellite that isn’t doomed to fall to earth like David Bowie?”\[127\]
Cisco smiles at her around the piece of red licorice he’s snacking on. “Sure,” he says after he finishes chewing and offers her a red string.

Mac shakes her head slowly and feels strangely vulnerable without the shield of her hair to slither over her cheeks. “Thank you,” she tells him, “but no.”

“Okay,” Cisco shrugs, “more for me.” Then, after she extracts a plastic bag of snacks from her purse and a soda bottle halfway full of shells from split sunflower seeds, he smiles at her again. “So you like salty,” he deduces, “not sweet.”

It’s her turn to shrug. “Guilty,” she elongates the y sound into an awkward enunciation and smiles back sheepishly. After all, sunflower seeds are basically a delivery mechanism for sodium chloride.

Cisco smiles wider and showcases the adorable gaps between his teeth. “I can respect that.”

There’s a buyer in Burma who wants Len to steal the Sunrise Ruby from Sotheby’s in Geneva. It’s worth thirty million, so they offered him twenty million plus expenses. Len is flying to London and taking a train from there to Switzerland, but instead of planning his trip in meticulous detail, he’s thinking about the information Axel found on his dream girl.

Oh, he has plans for her, too. Many of his plans involve taking her to bed, but he’s only been with sex workers and other men. Len wants so much more from her than he’s ever wanted from anyone, but he has no idea how to get a woman like Mac to want him back. Worse, he doesn’t actually know her. No matter how badly he wants to.

One thing’s for sure: he has no idea where to start. At least he has a few months overseas to plan things out. Or he thinks he does, until he goes to the bookstore to get something to read on the plane and sees her there.

Mac is wearing a black cardigan over a flowy dress printed with periwinkle blue flowers, sheer black stockings with seams up the back, and winter boots that look more comfortable than stylish. Len stops cold and stares at her. There are earbuds in her ears, the cord attached to the iPhone peeking out of the left pocket of her sweater. Len wonders if her stockings are thigh-highs, if she’s wearing a garter belt under her dress—and if he were dreaming, he’d get on his knees behind her, lift up her skirt, and see for himself. Instead he savors the sight of her.

It’d probably be creepy, if she noticed how hard he’s staring at her. Luckily she’s oblivious.

When she goes on tiptoe in a futile attempt to reach a poetry anthology on the highest shelf, he moves without thinking. Len grabs the book off the shelf for her with one hand and presses the other into the small of her back as she wobbles. It’s electric, and he barely touched her. Oh, she’s so warm. Like he always dreamed she would be.

Mac knows the hand on her back, knows that cold palm and those long fingers so intimately. It makes her heart clench so horribly inside her chest that she forgets how to breathe. It occurs to her that she hasn’t had a chance to mourn her husband: the morning after he died, she woke up a hundred and seventy years in the future. Then she traveled back in time, and she’s been setting things in motion every day since.

Of course she knew a version of Leonard Snart existed in this new timeline—but he’s not her Len. He’s not the man that she married. He doesn’t love her. He doesn’t even know her. Still, he’s touching her. Len hates physical contact, but he’s lingering now. His thumb is stroking back and
forth over the base of her spine. It’s familiar and new all at once. Mac has no idea how to handle this. Which is why she never wanted to meet the new version of him. It hurts to feel him so close and know she can’t act on how she’s feeling—because Eobard would kill him, and because she doesn’t want to use this new version of Len to fill the hole her husband left in her heart.

Len mourns the loss of contact after she steps back to look at him. “Was this,” he teases the sibilant out before he offers the book to her, “what you wanted?”

Mac tugs her bottom lip between her teeth and nods. Then she takes the earbuds out, winding the cord around her fingers in a circle and tucking it into her pocket with her phone. “Yes,” she tells him as she takes the book out of his hands. “Thank you.”

Len glances down at her mouth. Her lips are a dark shade of pink. She bites them, he can tell. He wants to kiss her so badly it’s embarrassing. Okay, he thinks, be cool, Snart. “I don’t normally do this,” he says, trying for nonchalance, “but do you want to have a cup of coffee with me?”

Maybe it’s too forward to ask her out right away, but coffee is casual; it’s not necessarily a date. There’s nothing casual about how he’s feeling right now, but he can keep his cool. They wouldn’t have to go anywhere. There’s a coffee shop in the bookstore. They could sit together and talk. Maybe he could hold her hand. Or he could slow down and wait for her to make the next move. After all, he’s been waiting for her since he was sixteen—a few more weeks or months or even years won’t kill him. I can wait as long as it takes, he thinks, if waiting means she’ll eventually want me as much as I want her.

Mac is conflicted. This is dangerous for both of them. Eobard could find out about Len asking her out and he’d kill him in a flash, pun intended. There’s a part of her that’s screaming internally, while another part of her aches. It feels like her heart is breaking all over again. Still, the loudest part of her is the part that’s been missing him since she returned to the past. Maybe an impulsive coffee date can be enough to sustain her until Eobard is out of the picture. Or she’s a selfish bitch who misses her husband and will settle for whatever version of Leonard Snart she can get. I loved him when he wasn’t real, she thinks, and I still love him. I have no idea how to stop.

“Yes,” she says before she overthinks her answer, “I could use a cup of coffee.”

After a grueling and gruesome day of photographing the scene of a kidnapping (while Joe dealt with the distraught parents of the cherubic six-year-old some creep snatched from the playground at the same elementary school she went to, what a mindfuck that was), Caroline arrives at the hospital to find the notorious Harrison Wells and a gorgeous redhead by her brother’s bedside.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing here?” she snaps.

“I put Mr. Allen in this bed,” Wells says, “and it’s my fault that he’s generating electrical phenomena that is endangering the lives of the other patients in this hospital—”

“Wait,” Caroline holds up one hand to shut him up, “you’re telling me Barry is causing the blackouts?”

It makes a lot of sense, actually: Barry was struck by lightning, so now electricity doesn’t know how to act around him. Only that isn’t how it works. At all. Unless the particle accelerator explosion changed the laws of the universe.

Fact: Dr. Tina McGee,[128] CEO of Mercury Labs, is the first person to identify dark matter as
more than just a theoretical concept. Dr. Wells created it, but he was in surgery when the discovery was made.

*What if the dark matter did something to Barry?* Caroline thinks. *Maybe it made him into something impossible.*

“Yes,” Dr. Wells says gravely, “and I am also telling you that if your brother stays here in this hospital, people will die.”

Mac and Len talk for hours. Shockingly, they never lie to each other. Of course they don’t tell the whole truth, because what’s happening between them is confusing enough without explaining the dreams or the time travel or the multiverse. It feels inevitable, them meeting again. There’s electricity between them no matter when or where they are—and no matter who they are. It all falls away until they can just enjoy each other’s company for a while. Len is still thinking about kissing her, and doing more than just kissing her; but he learns that he likes talking to Mac. Her voice is lovely, and sweet. She’s also smart, and interesting, and funny. When he gets her guard down, she starts talking so fast—a lesser man couldn’t keep up, but he gets what she’s saying. Len gets her. It’s almost surreal how well he feels like he knows her.

Oh, she isn’t what he dreamed she would be: the reality of her is far superior to anything he ever thought was even possible.

“I don’t normally do this, either,” she tells him shyly.

“What,” Len smirks, “have coffee with men you’ve never met before?”

Mac gnaws on the inside of her cheek. “Or have coffee with anyone at all,” she says.

Len smirks wider. “So you’re not seeing anyone,” he deduces smugly.

Mac blushes so hot that her glasses fog up. It’s winter, so she can’t even blame that on the Missouri humidity. “No,” she tells him softly. “I’m not seeing anyone.”

There’s a flicker of sadness in her voice, something that makes his heart hurt in a way he hates. Vulnerable. Weak. “Well,” Len interlaces his fingers to stop himself from taking her hand, “like I said, I don’t normally ask women I just met to have coffee with me. There’s something about you. I can’t explain it.”

Mac shrugs. “Maybe it’s the hair…” she smiles and he actually feels his face flush hot, what *the fuck*, at least his skin is dark enough that she can’t see he’s blushing, “…blue is my natural color, believe it or not.”

Len thinks about asking her to prove it, but he doesn’t want to seem too forward. After all, this may or may not be their first date—and he doesn’t want to ruin things by moving too fast. Suddenly he’s happy he’s flying out tomorrow: putting some distance between them should calm him down. This is what he gets for dropping out of high school and taking care of Lisa before he became a criminal: he’s never had a crush on anyone, never fallen in love or anything like it. Len has never said “I love you” to anyone, not since he was ten and he said those words to his father.

“Never tell me that! Never tell anyone that!” Lewis had screamed at him with his hands around his throat, squeezing hard enough to make his vision blur and set off alarms in his brain. Len couldn’t focus, couldn’t think for lack of oxygen. *Love is a sign of weakness,* Lewis had grumbled while Len choked and wheezed on the floor. *Emotion is for idiots.*”[129]
Len jolts out of the memory when Mac touches his hands, squeezes his fingers. It’s nothing like how Lewis touched him—she’s so soft, so gentle. Nobody has ever bothered to be gentle with him before.

Mac takes her warm hand away before he can squeeze back. “Sorry,” she says, twisting her fingers together at the edge of the table.

Len swallows thickly and shakes his head. “I’m leaving on business tomorrow,” he tells her. “I’ll be out of town for a few months, but I’d like to keep in touch. Maybe I could give you a call while I’m gone.”

Mac knows she should turn him down and never talk to him again, because that’s the only surefire way to keep him safe—but that’s not what happens. Instead she ends up putting her number in his contact list and handing his phone back to him, careful not to touch his hand again.

Iris side-eyes Caroline in the backseat of the ambulance Dr. Wells paid for to transfer Barry from St. Andrews to S. T. A. R. Labs. He’s lying between them on a gurney, the portable heart monitor attached to his chest beeping softly. “Are you sure about this?” she wants to know.

Caroline sighs. “C. P. D. health insurance won’t cover an indefinite stay in the hospital,” she mutters, “and people could die because of whatever is going on with him and the power surges.”

“Barry would never be able to forgive himself if that happened,” Iris points out.

Caroline nods. “Which is why I might as well let an eccentric billionaire foot the bill,” she cocks her head thoughtfully as the ambulance halts, “it’s not like he can do much else with his feet.”

Iris stifles an ugly shriek of laughter. “You’re awful,” she wheezes, “that man will never walk again.”

“I don’t know,” Caroline ekes the oh sound out, “according to you, nothing is impossible.”

After his dad broke his arm in three places one night when he was more drunk than usual, Len dreamed about her.

“I hate him so much,” he’d told Mac, “but you know what the worst part is? I miss him. Never father of the year, but I miss who he was before he hurt us, before he hurt me. I just want that guy to be my dad again.”


Thoughts of her were all he had, sometimes. Lisa was a kid and he did what he could to give her a happy childhood, but it wasn’t always good enough. Lewis was a mean drunk, and when he wasn’t drunk he was still mean. Len spent his twenties alone with everybody. When he was thirty his sister went to the Olympics, his father went to jail, and he left her with Megan—his mother’s best friend and godmother to both of them—after that while he went and stole everything he’d ever wanted to steal outside of Central City. It was just him against the world. Things were simple, for a few years; but no matter how or where he slept, Mac was always there. In his dreams, she was always his.

Now that she’s real, Mac isn’t his anymore. Which doesn’t stop him from feeling possessive of her
or thinking about her. Seeing her again. Touching her. Hearing her voice. Making his dreams come true.

Okay, so he’s obsessed. Can’t stop thinking about her. Doesn’t want to.

Now he just has to get her to start thinking about him.


[118] This is the motto of Clan Mackenzie, for whom Mac is named: luceo non uro. It means “I shine, not burn.”

[119] Eobard (as Wells) convinces Joe to move the comatose Barry to S. T. A. R. Labs three weeks after he gets struck by lightning in the flashbacks from The Flash 1x20 (“The Trap”), but in the pilot he says S. T. A. R. Labs is still a hazardous zone. I doubt anyone would take their son to a hazardous area while he’s in a coma, even if his heart is beating so fast the machines in the hospital can’t monitor his heartrate, but I’m guessing Eobard leveraged the safety of the other patients to make it happen.


Enter the Lady of the Lightning (3) Alienation Produces Eccentrics or Revolutionaries

I am older now, but not old. I am looking back to when I was a girl: now my body’s a flash of poison on the floor. The weather of the house, it shapes the body’s light. This is what a girl has in common with the lightning.

Aracelis Girmay, “Self-Portrait as the Snake”

Shock Value
Part 2
Myth Can Make Reality More Intelligible
Book I
With a Stroke of Lightning
Chapter 9
Enter the Lady of the Lightning (3 of 3)

III
Alienation Produces Eccentrics or Revolutionaries

Three weeks ago, Mackenzie Howell transplanted herself in the Gem Cities. Two weeks ago, she successfully negotiated a controlling interest in S. T. A. R. Labs. Last week, she completely restructured the company to triple the efficiency of its research teams and refocused each laboratory to specialize in certain scientific fields. This week, she gave these reporters an exclusive interview.

Clark Kent (CK): So how do you do it?

Mac Howell (MH): Um, how do I do what?

Lois Lane (LL): I think what Smallville wants to know is: how do you have the energy to run such a huge company, after everything that’s happened to you?

MH: Off the record? I’m from the future.

From “Who Is Mackenzie Howell?” by Lois Lane and Clark Kent
Printed in the Daily Planet on 3 January 2014 (with her answer to that question omitted)

Clark has been keeping tabs on Mac since she saved Lois’s life a few weeks ago, trying to decide if she threatens his credo of truth, justice, and—wait for it—the American way. Aside from a clandestine meeting with a certain black-clad blonde on the night before Christmas, she hasn’t left her house except to go to work. (Most of what she does is online. Which is harder for Clark to investigate, because she’s a technopath and he doesn’t want her to know he’s assessing her.)
Instead of looking into her—figurally or literally—as Superman, he and Lois take the train from Metropolis to Central after she agrees to give the *Planet* an exclusive interview. Which is how they end up sitting in her office on a Thursday afternoon, Lois totally prepared to ask a million intrusive questions and Clark trying not to freak out because S. T. A. R. Labs has a lead-lined room he thinks might be full of Kryptonite.

“So,” he leans forward in his seat and looks at her over the rims of his glasses, “how do you do it?”

“Um,” Mac stretches the humming sound out awkwardly, “how do I do what?”

Lois gives Clark a significant look, a sharp expression Mac can’t read but that he obviously knows fondly. If she didn’t know they were together, it would’ve been obvious to her from their nonverbals alone. “I think what Smallville wants to know is: how do you have the energy to run such a huge company, after everything that’s happened to you?”

Mac gnaws on the inside of her cheek to stop herself from asking whether she ever asked Dr. Wells that question. Then she accesses the *Daily Planet* news archives with her brain and sees Lois asked her business partner that exact question after he opened the facility in Metropolis six years ago. Mollified, she tucks her left ankle into the hollow space behind her right knee.

“Off the record?”

Lois and Clark exchange another significant look before they nod, one after the other.

Mac cocks her head and forces herself to make eye contact. Which she hates with the fire of a thousand red suns. “I’m from the future,” she informs them. “Which is how I know you’re Clark Kent but also Superman. You’re going to have a son named Jon Kent, conceived because Clark used something made out of blue kryptonite. There was—or will be—an ongoing scholarly debate about whether you wore a ring or something kinkier.”

Lois guffaws, imagining the possibilities. Clark just looks at her, trying to figure out whether or not she’s telling the truth.

Mac exhales with enough force to flap her lips. “Look,” she huffs the consonant to make it ricochet, “in the future, metahumans—people with powers, people like me—are considered subhuman. We don’t have rights. We’re heroes, or villains, or victims. There’s no in-between. When I was five years old, I was in a car accident. I was dead for three minutes until my heart defibrillated itself.”

This is what happened to Rose, in the divergent timeline where Eobard murdered her father. It’s a harsh memory, painfully hyperfocused. Mac swallows thickly as glass shatters at the back of her mind; the windshield fragmenting, the metal crunching, her father snatched out of sight by a yellow monster with red eyes before her field of vision flattens to black.

“So that’s how you got your powers,” Lois deduces.

Mac nods. “I survived, but my father didn’t. I never knew my mother. I had an aunt, but…she couldn’t handle a metahuman kid. I was a ward of the state, and instead of a group home, the government drones sent me to Belle Reve. Which isn’t what it was, or will be. Task Force X has just turned it into their headquarters, and they’re not experimenting on metahumans yet, because there were maybe a few thousand metahumans in the world before the particle accelerator exploded. Now there’ll be about a million. Dr. Wells caused a massive evolutionary shift. Most of those metahumans won’t get their powers for months. I guess it takes time for metagenes to express themselves, especially if you’re an adult when it happens.”
“Wait,” Clark said, “the government sanctioned illegal experiments on people with powers?”

“Yeah,” Mac sighs, “you can’t be surprised. Lex Luthor got a government bailout when the economy tanked.”

“So did Dr. Wells,” Lois points out.

“I know,” Mac says flatly. “Now he’s getting a bailout from me. I don’t like him. I think he’s arrogant and irresponsible, but as his business partner I have the resources to change the world. So people like me won’t get murdered by the cops willy-nilly, or denied medical care, or forced to have power dampers implanted in their spines without their consent if the government decides they’re too dangerous. So powerful metahuman kids won’t be taken away from their parents. So people won’t be terrified of us. I’ve thought a lot about this, about what having superpowers means and what I’m capable of. I think I can do more as Mac Howell than I ever could as a superhero. I’m using my abilities to help people, but I can’t do that if you tell the world what I am before I show them who I am.”

Clark’s entire posture changes. His shoulders were slumped before, in a futile attempt to hide how broad they are. He was hunched over, elbows on his knees, trying to conceal how much space he occupies. He’s sitting up now, back straight and shoulders solid, the buttons on the front of his shirt gaping open slightly so a hint of red, yellow and blue shows through. “I know who you are, Ms. Howell,” he tells her. “You’re the reason Central hasn’t fallen apart even though half the city was destroyed. You’re the person who’s been paying for people whose houses were destroyed to stay at hotels for free, the person who’s overfunding shelters and food banks and getting donation centers to replace what people lost in the explosion, the person who hasn’t taken credit for any of that because all you care about is helping the people who need it. You can be yourself and be a superhero. You don’t have to choose.”

Mac is caught somewhere between crying and scoffing. “I’m disabled,” she retorts gently, “walking hurts without my cane. Sometimes getting out of bed is all I can do. Sometimes I can’t even do that. I have to choose how to use my spoons—the limited amount of energy I have—every day. I’ve been chronically ill since I was eighteen. I know my limits. Sometimes I have to prioritize my mental or physical health over helping people. I think superheroes have to consistently show up whenever and wherever they’re needed. I can’t do that. Sometimes I can’t even take care of myself.”

Lois watches the blue sparks that fly when Mac twists her fingers together fizzle out. “If you’ve done all that in spite of your limitations,” she says, “that makes you more of a hero. Not less.”

Mac shakes her head, slowly. “Off the record?” she says, repeating herself, like history.

“Of course,” Lois tells her. After all, they can’t print any of this. Not as news. _Time Travel Is the Way of the Future_ would make a great headline, but telling people it’s possible would be chaos. Lois believes in the truth, but loving Clark has taught her that there are things the world doesn’t need to know.

“I didn’t travel back in time to become a superhero,” Mac says. “I’m here to save myself.”

When she meets Cisco, Caroline falls into his arms. Literally.

It’s not that she’s clumsy. Iris and Caroline took their soccer team to the national championship in high school, and they were both named all-state when they were seniors. Caroline still goes running three or four times a week. Actually, she met her fiancée at the park a few blocks from her
apartment: he was reading a book on a park bench, she was sweating like a pig and drenching her face in a nearby water fountain. Then she sat next to him, he offered to buy her lunch, and the rest is history. Caroline isn’t a klutz. Or the kind of girl who needs a guy to catch her if she falls.

Cisco falls, too. On his ass. Like a boss. “Sorry,” he glances up from under Caroline and gives her a sheepish grin. “I’mma level with you. I have no upper body strength. Like, none. At all.”

Oh, Caroline thinks, fuck me. “It’s fine,” she blurs, walking backwards on her hands like a crab until she isn’t straddling him anymore. “I’m the one who fell on you.”

Cisco grins wider. Caroline abruptly, startlingly wishes she could take a picture and capture that expression without being rude or weird. “It’s no big deal,” he tells her, “girls are falling into my arms every day.”

Caroline snickers as she rises from an awkward squat. “I’m Caroline Allen,” she says, hands open and held out to him, fingers splayed and palms turned up. Like an offering.

“I know.” Cisco takes her hands and curls his fingers into hers, fitting into the empty spaces in the bends of her knuckles as she pulls him to his feet.

Cisco has nice hands: warm and calloused, with careful fingers that could give her ideas. It’s far too soon for her to notice someone else’s hands, so Caroline narrows her eyes at him in a nonverbal how do you know me? I don’t know you.

“Oh!” Cisco drops her hands and runs his fingers through his hair, his grin slipping into something more sheepish. “I’m Cisco Ramon, and I know your name because you beat Melinda Torres—my brother’s ex-girlfriend and the love of my life—in the Gem Cities Plaza Teen Photo Contest eight years ago.”

“Oh,” Caroline exhales the sound in a soft, wispy sigh. It’s good he’s been carrying a torch for some other girl since high school, she thinks. I can’t rebound with one of the people who’ll be taking care of Barry—that could get messy fast.

“I loved that picture you took,” Cisco splays his hands in front of his chest and Caroline notices that he’s wearing a faded tee with Are You Out of Your Vulcan Mind? under a softly worn long-sleeved flannel shirt, “of that couple in the bowling alley.”

Caroline smiles at the memory of photographing Iris and Barry that night. Technicolor lights were caught in their eyes, their hair. Iris still wore her hair in its natural afro instead of flat-ironing it every morning. Barry went through a bowtie phase that never really ended. It’s a beautiful photograph—bright and full of love.

“They weren’t a couple,” she informs him as the doors shut behind them and he shows her where the elevator is. “That was Iris and Barry. He’s loved her since we were in second grade. She’s totally oblivious.”

Cisco presses the button and looks at her as the number six lights up. “There’s no way those feelings aren’t mutual,” he protests, “people don’t look at each other like that unless they’re in love.”

Caroline heaves another sigh. “He was right there in front of her,” she mutters. “She just wasn’t looking at him from the right angle.”

“Hey.” Cisco hesitantly puts his hand on her shoulder and squeezes gently, the swirl of his thumb making her limbs feel heated and shivery. “Don’t talk about your brother like he’s not going to
wake up. I promise we’re going to find a way to bring him back to you.”

Caroline swallows thickly, overwhelmed by the urge to curl up and shut the world out until her equilibrium returns and everything makes sense again. Of course intellectually she knows that twins aren’t two halves of one whole person, but without Barry here it feels like something huge is missing.

When the sliding doors open, she squares her shoulders and shrugs his hand off. “Don’t make promises you can’t keep,” she says.

From: COLD AS ICE

it’s 4:18pm here in Geneva.
it’s 9am there, isn’t it?
your day is just starting.

When she was three and a half years old, Mac climbed her first tree. Of course this happened in a timeline that no longer exists, but she remembers it—so, for her, it was real.

To: COLD AS ICE[130]

Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein is set in Geneva
she and Percy Bysshe Shelley visited Lord Byron there
he challenged his guests to write a horror story
it took weeks but finally she thought of Frankenstein

Mac remembers sitting on a thick branch at the top of the sturdy old fir tree and looking down at the ground below; marveling at how high she was, how far she’d climbed. Then she burst into tears and clung to the abrasive bark until her father came to rescue her. On their way down, she clutched at his shirt with sappy fingers and scraped palms as she promised to never do something like that ever again. Not unless she knew how to undo whatever she’d done wrong.

From: COLD AS ICE

“the whole series of my life appeared to me as a dream; I sometimes doubted if indeed it were all true, for it never presented itself to my mind with the force of reality.” [131]

When she was twenty-four and three quarters, she took a class on time travel as one of her electives during her last semester of undergrad. Mac learned about something called the undoing plot,[132] a convention of time travel narratives that posited a two-track system of forked chronology: one fork was the future from whence the time traveler came to change the past, and the other was the new timeline created by the time traveler where things diverged from their original circumstances. Then she actually traveled through time, and learned that things are a lot more complicated than a fork in the fourth dimension.

To: COLD AS ICE

“I have love in me the likes of which you can scarcely imagine and rage the likes of which you would not believe. If I cannot satisfy the one, I will indulge the other.”

Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus* (1818). I’m ngl, I put an embarrassing amount of thought into the ~symbolism~ of the quotes from *Frankenstein* that Mac/Len chose. Len’s is obviously him hinting at the whole “I’ve been dreaming about you since I was a teenager” thing. Mac’s is about her feelings for Len and Eobard, and how she plans to move forward with them both (i.e. by eventually killing Eobard and then dating Len). Like, the parallel to *Frankenstein* works because Mac is the Creature, Rose is Elizabeth Lavenza, and Eobard is Victor Frankenstein—these are their archetypal roles in this literary parallel in the first arc of this fic. Mac is a patchwork of timelines and memories who’s literally come back from the dead. Rose exists to die in the comics, like Elizabeth does in the novel. Eobard created Mac, but he didn’t expect her to deviate from his fantasies or desires, and now she wants to kill him. tl;dr I’m literary trash, sorry not sorry.

Catherine Gallagher, “Undoing” from the anthology *Time and the Literary* (2002).
Old Friends Are Better Left in the Past

Touch on anything’s resonant frequency, it’ll shatter. A list of possible sources of collapse: instability oscillation, non-linearity, I know a great bar down the block, there’s someone I want you to meet.

Annelyse Gelman, “Tipping Point”

Shock Value
Part 2
Myth Can Make Reality More Intelligible
Book I
With a Stroke of Lightning
Chapter 10
Fight or Flight, a Tale of Two Canaries (1 of 3)

“No one believes in second chances more than I do, but I have a gut feeling this will end in tears.”

Dinah Laurel Lance
Birds of Prey Vol. 1, No.70 (“Between Dark and Dawn, Part 2: Huntress/Prey”) September, 2004

I
Old Friends Are Better Left in the Past

Sara was born on Christmas Day.\textsuperscript{133} It was a white Christmas, the snow making the world look unmarred and incongruously new. After her sister died and their mother left, Laurel spent Christmas with their father. Now that Quentin is dead, Laurel is spending Christmas with Dinah. As angry as she is with Dinah for leaving in the wake of Sara’s death, they’re family. As far as Laurel knows, her mother is all she has left.

Dinah brings her daughter to a faculty Christmas party at CCU. (Laurel is being careful not to drink: she’s been going to AA meetings since the night the particle accelerator exploded, since she made friends with a pregnant beat cop, Cordelia Jackham—one of Julie’s older sisters—is her sponsor.) Mac finds Sara on the roof of the engineering building, watching her mother and sister through one of the ostentatiously large windows.

“Oh, you’re just in time,” says Sara, watching Mac and the two women. Mac looks at her with a mixture of suspicion and... distaste. “Happy birthday, Sara Lance,” she says. “Or al-Ta’ir al-Usfar.\textsuperscript{134} Whichever.”

Sara tries to activate the sonic device she wears around her neck, but it does nothing. Mac snorts
and holds up the hand she isn’t using to grip the handle of her cane before she generates a wad of lightning in her palm. Sara draws her batons, connects them to form a metal bō staff, and whirls to aim a strike at Mac’s head. It bounces off a dense electromagnetic field with enough force to send the defective assassin sprawling, but Sara was trained by Ra’s al Ghul to fight through all kinds of pain, so she throws one of her many concealed knives and draws six more as she rises to her feet.

“Whoever you are,” she snarls without bothering to disguise her voice, “go back to Nanda Parbat and tell Ra’s that I won’t go back to the League!”

Mac sighs. “Ra’s al Ghul didn’t send me,” she clarifies, “I’m here to hire you.”

“I’m not an assassin anymore,” Sara bites out, “I won’t kill for Ra’s. What makes you think I’ll kill for you?”

“I don’t want to hire you to kill anyone,” Mac retorts, “I want to hire you to help me save people. I want you to become the thing the people of this city think you are: a big damn hero.”[135]

Sara narrows her eyes behind her mask. “What would I have to do?” she wants to know.

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**Two Weeks Later**

Mac has been living at the Sheraton hotel on McGee Street since she traveled back in time a month ago. When she couldn’t see, she used her powers to buy several buildings around the city. Eobard doesn’t like the idea of hiring other people to work at the main lab, so she plans on setting things in motion elsewhere.

*I should probably keep the Mardon brothers at one of them,* she thinks. *Now that Barry’s at S. T. A. R. Labs, it’d be tempting fate to keep the criminal who killed Joe’s former partner in the same building.*

One of the buildings she acquired was a Planned Parenthood clinic, before right-wing assholes threatened to bomb it and it closed down. Which is where she plans to keep the Mardon brothers. Another is a clock tower a few blocks from S. T. A. R. Labs. Which is where she plans to live, but it’s a big place. There’s more than enough space for a lost assassin who’s been squatting in an abandoned warehouse—like the League teaches their members to do—since June.

Sara arrives at the clock tower in street clothes: a loose gray t-shirt and faded old jeans. It’s the first time she’s gone anywhere in Central without her armor, but she’s armed—she’s carrying a wooden sword on her back. It’s made of lignum vitae, an endangered species of wood, the hardest in the world. Nyssa gave her that sword the night she took her oath to Ra’s. Its name is Manāt, after the Arabic goddess of fate and time.[136]

“All legendary heroes name their swords,” Nyssa had told her, “you will be a legend, too, Sara.”

“That isn’t my name,” Sara said, “not anymore.”

Sara hasn’t used her sword, not since she broke her oath and fled Nanda Parbat. If you draw a sword, then you should be prepared to use it—to kill. It’s the same rule that applies to guns, the one that her dad taught his daughters the first time he took her and Laurel to the shooting range: never draw unless you’re prepared to use your weapon, to shoot to kill. Sara doesn’t want to kill anyone, not anymore. Which is why she uses nonlethal weapons like her batons, a bō, and a bokken. Oh, they could be lethal in her hands—she’s an assassin, and she was trained to see pretty much
anything as a potential weapon—but they’re not made for killing. Those weapons are made for fighting to survive, to live. Sara wants to live again, not just survive.

Of course most of her weapons are made of metal, so they’re useless against someone like Mac. Sara doesn’t know whether a wooden sword will be more or less effective than a steel one, but it’s comforting to feel its weight along her spine. Like having Nyssa with her.

Inside is what looks like a spacious apartment: fresh off-white paint on the walls, a refrigerator humming in a sunlit open kitchen, the plush eggshell carpet speckled with flecks of black giving way to tiny checkerboard tiles in black and white. There’s a glass bowl filled with lemons on the pink granite countertop, the yellow a shock of color that throws Sara off-kilter. Floral print curtains are held back with heavy iron hooks by the kitchen windows, the roses folded and reshaped into something else. Sara arches her eyebrows at the blue owl holding a variety of utensils: a wooden spoon, a spatula, a pasta strainer, a ladle. *Cute,* she thinks as she leaves the kitchen and catches sight of the elevator.

“Hello?” she calls out and the *oh* echoes through the ground floor, her voice distorted by the ricochet. “Anybody home?”

Nobody answers. Sara huffs and is about to walk out when the elevator doors open, accompanied by a metallic slide and a cheerfully ominous *ding!*

Mac is sitting in one corner of the room where the elevator takes Sara: she’s at the crux of a black suede couch with her ankle tucked under the bend of her knee. Sara draws her sword when she sees her eyes are whited out. Mac sighs and blinks so they fade back to a sharp but ordinary gray. “I’m putting up bookshelves,” she explains, flopping her wrist back and forth to showcase how that joint doesn’t bend at all, “I can’t do that any other way.”

Sara glances sidelong at her as she sits at one end of the couch. “Ra’s al Ghul told me about a girl named Perunika,” she murmurs, “a blue-haired goddess with lightning in her eyes.[137] Was he talking about you?”

Mac is surprised Ra’s remembers meeting her, *before.* It should’ve been retconned, but maybe she’s going to create another causality loop in the future. Where there’s time travel, what’s past is prologue.[138]

“I am *not* a goddess,” Mac mutters, “but Ra’s was probably talking about me.”

Sara balances her sword on her knees, one hand on the hilt in case she needs to use it, the other idly smoothing over the delicate curve of the wooden blade. “If you aren’t a goddess,” she says, “then what are you? Ra’s said he met you decades ago. How is that even possible?”

*When you eliminate the impossible,* Mac thinks, *whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth.*[139] Aloud, she says: “I’m from the future.”

Sara exhales a sound that’s part giggle, part snort. Mac shrugs and continues assembling her wall-to-wall shelves around the room. Sara curls her fingers around the wooden blade and lets silence fall. After everything she’s been through, the possibility of time travel is overwhelming. What would she change, if she could go back? It’s too much to consider all at once. “So what exactly do you want to hire me for?” she wants to know.

Mac finishes the shelves and stands, hobbling over to a pile of books without using her cane. “Vincent Santini is the most powerful mob boss in Central City,” she says as she picks up a copy of
Love and Freindship, caressing the textured cover before she puts it on the shelf.

“Commissioner Fells is in his pocket. Whenever the C. C. P. D. finds evidence against him, it goes missing or gets destroyed ‘accidentally,’” she crooks her fingers like quotation marks around the word accidentally, “he controls the drug trade, and the sex trade, and there are rumors that one of his side businesses specializes in procuring victims for pedophiles with friends in high places. I want you to investigate those rumors, and if they’re true, I want you to help me build a case against him.”

“I’ll kill him if they’re true, Sara thinks, Santini and anyone else who’s responsible. “Sure,” she says out loud. “When do we start?”

The Next Day

From: Au

who are you?
how did you know Louise was my sister?

To: Au

meet me @ Legends Outlets this Saturday @ noon if you want to find out.

Mac looks up from the screen of her phone when someone knocks on the door to her office. Cisco knocks with the side of his fist instead of his knuckles, rapid and loud, until she yells at him to come in. Caitlin knocks twice, with two efficiently quick taps. Eobard didn’t used to knock—he’d just go through the door without bothering—but as Dr. Wells, he knocks with three slow echoing taps. Which sounds vaguely ominous to Mac, but that’s because he scares her.

This knock—three fast raps that resonate against the door—isn’t one she’s come to expect. Mac cocks her head and narrows her eyes at the door, but alas, X-ray vision isn’t one of her superpowers. I wonder if one of the people I’m interviewing today is early, she thinks. Aloud, she says: “Come in.”

Iris opens the door so fast it hits the metal bumper attached to the wall. “Hi,” she says, grinning. She’s so pretty when she smiles that Mac can’t help smiling back. “Hello,” she says, stretching the oh sound out awkwardly.

Iris grins impossibly wider as she closes the door behind her. “It’s you,” she tells Mac, “you’re the one who saved my life at Jitters.”

“Yes,” Mac fizzes out on the sibilant, the sound hissing out through her teeth, “that was a thing I did.”

“So.” Iris folds herself into one of the chairs on the other side of the desk. “What exactly is a metahuman? I googled it, but nothing relevant came up.”

Eobard is supposed to anachronistically coin the term “metahuman” after Barry wakes up and becomes the Flash, but there are metahumans all over the city whose abilities will manifest in the next ten months. This isn’t just Barry’s story. It’s about all of them, too.

Mac yawns long and loudly into her palm before she answers the question. “It’s a term for people
with a genetic mutation called the metagene, people with superpowers,” she flails one hand at herself, “people like me. It’s not a term you’re going to find by googling.” Not in this universe, she thinks. Not yet. “Only a few thousand metahumans exist, but I think the particle accelerator explosion caused a massive evolutionary shift by turning millions of dormant metagenes on. I bought S. T. A. R. Labs so I could have the resources to help those people learn to control their abilities, and if you post any of this on your Tumblr, I will erase your blog like I erased all of the child porn on the internet.”

Iris frowns, her smile replaced by the realization that the woman who saved her life could hurt her if she wanted to. “Are you threatening me?” she wants to know.

“No.” Mac shakes her head so fast her glasses almost fall off. “I have a plan, Ms. West—”

“Iris.”

“I have a plan, Iris, that doesn’t involve being your Lady of the Lightning.”

Iris grins at her again, wide and warm. “You read my article.”

“You’re going to be an amazing journalist,” Mac tells her. Sooner than you think.

“Yeah,” Iris exhales a soft frustrated noise, “if I ever finish my dissertation.”

In 2033, Iris edits sections of her dissertation and publishes them as part of her book, The Life Story of the Flash. Eobard had a copy he’d filled with hastily scribbled notes, formulas for increasing speed, and other things Mac didn’t understand as Rose and doesn’t understand now as herself.

“So why don’t you want me writing your story?” Iris wants to know.

Mac forces herself to make eye contact, because people who aren’t brimming with anxiety typically like being looked in the eyes. Iris is one of those people: insatiably curious, perspicacious, and fearless in her pursuit of the truth. “I don’t want anyone writing my story,” she says. “There are people who choose to wear a mask and become something bigger than themselves. I don’t want to hide behind a mask, and I won’t let anyone else decide who or what I am. I liked what you wrote in your article, and I can see how much you want to believe in something, but I’m not what you’re waiting for.”

Iris notices then how tired Mac looks: the bags under her eyes, lurking behind the thick plastic frames of her glasses, how she’s hunched over her desk, chin buried in the hollow of her palm and both elbows plopped onto the wooden surface. Until now Iris has thought of her as superhuman, but she’s bitten her nails to the quick, her frazzled hair is frizzing out in short blue tufts, and she’s clutching her right hand in her left to contain a spasm. Nervous static is buzzing in between her fingers, popping shocks that froth in midair.

Oh, Iris thinks, eyes going wide and mouth gaping open softly as comprehension dawns, she’s not threatening me—she’s afraid of what could happen to her if I tell her story.

It isn’t the “super” or the “meta” that matters. It’s the person who’s asking Iris to keep her secret, for whatever reason.

Mac muffles her umpteenth yawn in the heel of her palm and glances down at the pile of budget reports she’s been perusing all week. It’s right next to the pile of résumés lying in wait on her desk for the applicants who are probably waiting in the cortex. Iris is smiling at her again when she
looks up.

“I’m waiting for Barry to wake up,” Iris tells her softly, “but meeting you showed me what I want to do next. After I finish my dissertation, I want to help you find those metahumans. I want to tell their stories. I hope you trust me enough to let me tell yours someday.”

Mac scoffs, but it’s not a harsh, cutting sound. “I trust you to know there are some stories that shouldn’t be told,” she retorts, not unkindly.

Iris knows there’s a story here. Something awful happened to Mac. Something tragic in her voice, the hard press of her lips meant to stop her mouth from trembling. Something that has made her afraid.

*I’m going to find out what her story is*, she thinks, *so I can have something to tell Barry when he wakes up, and to decide for myself whether or not it should be told.*

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[133] *Arrow* 1x09 (“Year’s End”) 12 December 2012.

[134] Ta-er al-Sahfer isn’t the correct way to phonetically spell the Arabic word for “yellow bird,” so I fixed it, sorry not sorry. Actually, the Arabic word for “canary” is literally “kunari” (کناری)—it’s so phonetically similar to the English version that it’s obvious the words have the same etymological root—but I guess the writers were trying to sound ~exotic~ or some bullshit, idek.


[136] Manāt was a goddess worshipped by pre-Islamic Arabs—one of the three main goddesses of Mecca—and she was conflated with the Mesopotamian goddess Ishtar. Muhammad ordered a raid on her temple and his men destroyed her idol in 630 CE.

[137] Perunika is one name for Ognjena Marija, the Slavic goddess of lightning and motherhood, protector of marriage and justice on earth.


[141] Au is the atomic symbol for gold. So that’s Lisa’s name in Mac’s phone, because: science puns ftw. There’s an app that can turn your smartphone into a burner phone. Mac uses it for anonymity when she’s telling people life-changing secrets like “you have a half-sister you never knew about” and whatnot. Which is why Lisa doesn’t know who she’s texting.

[142] Legends Outlets is a mall in Kansas City, the IRL counterpart of Central City.

Caroline hears many things about Mac before she meets her—from Iris, from Libby Lawrence-Chambers on C. C. P. N., from Bethany Snow on Channel 52—so it’s not exactly a first impression. There are expectations involved given what she knows. Mackenzie Howell is the richest person in the world, she’s paying Barry’s medical expenses until he wakes up, and she’s a metahuman who saved Iris’s life by taking a gun apart without touching it. Somehow.

Not that I don’t trust Iris, Caroline thinks, but I’ll believe it when I see it.

According to Iris, she isn’t the only person with powers in the world. There are burning questions that Caroline wants to ask:

Is what Barry saw that night possible?

Did a metahuman kill their mother?

Is their father innocent?

I doubt she has the answer to any of them, Caroline tells herself, but just knowing it’s possible would change everything.

Mac is underwhelming in person: she’s shorter than Caroline, her short hair is fluffy like pinfeathers on a baby Steller’s jay, and she’s wearing a light red dress—cut with thin navy vertical stripes that match the collar and the hem—on top of sensible black Oxford shoes. Not a
particularly intimidating woman at first glance, until Caroline meets her eyes. They’re a dark shade of gray, like a brewing storm. There’s a sharpness to her gaze, a ferocious intelligence; and then she abruptly looks away, breaking the spell. Caroline is startled when she notices that she stopped moving without realizing it.

*I wish I had my camera,* Caroline thinks. *I might be able to figure out why she seems so angry if I were looking at her through a lens.* Aloud, she says: “Hi.”

“Hi.” Mac waves, sparks fluttering from her fingertips as they curl into her palm, not even trying to hide the fact that she’s something more than human. “You’re Caroline,” she deduces, “Barry’s sister.”

“I’m more than just Barry’s sister,” Caroline points out.

Mac smiles without baring her teeth—a shockingly bright expression that curls the corners of her mouth—and laughs, a soft, throaty sound bubbling up from her throat. “I know,” she says, “you’re also more than human.”


Mac spins the handle of her cane between her fingers, stimming. “When you brought your brother here,” she says, “we tested him for the metahuman gene. That’s why my business partner and I offered to monitor his condition: because he hypothesized that Barry had a dormant metagene, and it was activated by the particle accelerator explosion. Caitlin—Dr. Snow—ran that same test on the blood sample you gave her.”

“What does that mean?” Caroline wants to know.

“It means that lightning strike didn’t just give you a scar,” Mac says. “It also gave you superpowers.”

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**One Week Later**

To: COLD AS ICE

11:03am

*Wuthering Heights* is NOT romantic.

11:06am

*Cathy and Heathcliff’s love is like a black hole:*
*it destroys everything around them*
*it’s an unhealthy, possessive, all-consuming love*
*it eats her alive and keeps chewing after she dies until he shuffles off this mortal coil*

11:09am

“If all else perished, and he remained, I should still continue to be; and if all else remained, and he were annihilated, the universe would turn to a mighty stranger.”

11:11am
I don’t want a love so intense that I couldn’t live without the other person

From: COLD AS ICE

11:10am

“I’ve dreamt in my life dreams that have stayed with me ever after, and changed my ideas: they’ve gone through and through me, like wine through water, and altered the color of my mind.”

11:11am

I’ve never been in love.

To: COLD AS ICE

11:59pm

I have
I have

Sara is drinking her cappuccino when she notices Mac frowning at her texts. “Why’re you making your smooshy face?” she wants to know.

After living with Mac for a week and a half, Sara has learned that she makes a smooshy face whenever she’s annoyed. Mac has learned that Sara can’t sleep without KuKu the white cockatoo, a beanie baby Laurel gave her for her tenth birthday.[146] It’s a substitute for the stuffed shark she used to sleep with, but he lives on Laurel’s bed now and Sara didn’t want to steal him from her sister like she stole Oliver Queen. Mac wanted to point out that Oliver made the choice to cheat on Laurel with her sister, of all people; that Sara was only twenty, too young to know her first love wasn’t worth breaking her sister’s heart. If things had gone the same way they did before, she would be with Oliver now. Sara needs someone who understands what she’s been through, but they don’t talk about that.

Also: they both have terrible nightmares, but they don’t talk about that either.

Mac looks up from the screen of her phone and shifts her focus. “My phone sent the same message twice,” she explains. “I only wanted to send it once.”

Sara finishes her cappuccino, tilting her head all the way back to drink the last drops, and tosses her cup into the trash can behind her. It goes in flawlessly, without touching the rim. “Who’re you texting?” she asks.

“My guy in Switzerland,” Mac tells her. Not that Len is hers in this timeline, but she can’t say “an alternate version of the guy I married in another timeline that no one else remembers, whom I might be in an accidental long-distance relationship with, because he’s a career criminal and he’s in Geneva to steal a giant ruby” without sounding ridiculous.

“Ooh,” Sara teases, “you have a guy in Switzerland?”

“Yes,” Mac says without thinking. “Yes, I do.”

Sara arches her eyebrows as Mac blushes bright, blotchy red. Then she looks down at her phone when it buzzes again.
From: Au

I’m at the food court. Where are you?

Mac accesses the security cameras to find her instead of looking around conspicuously. Lisa is wearing dark jeans, a slick leather jacket over a soft royal purple t-shirt tailored to fit her perfectly, and black lace-up stiletto boots with six inch heels. Those are Lisa’s Don’t Fuck with Me boots, the ones that make her almost as tall as Len. So many things have changed, but that remains the same. It’s cold comfort, to know the Snarts are still the people she loves; even if they don’t love her back like they did, before.

To: Au

I’m the one with blue hair eating a footlong.

Something in the way she walks changes as Lisa moves closer to the table. Mac finishes half of her sandwich and glances at Sara, whose face pinches awkwardly for a fraction of a second when Lisa sits at their table. Suddenly she feels like a third wheel. Which is odd, because Sara and Lisa haven’t met.

Unless they have, Mac thinks. Unless they know each other somehow. This is a new timeline. Anything is possible. Aloud, she asks: “What happened here?” Lisa opens her mouth to answer. Mac gives her a pointed look. “Don’t say ‘nothing,’” she tells her softly. “Don’t insult me by lying to my face.”

Lisa closes her mouth and folds her arms, her lips pressing into a semblance of a pout. Sara huffs. “We had a one-night stand,” she informs Mac, “before the particle accelerator exploded.”

I didn’t see that coming, Mac thinks, but somehow I’m not surprised. “Okay,” she says, “would that become a problem for either of you if I wanted to hire you both for this job?”

“I don’t see how.” Lisa smiles with a sweet, poisonous edge and flicks her gaze to Sara before she focuses on Mac. “No feelings were involved.”

“No hearts were broken,” Sara murmurs with a heavy lilt in her voice. “It was just sex.”

Mac nods, a quick descent of her chin. “Okay,” she ekes the oh sound out into an ooh, “who wants to help me bring on the fall of a mafia empire?”

Sara raises her hand, because her mouth is full of fries she stole from Mac. Lisa glances at her sidelong and lingers for a few seconds before she looks away. “I’m in.”

One Week Later

Iron Heights is located in Keystone, across the Missouri River from Central. When the particle accelerator exploded, it destroyed the prison walls. Several inmates died, but others escaped—including Count Vertigo, Winnick Norton, Cyrus Vanch, Kyle Reston, and Barton Mathis.

Barton Mathis is the only son of Wesley Mathis, a serial killer from Gotham City who hunted women and cannibalized them before he was caught. After that, he went into foster care and was sent to live with a family in Starling. Then he grew up and followed in his father’s footsteps, but
instead of eating the women he murdered, he preserved their bodies and dressed them up like dolls. Quentin Lance arrested him, he was sentenced to consecutive life sentences without the possibility of parole, and he sat in Iron Heights for twenty years. During those two decades, he fantasized about escaping and murdering Quentin’s daughters in front of him. When his younger daughter was shipwrecked and pronounced dead, Mathis was enraged until he decided that it would hurt Quentin so much worse to watch his only living daughter become part of his collection.

When the man who arrested him died in the Undertaking, he thought he had nothing left to live for. Until Laurel Lance got a job with the District Attorney’s office in Central. Mathis knows the Canary protects women in particular, so instead of killing again, he watches Laurel and waits. Laurel, he decides, is Quentin’s legacy, his soul—killing her is better than killing her father, because his soul dies with her.[153]

After the particle accelerator explosion, Laurel started going to Krav Maga classes with Julie. Ted Grant, a boxer who moved to Central after his apartment building in the Glades was condemned and the gym he owned was destroyed in the Undertaking, teaches the class. Marianne, [154] Ted’s cousin, owns a flower shop called Sherwood Florist—and uses an expensive skin cream called Mermaiden.

Laurel, being the force for justice that she is, has been keeping tabs on the inmates who escaped. Quentin never told her about Mathis, but she’s read the file and even though she was too young to understand what was tearing her father up when he was working the Dollmaker case, she still knew something was wrong. It’s the same feeling that churns her stomach when she picks up the phone and hears Mathis on the other end of the line, the feeling that makes her cover her mouth in horror when he asks her to meet him at the obligatory abandoned chemical plant and trade herself for Marianne.

Of course, instead of letting her friend go, Mathis decides he’d rather kill them both. Two birds. One stone.

Laurel screams when the white polymer he uses to make dolls out of his victims starts to flow through the tube he forced into her mouth. Then, something impossible happens. Laurel screams and it all shatters: the tube, the glass, his eardrums. Mathis howls and falls to his knees with his hands over his ears, blood dripping between his fingers. Marianne sobs and squirms haphazardly against the straps restraining her.

Lisa draws a butterfly knife from a sheath in one of her boots and slices through the restraints. Marianne sobs harder and throws her arms around her rescuer. Lisa freezes, profoundly uncomfortable at the touchy-feely display of gratitude, and pats Marianne’s back awkwardly until she lets go.

Laurel flinches when her restraints come undone by themselves and exhales a loud, shuddering breath. Mac plucks a shred of elastic out of her hair and drops it onto the filthy cement floor. “You’re okay,” she tells her softly.

“How did you do that?” Laurel asks, looking down at her unbound wrists in a futile attempt to hide the tremor in her voice, and catching sight of the shards of broken glass on the floor. “How did I do that?”

Sara is beating the stuffing out of Mathis, his bones cracking with every blow.

“Wait!” Laurel gasps. “Stop!”
Sara halts at the sound of her sister’s voice, the fight seething out of her.

Mac shakes her head. “Men like him,” she says, “who think women are things, deserve what’s coming to them.”

Sara looks at Laurel and deactivates the device that disguises her voice. “He went after my sister,” she says. There is a difference between killing someone for money and killing because someone tried to hurt someone you love. Sara is tired of being a murderer; but killing men like Mathis is justice, not murder.

Laurel knows that voice, but it’s not possible—she’s in shock, her mind is playing tricks on her, this isn’t happening.

Lisa smiles at her, more sweetly than she intended. “He’s all yours.”

Sara draws a blade from the sheath on her thigh and stabs him in the heart, twisting the knife. Laurel whimpers at the ugly sound, the visceral squelch, and suddenly it all feels too real.

“Sara?” she whispers.


[146] (x). I think I dated myself by including a first gen beanie baby in this fic. Welp.

[147] So, one of the subplots of *Arrow* S2 was that the Undertaking destroyed Iron Heights and B-list villains from S1 returned one at a time to bother Team Arrow. Which made no sense, because Iron Heights is located in Keystone City. Which is across the river from Central City. Which is six hundred miles from Starling City. If the earthquake generated by the Markov device was powerful enough to destroy a prison from six hundred miles away, then the Undertaking would’ve killed a lot more than five hundred and three people. I decided that the particle accelerator explosion wrecked the prison instead. Which retcons the plot of *Arrow* S2 through episode nine, but I’ve retconned like 80% of *Arrow* anyway, so idgaf.

[148] Dodger, who doesn’t have a name in the comics, first appeared in *Green Arrow and Black Canary* Vol. 1, No. 7 (“Greetings from Faraway Lands”) June, 2008. Winnick Norton first appeared in *Arrow* 1x15 (“Dodger”) 20 February 2013. Winnick also appeared in the *Arrow: Season 2.5* comics, but since I’ve retconned everything after S1, I’m ignoring that mini-arc.


[150] Kyle Reston is the Ace of Clubs in the Arrowverse version of the Royal Flush Gang who first appeared in *Arrow* 1x06 (“Legacies”) 14 November 2012.


III
Even Your Family Can Betray You

After the hour Laurel had to spend at the police station lying her ass off about what happened with Mathis in her official statement—which says the Canary rescued her from Mathis, but doesn’t mention Mac, or Lisa, or the scream—she agrees to meet her sister back at the Clocktower. Lisa is smart enough to take herself out of the equation. Mac lives on the ground floor, though: she doesn’t have anywhere else to be.

“Laurel,” Sara says heavily, five years spent apart giving her sister’s name a massive amount of weight. “I know you’re angry. You have every right to be—”

“Every single thing that’s gone wrong in my life is your fault,” Laurel snaps. “You got on that stupid boat with my boyfriend. You didn’t call us to tell us that you were still alive, even though it probably would’ve saved our parents’ marriage. You stole my whole life away from me!”[155]

When she raises her voice, a crack blooms in the glass of Mac’s kitchen window. It makes a jagged web; fractured, but not broken, not yet.

Sara bites her lip and looks away, ashamed. “I’m sorry.”

“Okay,” Mac interjects sharply from a stool on the other side of the island in the center of the kitchen, “that’s enough.”

Laurel whirls to face her. “You stay out of this!”

When she shouts, the windowpane shatters. Laurel covers her mouth with both hands, one palm over the other, choking a gasp of horror.

Mac heaves a sigh. “You think you’re the only person who’s ever had their life ruined by someone you love?” she retorts. “I had a fiancée who murdered my family and friends because he wanted to
have me all to himself. You’re blaming Sara for everything because you don’t want to admit that you blame yourself.”

Laurel keeps her hands over her mouth she watches Mac generate a paramagnetic sphere to attract and contain the broken glass so she won’t step on any shards later. Then she puts the glass in the trashcan under the kitchen sink. Laurel watches her dispose of the glass with wide eyes, still not quite believing what she’s seeing. Sara isn’t used to how lazy Mac is with her powers sometimes, how nonchalant. It helps to see that her sister is perturbed by this new normal, too.

“You’re a metahuman,” Mac says. “Your voice is a weapon. You’ve seen Charmed, haven’t you?”

Laurel nods, but doesn’t uncover her mouth.

“What does a show about witches have to do with anything?” Sara wants to know.

“Well, for one thing,” Mac yawns through the word one, elongating the n sound, “our powers are tied to our emotions, too. I’m not saying you have to forgive your sister—that’s something you have to decide for yourself—but I am saying you need to let me teach you to control your powers. Otherwise, you’re going to keep breaking things.”

Laurel takes her hands off of her mouth slowly, and squares her shoulders to make herself feel stronger. “What would I have to do?” she asks.

Two Weeks Later

Felicity came to visit Barry after the particle accelerator exploded and stayed in Central for a few weeks. Iris didn’t get to meet her, but Mac, Caitlin, and Cisco did—and Mac took her aside to give her a message for a certain vigilante in Starling. Felicity has been in contact with Mac since then, sharing information in exchange for access to the S. T. A. R. Labs satellite that helps her watch over her city.

When she learns Milo Armitage is coming to Starling to procure the only remaining Markov prototype, she calls Mac.

“Wait,” Mac holds up the hand she isn’t using to hold her phone, even though Felicity can’t see what she’s doing, “you’re telling me that Malcolm Merlyn had a prototype earthquake machine in his garage? Why didn’t the cops search his mansion after he used a weapon of mass destruction to murder five hundred and three people?”

“Well,” Felicity elongates the l sound awkwardly, “he’s a white guy. And he’s a billionaire.”

Mac cocks her head in concession. “Okay,” she huffs, “but he’s also a mass murderer. I’d call it genocide if he’d been trying to destroy a specific group of people, instead of just the ones below the poverty line.”

“No arguments here,” Felicity says, holding the phone between her shoulder and her ear while she types, “but we both know that sometimes the justice system fails to actually get justice if the bad guy is a rich white guy.”

“Which is good if you’re working for a rich white guy,” Mac retorts, “like Oliver Queen.”

Felicity stops typing. “Why don’t you like Oliver?” she wants to know.
Mac exhales with enough force to flap her lips. Most of her reasons are rooted in knowledge from watching a TV show in a parallel universe. Which is something she can’t exactly tell Felicity, not without explaining the multiverse. There’s no time to explain the whole *I used to think this world was fictional* thing or list all of the reasons why Oliver Queen desperately needs therapy, not with a weapon of mass destruction in play. “I don’t think he should’ve let Malcolm Merlyn live,” she answers.[158]

“Wait,” Felicity blurts on the other end of the line before Mac hangs up, “what?”

Lisa won three gold medals in the 2002 Winter Olympics. Then her relationship with Roscoe—her coach and pairs partner—became the scandal that ruined her career.[159] Lewis was incarcerated at Iron Heights, Len went overseas to become a world class thief, and Lisa was stuck in high school. Of course Lisa was the kind of girl other teenage girls love to hate. At sixteen she was gorgeous, disciplined, confident, and she gave no fucks what any of her peers thought.

Until she met Sandra Moonday Hawke.[160] Lisa didn’t mean to, exactly, but somehow she became Sandra’s best friend.

At sixteen, Sandra was a burnout army brat with a rebellious streak: her grandfather fought in the Korean War, and her father owns a cattle ranch, but her mother is a flake who uses the preferred terminology of “free spirit” to explain why she was never around. At nineteen, Sandra met a certain billionaire playboy at Ivy Town University, but he dropped out of college and moved back to Starling before she could tell him that he’d gotten her pregnant. At twenty, she had an infant son named Connor, a dark-skinned boy with her brown eyes and incongruously blond hair.[161] At twenty-four, she married Milo Armitage: international arms dealer, member of a criminal organization called HIVE, and an abuser.

When she confronted him about the bruises, Sandra cut Lisa out of her life. It’s been three years since then, a year since Sandra left her husband to protect her son and Lisa helped her assume a new identity as a single mom. Connor is eight now, a third grader, and he gets birthday cards and a present from his “Aunt” Lisa every year.

“You don’t have to be here,” Sara says as the stark winter afternoon peeks in through the windows, the train chugging past the view.

“Yes,” Lisa tells her, “I do.”

Laurel narrows her eyes at her sister. Oh, she knows that look. Sara used to look at Oliver that way before they started going out, back when her sister wasn’t trying to hide the huge crush she’d had on him. Only now she’s looking at another girl that way. “Hey, Sara,” Laurel says, trying for nonchalance, “did I ever tell you about the girl I dated when I was in law school?”

Sara glances at Laurel, surprised and almost shy. Laurel gives her a smile, one that doesn’t show her teeth; it’s not as warm as Sara remembers, but it’s nowhere near the anger or bitter disappointment that her sister has been telegraphing since Laurel learned the rumors of her death were greatly exaggerated,[162] so she’ll take it. “No,” she says tentatively, not wanting to ruin the bonding moment. “You didn’t.”

“That’s actually how I knew there was a job opening in Central City,” Laurel explains. “Lola works in the District Attorney’s office.”[163]

“Ooh,” Sara arches her eyebrows, “have you been thinking about rekindling an old flame?”
Laurel smiles wider and shakes her head. “Actually, she’s married now. With a two-year-old daughter named Inez. I’ve met Edgar, her husband, and it looks like they’re really happy.”

Sara knows better than to ask whether Laurel is seeing anybody after what happened with Tommy and with Oliver. Lisa doesn’t, but just as she’s about to make awkward small talk, the opening riff of “Ice Ice Baby” jams out of Mac’s phone.

Mac blushes from the roots of her dark blue hair to the collar of her dress and below. “Sorry,” she blurts, using her cane for balance as she rises to her feet. “I’m going to take this call…somewhere else.” Once she’s in the bathroom and safely out of earshot, she says: “Hi.”

“Hi there,” Len says in a low, intimate voice that makes her shiver, even though she’s wearing a giant sweater over her dress that gives her paws.

Mac checks her watch—an owl pendant she wears around her neck—and frowns. “It’s almost midnight there,” she tells him softly, even though he must already know. “What’s keeping you up?”

“Had a bad dream,” Len murmurs. Which is a massive understatement, because he dreamt that she died while he was in jail and woke up heartbroken that he couldn’t protect her. “Wanted to hear your voice.”

Mac smiles and looks down after she notices how goofy she looks in the bathroom mirror. “What should I say?” she asks.

Len smiles back at warmth in her voice. It turns the simple words into something more powerful, something that unties the knot in his stomach and makes him feel a kind of sharp, sweet happiness he’s never felt before. It almost makes him sick. “Anything,” he tells her.

All of a sudden, Mac finds herself at a loss for words. “In the outside world,” she says after a few long seconds of silence, “all forms of intelligence, whether of sound or sight, have been reduced to the form of varying currents in electric circuits so they may be transmitted. Inside the human frame, exactly the same sort of process occurs. Must we always transform into mechanical movements in order to proceed from one electrical phenomenon to another? It is a suggestive thought, but hardly warrants prediction without losing touch with reality and immediateness.” I read an article from the forties on perception and transmission of information today, she explains, “and even though it was written so long ago, I think it’s interesting. Like, ‘sticking to present-day patterns, it may be well to mention one such possibility, not to prophesy but merely to suggest, for prophecy based on extension of the known has substance, while prophecy founded on the unknown is only a doubly involved guess. All our steps in creating or absorbing material of the record proceed through one of the senses—the tactile when we touch keys, the oral when we speak or listen, the visual when we read. Is it not possible that someday the path may be established more directly? We know that when the eye sees, all the consequent information is transmitted to the brain by means of electrical vibrations in the channel of the optic nerve.’”

“What you’re saying,” Len murmurs, “is that how we perceive sensory information makes us what we are. If we see or hear something, it’s real. If we feel something,” he doesn’t let himself elaborate that he’s talking about his feelings for her in particular, “it’s real.”

Mac nods before she remembers that he can’t see her. “Yes,” she says. “If you feel something, or remember it…even though you might be the only person who does…it’s still real, still part of you.”

Len likes to think of himself as a perceptive man, a man who can read people like a book. Mac is easy to read: her face is expressive, she’s the worst liar, and she has no filter. Obviously someone
hurt her, and thinking about it makes his blood boil. *No one hurts the people I love and lives to tell about it,* he thinks, and stops cold. *Get a grip, Snart,* he tells himself, *love isn’t real.*

Mac says his name and his jaw clenches tight as his heart wrenches horribly in his chest. “Len?” 

Len swallows thickly. “I’m here,” he tells her.

“I have to hang up.” Mac says. “I’m on a train, and I think people who actually need to use this bathroom are waiting.”

“Why are you on a train?” Len wants to know.

Mac uses her powers to access the S. T. A. R. Labs satellite and tries to locate Armitage using facial recognition software that Felicity has in the Arrowcave. “I have business in Starling City,” she says. “I’ll call you tomorrow.”

“I’ll hold you to that,” Len says, and hangs up.

Mac smiles as she tucks her phone into the pocket of her sweater and hobbles back to her seat—talking to Len always makes her happy, and even though she misses the version of him that she married so badly her heart still aches, it helps to know another Len is alive and that he called her just because he wanted to hear her voice.

All they’ve done is talk, and part of her feels like she’s cheating on her dead husband, but another part of her doesn’t care. It’s an odd swirl of guilt and heartbreak and love, but she’s not sure who exactly her love is meant for. Which is why she’s indulging her rage instead, why she’s on the train to Starling when she should be staying out of this. Mac isn’t satisfied. Not even close.

Sara grins at her. “Was that him?” she asks, teasing. “Your guy in Switzerland?”

Lisa frowns. *Lenny’s been in Geneva for almost a month,* she thinks. *Which could be a coincidence, but I doubt it. Mac’s the one who told me about Louise. If she knew about the baby sister I never knew I had, she should know about the brother who practically raised me.*

Sara pouts when Mac doesn’t answer, but after a few seconds she shrugs it off and turns back to Laurel while Lisa brainstorms. Mac looks out at the station wall as the train arrives. There’s graffiti of a green arrowhead on a poster of Superman, spray painted over the symbol of the House of El on his chest. Truth and Justice are still intact, but the street artist redacted the American Way.

“We’re here,” Laurel says, shifting uncomfortably in her seat after she states the obvious.

Sara squares her shoulders and feels the weight of her wooden sword against the curve of her back. “Welcome home.”


[156] *Charmed* 1x01 (“Something Wicca This Way Comes”) 7 October 1998.


[158] Oliver doesn’t canonically find out that Malcolm is still alive until *Arrow* 3x04 (“The Magician”) 29 October 2014, when Nyssa informs him that Ra’s sent Sara to find out whether Malcolm was really dead. Which doesn’t make any sense, because in *Arrow* 2x07 (“State v. Queen”) 20 November 2013, Malcolm implies that he used the Lazarus pit to heal the
wound Oliver gave him in *Arrow* 1x23 (“Sacrifice”) 15 May 2013. Unless there’s another Lazarus pit, one that Malcolm
found at some point that Ra’s never knew about. Which means they could actually bring Laurel back. I’m just saying.

[159] Apparently there will be a female version of the Top named Rosa Dillon in S3 of *The Flash*, but as far as I’m
concerned, she’s Roscoe’s younger sister. I like my backstory for Lisa too much to change it and I’m 99% sure canon will
disappoint me. It’s been almost a season since we’ve seen her on *The Flash*, she wasn’t on *Legends of Tomorrow* at all
beyond a few brief mentions, and I doubt we’re going to see much of her next season. Ugh.

[160] Sandra Hawke first appeared in *Green Arrow* Vol. 2, No. 91 (“Images”) November, 1994. Sandra is the mother of
Oliver’s son, Connor Hawke. Samantha Clayton, a whitewashed version of her, appeared in *Arrow* 2x20 (“Seeing Red”) 23
April 2014. John Diggle, Jr. appeared as Connor Hawke in *Legends of Tomorrow* 1x06 (“Star City 2046”) 25 February
2016, so technically show canon has erased and whitewashed Sandra twice. I imagine my version of her as Chanel Iman.

the version of him that appeared on *Legends of Tomorrow*, because I’m still bitter about the twofold whitewashing and
erasure of his mother.

[162] Mark Twain wrote this in a letter to Frank Marshall White on 31 May 1897, and White published an article in the
*New York Journal* in which he quoted the letter on 2 June 1897.

[163] Charlotte “Lola” Rhodes (née West) first appeared in *DC Special Series* Vol. 1, No. 11 (“Beyond the Superspeed
Barrier! Prologue”) February, 1978. Lola is Iris’s older sister in the comics. I imagine my version of her as Laverne Cox.


[166] Vannevar Bush, “As We May Think” from the July, 1945 issue of the *Atlantic*. (x)
Emotional Responses Are as Valuable as Intellectual Responses

the thing I came for:
the wreck and not the story of the wreck
the thing itself and not the myth.

Adrienne Rich, “Diving Into the Wreck”

Shock Value
Part 2
Myth Can Make Reality More Intelligible
Book I
With a Stroke of Lightning
Chapter 13
Pretty Birds
(1 of 3)

“And though we were strangers in this life, in another land, in another time, in another passage through the world, maybe it will not be so. All things come back.”

Diana of Themyscira
DC Bombshells Vol.1, No.22 (“Allies, Part 4 of 9”)
January, 2016

I
Emotional Responses Are as Valuable as Intellectual Responses

Mac bought the Ferris Air Testing Facility in Central from the eponymous Carol Ferris the morning after she had dinner with Caroline. (Carol had pink ribbons wound through the spokes of the wheels on her chair,[167] leftover from Pride in Coast City, for which she’d woven blue and purple ribbons in with the pink. Mac had to bite the inside of her cheek to stop herself from mentioning anything about star sapphires or Green Lanterns.) It took a few weeks to get the paperwork in order, but now there’s a place where she can teach other metahumans to control their powers.

Laurel is standing on the airstrip dressed all in black with a domino mask and black greasepaint obscuring her features and a platinum blonde wig hiding the natural golden brown of her hair. Cisco is grinning from ear to ear while he sets up the devices that Mac asked him to make: high-tech roly-poly toys made to measure the frequencies of the soundwaves Laurel creates. Like weebleys, they wobble, but they don’t fall down.[168] Cisco made them to look like a rainbow of R2-series astromech droids, including R2-D2.

“Cisco,” Mac says after she boops one of the droids to watch it bobbling around, “you’re a sawed-off genius.”[169]
Cisco grins wider. “That’s true,” he says, “but you’re the brains, sweetheart.”[170]

Mac laughs at his over-the-top Han Solo impersonation before she hobbles to her chair, flops into her seat, and tucks one ankle underneath her other knee. Caitlin finishes attaching the electrodes to Laurel—they correspond to the apps Caitlin uses to monitor both the circulatory and central nervous systems, to collect as much raw data as possible—gets a baseline reading on her tablet, and comes to sit in the chair to Mac’s right. Sara is sitting to her left, watching her sister as Laurel settles into a fighting stance. Like she’s facing off with a more formidable opponent than a series of knockoff thermcapsulary dehousing assisters.

“Hey,” says Mac, breaking the silence. “I know you’re scared, but sometimes you need to lose control to learn how your powers work. It’s okay to let everything you’ve been carrying around on the inside out. It’s okay to heal loudly.”[171]

Laurel shuts her eyes tight and thinks about what her father would say until the lump of fear in her throat is gone. Then she takes a deep breath, inhaling sharply—and screams.

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One Week Later

Armitage is meeting Benjamin Turner[172]—a mercenary also known as Bronze Tiger—at the docks on the bank of the Scioto River.[173] Turner and an assortment of goons have stashed the prototype earthquake machine in a shipping container, and Armitage has a boat waiting to transport his dangerous cargo to his buyer in Markovia. Oliver is up on the roof of a nearby warehouse posing dramatically, Roy is skulking in the shadows behind the shipping container, and a woman in a black hood Mac doesn’t recognize is watching his back.

When she turns to face them, Sara gasps. “Shado?” she whispers. “I thought you were dead.”

“Yáo Xiū—the woman you knew as Shado—was my sister,”[174] the woman says, “my name is Yáo Mĕi. I’m her twin.”[175]

There’s no time for Sara to process the whole a woman I met on Liànyù who died because Oliver chose me over her apparently has an identical twin sister thing, because Oliver swoops down and shoots Armitage in the meat and muscle of his thigh. Turner joins the fray, Roy hulks to Oliver’s defense, Mac hobbles into the shipping container to destroy the prototype, Laurel asks her sister who Shado is, and Lisa takes the opportunity to put a bullet in Armitage’s head.

Oliver knows he should do something about that, but first he has to stop his sidekick from beating Turner to death. “Roy,” he shouts and lunges forward with enough force that his hood falls off, “I need you to stop!”

Laurel doesn’t see that it’s Oliver under the hood because Mac drags her into the shipping container. “Okay,” she says after she fulgurkinetically takes the machine apart, “remember what I’ve been trying to teach you. Focus on the components of the prototype. Use your voice to create a resonance and shatter them. I’m going to leave, because I don’t want you to accidentally shatter my eardrums.” Then she tentatively reaches out to squeeze Laurel’s shoulder. “I believe in you,” she tells her softly and sincerely. “I’m just being pragmatic.”

“I get that,” Laurel says, trying to hide the tremor in her voice, “but what if I accidentally destroy the shipping container while I’m still in here?”
“Don’t worry,” Mac says before she hobbles out into the night. “I won’t let you die.”

Laurel folds her arms and exhales a sharp whoosh of air through her teeth. *Okay,* she thinks, *I can do this.*

Mac emerges from the shipping container to find Oliver aiming an arrow at Lisa. “Why did you kill him?” he asks.

Lisa sneers at him. “Does the name Sandra Hawke ring a bell?” she snarks back, smirking viciously when his shoulders tighten at her name. “That bastard was still her husband on paper, but she left him a year ago because he went after her son. Now she’s his widow, and she stands to inherit everything he had. Should help her put Connor through college, when he’s old enough.”

Oliver is about to ask how old Connor is—even though the knot in his stomach is telling him that he already knows the answer to that question—when he sees Sara move in his periphery and turns instinctually to aim at her instead. Sara takes her wig off, tucks it into the crook of one elbow, and slowly removes her mask.

“Oliver,” Mĕi says, power reverberating through her voice, “put the bow down.”

Oliver glowers at Mĕi as the tension slips out of his bowstring. “I told you to never use your powers on me,” he snaps, raising his voice on the word *never.*

Mĕi just looks at him instead of apologizing, and anger that feels like it’s been simmering for years passes between them.

“Okay,” Mac says, awkwardly elongating the *oh* sound into an *ooh.* “I called the police with an anonymous tip about Bronze Tiger. I know you’re probably shocked—” she laughs and veins of electricity slither in between the fingers of the hand she isn’t using to grip her cane, “—pun unintended, but we should go before they get here. Why don’t we meet you back at the Arrowcave in half an hour?”

“Why don’t I take you there now?” Oliver suggests. There’s something dangerous in his voice, flat and sharp like the lethal edge of one of his arrowheads.

Mac snorts at the implicit threat. “I’m hypoglycemic,” she explains, “and I didn’t eat on the train. I’m going to stop by Big Belly Burger for a milkshake and fries.” Then she tunes into their communication uplink. “Felicity,” she asks, “do you or Mr. Diggle want anything?”

“I’d love a mint chip shake,” Felicity tells her, then pauses to listen to her other partner in crimefighting before she adds, “and a double cheeseburger for Dig, with no onions and extra pickles.”

Laurel emerges from the shipping container to find her sister unmasked, her first love decked out in green leather and glaring at Lisa, a Chinese woman dressed all in black, a boy in a red hoodie, an unconscious mercenary facedown on the concrete below, a dead man with a bullet hole in the back of his skull, and Mac yawning into the hollow of one palm. “Okay,” she says. “What the hell did I miss?”

Roy doesn’t stick around for late night burgers and catchup; so much has happened, and he needs time to process. Mĕi knows all about the history of Oliver, Sara, and Laurel because that scandal surfaced when the *Queen’s Gambit* went down, and she’s smart enough to stay out of that mess. After all, she’s not interested in Oliver—she’s in Starling to stop Slade Wilson[176] because it’s
what Shado would’ve wanted. When that’s done, she plans on returning to Hong Kong and never looking back.

Mac flops into an empty swivel chair and dips one of her fries in her milkshake, making a futile attempt to blend into the background. (Which isn’t possible with blue hair, but at least she’s trying.) Lisa is still glaring at Oliver, but it’s less about Sandra and more about Sara now. Oh, the way she leans with her left hip cocked against the edge of the table in the middle of the room and subtly angling her body toward the lost assassin says it all. Like she’s waiting for Oliver to give her an excuse to hurt him.

Oliver doesn’t trust either of them, but he only has eyes for Laurel and Sara. Which has always been his problem. “Where have you been?” he wants to know.

“Everywhere,” Sara quips.

Oliver exhales, his nostrils flaring in frustration. “That’s not an answer,” he points out.

“Well,” Sara retorts, “it’s the one you’re getting.”[177]

Lisa snorts. Mac looks down at her food and wonders if Len is awake yet, because she could use texting as a distraction from the weird atmosphere in the Arrowcave. Felicity noisily slurs her milkshake while her gaze darts from one sister to the other and back to Oliver. Diggle is eating his cheeseburger, totally unperturbed by the tension in the room—probably because he’s been working with Bargain Basement Batman the longest and the heaviness in the air is just another part of the job.

Mac heaves a sigh. “Okay,” she says, “the facts are these. Sara joined the League of Assassins after the Amazo debacle five years ago, only she doesn’t want to be a murderer anymore unless she’s taking out serial killers like the Dollmaker, so she took a contract that brought her to Central and never returned to Nanda Parbat. Laurel moved to Central after the Undertaking because you were on the island again and she thought there was nothing left for her here. Then the particle accelerator exploded, and now she’s a metahuman. I hired Sara and Lisa to help me bring down the Santini crime family, because I can’t openly attack the mafia without outing myself as a metahuman. I’ve been sending evidence against other criminal organizations to police precincts all over the country in envelopes stamped with Medusa’s head—”

Oliver raises his eyebrows incredulously. “You’re Medusa?”

“Yes,” Mac tells him, “my mother used to call me Medusa because my hair looks like snakes when it’s long. There’s a few variations on her mythological origin story, but I like the version where Poseidon rapes Medusa and Athena turns her and her sisters into gorgons so they can protect themselves against monstrous men in the future.[178] Which isn’t a perfect allegory for what I’ve been through, but it’s close enough. I know you don’t trust me. And with everything you’ve been through, I don’t expect that to change anytime soon. I don’t want a partnership, but I do want to form an alliance with your team. And I want you to tell the caped crusader to stop looking into me, because he won’t like or believe what he finds.”

“Wait,” Felicity blurts, her mouth gaping open in shock, “you know Batman? Since when do you know Batman?”[179]

Oliver looks up toward the ceiling as if to ask, why me? Mac glances at the tiny camera surreptitiously hidden in one corner. Which, upon inspection under a microscope, would be shaped like a bat.
Laurel eventually takes Oliver aside to get closure. It’s been almost nine months since the Undertaking, since Tommy. *It’s time to see if our friendship is worth saving,* she thinks. “I made a mistake,” she says aloud, “when I slept with you. I know it wasn’t exactly cheating, because Tommy had broken up with me, but he only did that because he thought that you and I should be together. All I know is that I still feel like I betrayed him, but he’s gone, and there’s nothing I can do to make it right.”

“I know how that feels,” Oliver tells her, “when I brought your sister on the Queen’s Gambit, I betrayed you and your father. There’s no forgiveness for what I led Sara into. I would give anything to…”

“…to go back,” Laurel says, finishing his thought with a sad smile.

Oliver nods, the motion heavy with regret. “Yeah.”

“You can’t go back,” Mac says.

Laurel startles and looks over her shoulder at her. Oliver doesn’t flinch, but his jaw tightens.

“Sorry,” Mac holds up one hand in mock surrender, “but take it from someone who knows: going back in time isn’t a surefire way to fix your mistakes. All it does is give you a chance to make new ones. Now,” she adjusts her grip on her cane and shifts her weight off her bad ankle, “where’s the bathroom? I have to pee.”

Sara and Laurel visit Quentin and Tommy before they leave Starling. Mac sleeps in and skips breakfast. Lisa breaks into her room after spending the night with Sara to confront her about Len, and is disgusted with herself for letting her sleep instead. There’s a warm and fuzzy feeling that’s blooming in her belly, satisfied and happy. It’s making her soft, and so she pouts all the way to the station.

“What do you think dad would say to us,” Laurel wonders after the train starts chugging back toward Central, “if he were still here?”

“That a guy with a bow and arrow can’t save a guy who’s had a building fall on top of him,” Sara tells her.

Laurel looks away, guilty. “Who said I was talking about Tommy?”

“Mac.” Sara looks over her shoulder at the blue-haired metahuman, whose soft snores are condensating against the window, and smiles to herself before she turns back to her sister. “What she said the other day, about you blaming yourself.”

“Oliver,” Laurel swallows thickly, “he told me to stay out of the Glades, and he told me to get out of CNRI, but I didn’t. Tommy was only there because I was too stubborn, too stubborn to get out when I had the chance. It’s all my fault that Tommy died.”

“Would you do anything differently,” Sara wants to know, “if you could go back to that night in the Glades?”

Laurel fists her hands in the fabric of her slacks and shakes her head. “No,” she says. “Not that night. I don’t even think I’d go back and stop myself from sleeping with Oliver. I know it was a mistake, but it was a mistake I needed to make. Now maybe I can finally move on.”

Sara glances Lisa and nods, a slow descent of her chin. “Love is the most powerful emotion,” she
murmurs, remembering what she told Oliver when they were on the island together, “and that makes it the most dangerous.”[182]

Laurel and Sara eventually get up to go eat breakfast in the dining car. Mac wakes up from her nap and blinks groggily, swiping at a glob of drool in one corner of her mouth. Lisa folds her arms and raises one perfectly arched eyebrow at her once they’re gone. “What exactly are your intentions with my brother?” she asks.

Mac chokes on her own spit. “Lisa,” she says, her gray eyes wide, panic setting in, “why would you think I have any intentions with—”

Lisa snorts. “Don’t insult me by lying to my face,” she says, throwing Mac’s own words back at her.

Mac looks away. “If I tell you the truth,” she mutters, “you won’t believe me.”

“Try me,” Lisa snarks back.

“Okay.” Mac crosses her ankles over the stem of her cane and flexes her fingers around the handle as she squares her shoulders and forces herself to meet Lisa’s eyes. “I’m from the future.”

[167] Carol Ferris uses a wheelchair in *Green Lantern* Vol. 2, No. 83 (“And a Child Shall Destroy Them!”) May, 1971 because Sybil, a psychokinetic metahuman, put a mental block in her mind that kept her from walking. It was broken in *Superman* Vol.1, No.261 (“Slave of Star Sapphire”) February, 1973. There aren’t enough disabled characters in canon, so I’m keeping Carol as a wheelchair user…only I’m not going to make it a disempowering mindfuck, because I’m not an asshole who thinks disabilities are tragedies.

[168] (x)


[171] Caitlyn Siehl, *Crybaby* (2016). I loved that the preface to this poetry anthology is two words *heal loudly*. (Italics hers, not mine.) Which is the most Laurel thing I have ever read, tbh.


[173] There are thirteen cities that are approximately six hundred miles from Kansas City, Missouri IRL: Toledo, Ohio (610 miles), Bismarck, North Dakota (617 miles), Columbus, Ohio (621 miles), Knoxville, Tennessee (624 miles), Baton-Rouge, Louisiana (627 miles), Austin, Texas (635 miles), Detroit, Michigan (645 miles), Houston, Texas (646 miles), Midland, Texas (646 miles), Montgomery, Alabama (657 miles), Santa Fe, New Mexico (667 miles), Atlanta, Georgia (676 miles), and New Orleans, Louisiana (681 miles). Detroit isn’t an option because that’s where *Vixen* is set; Atlanta isn’t an option because it exists in *Constantine*. Bismarck, Toledo, Montgomery, Knoxville, Midland, and Santa Fe are all too small; New Orleans, Baton-Rouge, Austin, and Houston are too big. Which leaves Columbus. Which was founded at the confluence of the Scioto and Olentangy rivers. There are no direct train routes from Kansas City to Columbus, but I’m going to pretend one exists on Earth-1 because otherwise the train ride would take thirty-two hours and it would involve a detour to Chicago. I hate how vague the show is about geography, jsyk.

[174] Shado first appeared in *Green Arrow: The Longbow Hunters* Vol. 1, No. 1 (“Book One: The Hunters”) August, 1987 and in *Arrow* 1x14 (“The Odyssey”) 13 February 2013. Shado is Japanese in the comics, which is why she’s literally named “shadow” (シャドー), but she’s Chinese on the show because Asian ethnicities are totally interchangeable, right?
Ugh. (Seriously, if her creators knew anything about Japanese, they would’ve known that the gairaigo version of a word is not a name.) There are no Chinese words that are phonetically similar to the English “shadow,” so I changed her name. I chose “xiū” (庥), which can mean “shadow” or “shade,” but it has a protective connotation that suits the version of Shado who appeared on the show.

[175] Méi first appeared in *Arrow* 3x16 (“The Offer”) 18 March 2015. Méi can mean oodles of different things depending on what character is used, but I chose “mĕi” (美), which translates as “beauty” or “beautiful.” Although it’s never explicitly stated by either Shado or Méi, their surname is probably Yáo because Yáo Fēi was their father and Chinese names are transposed. I needed someone to take Sara’s role in S2 of *Arrow* so the plot happening offscreen in Starling would move forward in a similar way. I chose Méi because Yáo Fēi has vocalization-based superpowers in the comics and that means I get to write her as a metahuman. I regret nothing.


[178] Ovid wrote the version of Medusa’s origin story in which becoming a gorgon is her punishment for bragging that she’s more beautiful than Athena, but more feminist interpretations of the myth are that Athena turned her and her sisters into gorgons to protect them, or that the sisters were born that way. There’s a scholarly debate about whether her name itself means feminine wiles, or guardianship, or even queenship. It’s possible that Medusa was originally meant to function as a symbol of feminine power, but patriarchal society chose to twist her story into a cautionary tale about vanity and pride. I prefer our reclaimed version of Medusa, but that’s just me. YMMV, obviously.

[179] When he gives Felicity the codename Overwatch in *Arrow* 4x11 (“A.W.O.L.”) 27 January 2016, Oliver says the codename Oracle was taken. Gotham does exist in the Arrowverse, and they’ve referenced Batman a few times without being explicit about it, and I have a headcanon. Oliver probably went to private school with Bruce at some point, and their families must run in similar circles, so they’ve met. Bruce is a total control freak, so if he exists, he knows Oliver is a vigilante. *Arrow* has timeskips between each season that last five to six months, so it’s possible that the Arrow has worked with Batman offscreen, and that’s how Oliver knew about Babs. I’m just saying.

[180] *Arrow* 2x01 (“City of Heroes”) 9 October 2013.


Pretty Birds (2) Hiding Your Emotions Is Despicable

It’s not violent
and we’re not violent—
we’re goddamn radiant.

Sunflowers blossoming from our skins
something safe,
something shining

with my hand in her hand,
with no one afraid.

Emily Palermo, “A Certain Kind of Softness”

Shock Value
Part 2
Myth Can Make Reality More Intelligible
Book I
With a Stroke of Lightning
Chapter 14
Pretty Birds
(2 of 3)

Hiding Your Emotions Is Despicable

Mac refuses to elaborate on her “I’m from the future” reveal until they’re back in Central, back at the Clocktower. Lisa sits on her couch and slouches deliberately, an old habit leftover from trying to make Roscoe mad so he’d pay more attention to her. (Which is fucked up, but growing up with a father like Lewis didn’t exactly teach her healthy ways to get male attention.) Mac pops the metal tab on a can of Dr. Pepper. It fizzes and hisses as she sits in her papasan chair and sets her soda on the coffee table, cutting the tension into slivers. Lisa slowly leans forward, puts her elbows on her knees, and interlaces her fingers.

“You probably have questions,” Mac deduces.

Lisa snorts. “How is this possible?” she asks. “I know I’ve seen some shit since the particle accelerator exploded, but time travel?” she arches her eyebrows at Mac like she’s expecting the punchline to a joke instead of a massive shift in her worldview. “Really?”

Mac shrugs, one shoulder hunching to meet her earlobe. “Things and qualities, relations, space and time, change, causation, activity, the self. All these, though in some sense facts which qualify reality, are not real as they appear. What is real is one single, indivisible, timeless whole, called the Absolute, which is in some sense spiritual, but does not consist of souls, or of thought and will as we know them. All this is established by abstract logical reasoning that professes to find self-contradictions in the categories condemned as mere appearance, and to leave no tenable alternative
“I was a philosophy minor,” Lisa interjects, “I’ve read Bertrand Russell too. ‘What is the nature of the evidence that causal laws have held hitherto, at least in the observed portions of the past? This question must not be confused with the further question: Does this evidence warrant us in assuming the truth of causal laws in the future and in unobserved portions of the past? For the present, I am only asking what are the grounds which lead to a belief in causal laws, not whether these grounds are adequate to support the belief in universal causation.’ Now tell me when you’re from, why you’re here, and what you’re doing with my brother.”

“I came here from 2016,” Mac tells her, “but technically the future I’m from isn’t possible now because of what we did in the past. I say ‘we’ because I knew you in the future, and I knew Len. I…” she swallows thickly, “…he was my husband.”

Lisa doesn’t miss the past tense or the way her voice shakes when Mac says her brother’s name. “Lenny died,” she deduces, her voice hushed and heavy. “How does it happen?”

Mac heaves a sigh. “Lisa, your brother isn’t going to die. What we did in the past changed the present to the point that the version of Leonard Snart that I was married to doesn’t exist anymore, so the circumstances that led to his death in the previous timeline won’t occur in this one.”

“How did he die?” Lisa asks again, softly. “I need to know.”

Mac heaves another sigh. “There was an organization of people who called themselves the Time Masters,” she explains, “they had a massive temporal computer called the Oculus that let them manipulate people and control the outcomes of certain events. Len died to destroy it. I have a theory that its destruction resonated to change the timeline by undoing the machinations of the Time Masters, but I don’t know for sure. I do know Len died because he wanted to prove they couldn’t control the choices he made.”

Lisa presses her lips into a thin line. “Lenny can be selfish,” she mutters, “no matter how much he loves you.”

“I guess the more things change, the more they stay the same,” Mac deadpans.

Lisa cocks her head and watches Mac chew on her thumbnail without biting through it before she speaks. “So,” she ekes the oh sound out knowingly, getting to the heart of the matter, “you love my brother, don’t you?”

Two Weeks Later

Len sends Mac three things on Valentine’s Day: a stolen Van Gogh, a sketch of her standing in the Louvre with the Winged Victory of Samothrace in the background, and a dick pic. Mac squawks when she looks at the picture and blushes all over. It’s been two months since she’s seen Len naked, two months since he’s touched her. Mac thinks about his hands sometimes, his fingers; but she’s been trying not to let herself go further than being haunted by the electric charge she felt after he pressed his palm against the small of her back in the bookstore.

It hits her again that she misses her husband, but she’s startled by the epiphany that she doesn’t miss him. What she misses is the life she thought she’d have after the mission aboard the Waverider was over. What she’s mourning is the future that she fought for…and lost.
I thought losing him would be the end for me, she thinks, but it wasn’t. I’m not ready to move on, but when I am, I can. I just need time.

Caitlin leans over to see what she’s looking at. “Oh,” she says, her eyebrows arching as high as they can go, “wow.”

Mac thumbs the button on the side of her phone and exhales a loud whoosh of air when the screen goes black. Eobard isn’t in the room, and Caitlin isn’t the type to gossip to her boss about his business partner’s sex life, so her secret is safe.

Okay, she thinks, since when do I have a sex life? Or a sex drive, for that matter? I’ve never been hornier than I am now, not in any timeline I can remember. I’m literally aching for it, and seeing a picture of…it…is making the wanting so much worse.

“Mac?” Caitlin puts a hand on her forearm, “are you okay?”

“Yes.” Mac nods, fizzling out on the sibilant. “I’ve just never had a guy send me a picture of his dick before.”

Cisco blinks and looks up from his tablet, the neon orange straw he was chewing on slipping out of his mouth. “Say what now?”

Mac flushes hot enough to fog up her glasses in slivers. Like half-moons underneath her eyes, skimming the plastic rims. “I’m guessing you won’t be able to take me seriously ever again,” she says, “even though I’m technically the boss of you.”

When she smiles, Caitlin tries and fails to hide the edge of sadness in the seam of her lips, the corners of her mouth. “You aren’t just our boss,” she points out. “You’re our friend, too. We won’t judge you.”

Mac smiles back, even though she knows Caitlin would probably judge her if she knew the dick in question belongs to a hardened criminal.

Cisco grins around his straw and waggles his eyebrows suggestively. “I’mma judge you if you don’t show me the dick pic,” he tells her, “like Izzy Lightwood says, ‘nothing less than seven inches.’”[186]

Caitlin covers her mouth in a futile attempt to muffle a shriek of laughter. “Cisco!”

“I think Izzy Lightwood was talking about high heels,” Mac points out. “Also, you know Cassandra Clare is a gross plagiarist, don’t you?”[187]

“Of course,” Cisco says, grinning wider, “the whole Ms. Scribe story is diamonds.”[188]

Eobard returns then, the whirring of his automated wheelchair bringing the conversation to a dead end. Mac stills, tension rooted in the line of her shoulders before she squares them and shakes it off. Eobard rests his elbows on the arms of his chair and interlaces his fingers, focused on her with an intensity that makes her want to hide.

I am done being afraid of you, she thinks viciously, you aren’t the only monster in this lab anymore. Out loud, she asks: “Who here knows what a SWOT analysis is?”

Caitlin raises her hand. “SWOT stands for Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats,” she answers, “a SWOT analysis identifies the internal strengths and weaknesses of a business, as well
as external opportunities and threats.”

Mac nods. “Gold star for Cait,” she says.

Caitlin practically glows at the praise. Ronnie is dead, and most of the time it feels like there’s ice where her heart should be, but praise has always made her feel all warm and fuzzy. Of course academic excellence has always been her thing: she skipped kindergarten and first grade, started taking college-level courses at fourteen, finished high school at sixteen, graduated from Hudson University at twenty, and finished med school at twenty-three. Now she’s twenty-seven, and everything she’s spent her whole life working for exploded two months ago. Literally. At this point, she’ll take all of the warmth that she can get.

“I did a SWOT analysis of S. T. A. R. Labs,” Mac explains, “and I think our main internal weakness is that we only have two employees. I’d say no one wants to work here, but people are still sending in applications.[189] Dr. Wells is the one who seems to think we don’t need more than two other people in the lab. I think that at the very least we need lab assistants for Caitlin, a new head of R & D, two or three people with proposals for research projects to develop, a head of engineering, and a systems engineer. I can’t keep running our network on top of everything else.”

“I’m in charge of research and development,” Eobard reminds her with forced nonchalance, trying not to get visibly angry.

“Not anymore,” Mac retorts. “Not since your hubris destroyed half the city. I think we should try to distance the company from your epic failure going forward, and that means you don’t get to be in charge.”

Eobard grits his teeth, but doesn’t argue. Mac bites down on the inside of her cheek to hide the bloom of a petty, ferocious smile.

“Here’s how this is going to work,” she continues. “Cisco, you’re not qualified to run the engineering department, but you get your workshop all to yourself and pre-approval for any independent projects, as long as you submit a proposal and a budget to me so I know where my money is going. Caitlin, I know you want to map my genome and isolate the metagene—your proposal was very thorough and lightyears ahead of its time. Caroline, Laurel, and Bea have all agreed to give you samples for your research, and I know a few other people who might be willing to contribute to our Metahuman Genome Project once their powers kick in. I’ll keep you posted. Dr. Wells, you do whatever you want as long as no one else gets hurt. I’ve hired Syd Palmer as head of R & D and Naomi Singh as systems engineer.[190] I’ve also offered research funding to Eliza Harmon[191] and Brie Larvan, two grad students from Hudson University. Mr. Palmer is the only person who’ll be working in this building, and I can restrict his access to the cortex to keep him from interfering with Caitlin’s research or Cisco’s toys or Barry’s recovery. Who’s with me?”

Cisco raises his hand all the way above his head and splays his fingers wide. Caitlin glances at the man she knows as Dr. Wells before she reluctantly follows suit, arm bent acutely at the elbow and no negative space between her fingers.

Eobard removes his glasses and flicks his gaze to her, his lips curling into an unexpected smile before he makes her decision unanimous. I don’t care what game she’s playing, he thinks, I always win.

Mac says goodbye to Iris before she leaves the building—she’s nervous because this is her first Valentine’s Day with a boyfriend, but she’s so excited she can’t stop smiling because it’s with
Eddie—and comes home to find Lisa pressing Sara up against the island in the kitchen to steal a kiss. Mac gives Lisa two thumbs up and hobbles to the elevator with her cane tucked into the crook of her left elbow. “I made a cake batter cheesecake,” she calls before the sliding doors open, “eat it after you eat out.”

Sara guffaws and buries her face in the crook of Lisa’s neck. Lisa snorts and squeezes the soft curve of Sara’s hip before she tilts her face up and kisses her again. Like she means it.

After she kicks her shoes off, Mac uses her powers to open the thin rectangular crate propped up against the exposed arm of her couch, and finds the repetition of the fourth version of “Sunflowers” from the Van Gogh Museum. Len must’ve taken the train from Geneva to Amsterdam to steal it. There’s an envelope taped to the frame, and inside is a sketch of her at the Louvre with February 4 written in the bottom left corner.

Mac flops onto the couch and extracts her phone from her purse to call him. “You draw,” she says after he picks up.

Len is quiet for a minute. When he was a kid and his mother would draw for hours, he’d sit with her and watch the way her hand moved; the way she hunched over the page, her whole body focused on what she was doing. Then he took an art class in high school, and it was the one thing he actually looked forward to before he dropped out. When he cases jobs, he uses art as a convenient excuse to sit in one place for hours looking at a building. Mac is the person he’s drawn the most, because sometimes he draws what he sees in his dreams. It took him years to get her eyes right, and the texture of her hair. “Yeah,” he says lowly, “is that the picture you want to talk about?”

“I have no idea how to respond to the other picture you sent me,” Mac tells him, “why would you send me a picture of your…”

“I don’t know,” Len says, his smirk audible in his voice, “isn’t sexting what all the cool kids are doing?”

Mac exhales a wheezy laugh. “Okay,” she says, still laughing softly. “Firstly, sending me a picture of your…”

“Mac,” Len says her name in that low, intimate voice, “you can say ‘cock.’”

Mac shivers and something low in her body clenches at the way he enunciates the word cock, a sweet ache between her thighs that throbs and makes her bite her lip to muffle a moan. “I don’t think sending me a picture of your cock is sexting,” she informs him, “sexting is basically texting with dirty talk, so you actually have to use your words to sext. Secondly, I didn’t know what the cool kids were doing when I was a kid, and I have no idea what they’re doing now that I’m twenty-six. Thirdly,” she exhales a soft whoosh of air, “I didn’t get you anything for Valentine’s Day. I didn’t know you wanted to be my valentine.”

Len grins and taps his fingers slowly against his thigh. “I know something you can give me, sweetheart,” he tells her suggestively.

“I won’t send you a naked picture,” Mac says, “not that I don’t trust you, but no data is private, not really.”

Len closes his eyes and exhales sharply. There’s a small part of him that wants to make her explicitly say that she trusts him, but a much larger part is terrified of how much it would mean to him. “Okay,” he says, “no pictures. Why don’t you tell me what you’re wearing?”
Mac fists the hand she isn’t using to hold her phone in the fabric of her skirt. “My bra is pink,” she tells him, “it has pale pink silk cups with black lace overlay. My panties have a silk panel in the front, but they’re black lace and see-through everywhere else. I’m sitting on the couch,” she elaborates. “I’m still wearing the dress I wore to work, but that’s what I have on underneath.”

Len groans and fists his other hand in the sheets to stop himself from unbuttoning his pants and stroking his cock. “Now tell me,” he drawls, “are you wet?”

“Yes,” Mac whispers.

Len palms his cock through the thick material of his jeans and thinks about her soft hands, her pretty mouth. “Touch yourself through your panties,” he orders, unzipping his fly and slipping his hand under the waistband of his boxer briefs. “Tease your pussy for me, nice and slow.”

Mac flushes hot as she lifts her skirt up and spreads her legs, moaning softly as she cups herself and strokes one finger along her slit. “Len,” she whimpers.

Unfortunately, the elevator dings before he can tell her to do anything else. Sara steps out, her pale eyes wide and frantic. Mac blushes impossibly brighter and tugs her skirt down abruptly to cover her thighs.

“It’s Laurel,” Sara tells her, voice trembling with worry around her sister’s name. “Ra’s al Ghul sent assassins after me and they found her instead.”

Mac huffs and holds up one finger. “Len,” she says, “I’m sorry. I have to go.”

Don’t, Len thinks, but he clenches his teeth to stop himself from begging once he hears the urgency in her voice. “Sure,” he sighs, his frustration audible in his harsh tone, “is something wrong?”

“Yeah,” Mac heaves a sigh of her own and hobbles to where she kicked her shoes off before she slips them on again, “but it’s nothing I can’t handle. I’ll call you later?”

Len doesn’t miss the way she poses that as a question. “I always want to talk to you,” he murmurs, “I don’t care if it’s dirty talk or not.”

Mac flicks her gaze to Sara, who’s watching her with folded arms and tension woven through her entire body. “I second that emotion,”[194] she tells him softly. “I’ll call you later.”

“It’s a date,” Len says before she hangs up.

Mac shrugs her sweater on and tucks her phone into one of the pockets. Sara holds the elevator until she steps inside, angry threads of lightning slithering along the stem of her cane. Lisa is waiting for them upstairs, her blue eyes flat and cold.

“Okay,” Mac says, “let’s go. It’s time to send Ra’s al Ghul a message.”

[183] Bertrand Russell, Our Knowledge of the External World as a Field for Scientific Method in Philosophy (1914).

[184] Legends of Tomorrow 1x15 (“Destiny”) 12 May 2016. I know canon thinks Len died heroically, but I don’t agree for a few reasons. Firstly, I doubt Len would’ve made the sacrifice he made if anyone but Mick had their hand in the Oculus. I don’t think he would’ve done it for Rip, or Ray, or even Sara—and I think it was ultimately a selfish choice, not a heroic one. Len’s last words were “There are no strings on me.” What he meant was basically fuck you, you don’t control me and you’ll never manipulate anyone else again—in that order (i.e. himself first, then everyone else). Which is
how I write Len: as a selfish person who still has a good heart buried somewhere in there underneath all the ice.

[185] (x)


[187] I was actually in the Harry Potter fandom when the Cassie Claire—and jsyk, that's not a typo, she took the “i” out of her pseudonym when she became a published author—plagiarism debacle happened, but if you weren’t in fannish spaces in 2002, here’s a thing: (x) (x). Also, she stole the idea for Shadowhunters from Sherrilyn Kenyon’s Dark-Hunters series, from the plot to the runes they use: (x) (x).

[188] (x)

[189] The Flash 1x10 (“Revenge of the Rogues”) 20 January 2015. When she goes to talk to Jason Rusch about the paper he co-wrote with Martin, he tells Caitlin that he accepted a position at Mercury Labs, ostensibly because S. T. A. R. Labs never contacted him about the résumé he sent in; so it’s canon that people still wanted to work at S. T. A. R. Labs in the aftermath of the particle accelerator explosion.


[192] (x)

[193] (x)

I loose myself like a flock of blackbirds
storming into your face.

My lightest touch leaves blueprints,
bruises on your mind.

Desire sandpapers your skin
so thin I read the veins and arteries
maps of routes I will travel
till I lodge in your spine.

Marge Piercy, “Moonburn”

Mac chose the Clocktower as her base of operations for three reasons. Firstly, in anachronistic homage to Oracle’s Watchtower. Secondly, it’s nowhere near Eobard’s mansion. Which is located in a more rural and ritzy part of the city, in the kind of neighborhood where the houses were built with acres of woods between them. Thirdly, it’s two blocks from Laurel’s apartment. Which is crumbling around its tenants in the wake of the Canary Cry.

“Ugh,” Mac groans, stretching her disgust out into a jagged sound. It takes a significant amount of effort for her to shut out the world: all the technology, all the people, all of the energy on (and around) the planet. There’s the geomagnetic field, the lightning in the ionosphere, the power grids, the cell towers, the tangled web of networks, the kinetics of billions of people, their electrical impulses from the thoughts in their heads to their heartbeats. It’s too much for anyone to sense—too much for anyone to make sense of—but she doesn’t have any other way to keep the building from falling down.

When she notices that Mac isn’t moving, Lisa whirls to look over her shoulder. Sara runs into the building without her, screaming for Laurel. Mac squeezes her eyes shut and falls to her knees, gripping her cane so hard her knuckles clench white and bloodless, the metal scaffolding of the building holding together by the sheer force of her iron will. “Lisa,” she grinds out through her teeth, “get everyone out of the building now. I don’t know how long I can hold it.”
Lisa doesn’t particularly care about the people in the building who aren’t Sara—and possibly Laurel, by the transitive property—but she’s startled to realize that she cares what Mac will think of her if she doesn’t help save them. *Lenny was her husband in the other timeline, she thinks, and she obviously has feelings for him in this one. What’s going to happen between them when he comes back? Where does that leave me?*

Sara, meanwhile, grabs the concussed assassin by the wrists and drags her down the hallway to the elevator. Laurel exhales a frustrated noise and slings a duffle bag over her shoulder along with her purse. “What’s that for?” Sara asks as the elevator descends.

“I think it’s safe to say that bringing the building down around us violates my rental agreement,” Laurel retorts. “I’m definitely not getting my deposit back.”

Sara cocks her head in concession and glances down at the girl on the floor. Laurel doesn’t miss the way she blanks, so hard it must be forced; but this isn’t the time to ask how her sister knows the girl who tried to kill her. Lisa meets them in the hallway and helps Sara carry the girl out of the building. Mac is sitting on the sidewalk, raggedy ladders in her stockings where the asphalt scraped her knees and calves. When she sees they’re safe, her eyes fade from eerie, shocking white to tempestuous gray. Laurel yelps and covers her mouth before she notices the building is still intact. Mac grins, showing her slightly crooked teeth.

“I filled the cracks with ore I pulled out of the earth,” she explains. “I think finding gold in the walls is going to cause more trouble than it’s worth, but they won’t sue you for damages. Probably. I can buy the building if they try, though.”

Laurel is smiling when she offers her a hand and pulls her up into a one-armed hug, tucking Mac against her side and resting her cheek on top of her head. Mac hesitates for a few seconds before she wraps an arm around her waist and hugs Laurel back.

“Well,” she murmurs, “we should go back to the Clocktower before the cops get here.”

Laurel glances up at her darkened window. “I think I should move into the Clocktower,” she suggests, “even if they can’t find a way to evict me for this, staying here would put my neighbors in danger, and I couldn’t live with myself if other people got hurt because of me.”

“I can hire someone to come and pick up your stuff in the morning,” Mac tells her. “I know money can’t buy happiness, but it can sure as hell solve problems.”

Laurel has to force herself not to look back over her shoulder in case any of her neighbors pointed the cops in their direction. Julie—one of the cops who arrives at the scene once they’re two blocks away—calls to see if she’s okay, but no one suspects that Laurel is responsible for almost bringing down the building. Of course the existence of metahumans isn’t common knowledge yet, so people will believe in a small earthquake instead of a girl whose screams can make things crumble and fall.

“So,” Laurel turns to Sara as Lisa handcuffs the girl to one of the mismatched chairs Mac uses as temporary seats for stacking new books she hasn’t had time to shelve, “who is she?”

Sara is sitting on the couch with her fingers interlaced, the indexes pressed against the seam of her lips. “Sin,” she murmurs, “her name was Cynthia before she joined the League of Assassins. Nyssa and I found her at a monastery in the Himalayas that had been attacked by Huang Sī Chóu, one of Ra’s al Ghul’s former students who drank from the Lazarus pit before he left the League over a century ago. Sin joined the League and became one of Nyssa’s students, but she was…” her gaze flicks to Lisa before she looks down at her hands, “…like our daughter. Ra’s must
have sent her here because he knew I wouldn’t hurt her.”

“Oh, Lisa folds her arms and narrows her eyes after Sara looks away, “who’s Nyssa?”

“Nyssa Raatko,” Mac informs her. “Warīṯ al Ghul, daughter of Ra’s al Ghul and Heir to the Demon.”[198]


Sin is ten years old, but she’s a smart girl. When he chose her to find and kill Sara, she knew Ra’s al Ghul was planning on using her against Sara because she broke her oath. Which gave Sin an excuse to leave the League and see her again. Now she’s sitting with Sara and Laurel in the breakfast nook. Lisa is standing in the kitchen, unsure where she fits in. Mac emerges from the elevator mid-yawn, hobbles in past the tension, and pours herself a glass of milk. Lisa glances at her as she props her cane against the island and squirms onto a stool. Mac leans over to nuzzle her upper arm with the crown of her head, giving Lisa an oddly affectionate headbutt.

“Good morning,” Laurel says, leaning to look around Sara and smile at Mac.

“G’morning,” Mac says, another yawn swallowing the ooh sound before she smiles back, static clinging to her fingers when she scrapes one hand through her short hair.

Sin looks at her with wide eyes and says something to Sara in Arabic. Mac understands the words Ra’s al Ghul and Perunika, so she gets the gist of what they’re talking about even if she doesn’t know exactly what they’re saying. “I’m not a goddess,” she tells Sin. “I’m a person who happens to have powers that could be characterized as godlike.”

Lisa snorts, her nostrils flaring as the harsh, ugly sound gnarls out of her throat. “Oh please,” she deadpans, “that’s just semantics.”

Mac glares. “I am human,” she bites out. “If you don’t believe that, then why are you here?”

“Because you pay me to be here,” Lisa snarks back.

Sara hunches slightly, her shoulders folding, slumped with guilt. Laurel knows the hard press of her lips and that furrow between her eyebrows all too well. Mac looks like she’s been sucker punched: gray eyes huge and full of hurt, the fingers of her arthritic hand curled into something that’s not quite a fist, her bottom lip tugged in between her teeth and bitten hard.

Lisa huffs and walks out, her heels thundering against the floor before she slams the door behind her. There is a birdlike woman with dark eyes, brown skin, and black hair standing on the sidewalk, but she’s too pissed off to notice.

Mac, meanwhile, sighs and lowers her head until it meets the countertop, the granite cool against her forehead. “Sara,” she mumbles. “Lisa is terrible at feelings, but she has apparently fallen for you, so you need to figure out how you feel about her before she takes her frustration out on someone who won’t forgive her for being an emotionally stunted mess.”

“I like her,” Sara murmurs, “and I might be falling for her too, but I still love—”

There’s a knock on the door before she finishes that sentence: two raps, short and powerful. Mac blinks after she uses her powers to access a nearby traffic camera. Whoever is knocking on her door knows her angles—including how to avoid the possibility of being seen by miscellaneous security camera feeds—but it can only be one person. Mac hobbles over to the oven to make
herself an omelette. *Whatever happens next,* she thinks as she takes the carton of eggs out of the fridge, *I’m not dealing with it on an empty stomach.*

“I’ll get it,” Laurel says, scooting out of the breakfast nook.

Nyssa doesn’t smile when she steps into the kitchen, but some of the harshness seeps out of her stare and warmth oozes to fill the chinks in her armor. Mac flips her omelette onto a plate and spoons a dollop of sour cream off to the side. Laurel is hovering behind her sister’s ex, unsure what to do in this situation.

“Sara,” Nyssa says, her voice equal parts reverent and furious.

“Okay,” Mac says, awkwardly turning the *oh* sound into an *ooh.* “Laurel, I think we should go downstairs—”

Nyssa shakes her head. “No,” she says stiffly, “I may need to ask a favor of you.”

Sara glares at her then. “You have no right to ask Mac for anything,” she snarls quietly.

Nyssa exhales sharply. “Sara,” she sighs, “when I learned that my father sent our Cynthia after you, I tried to cut off his head.[199] I failed to kill him, but I drew blood, so now he believes I am the one from the prophecy whose fulfillment he has feared for over a century, the one who is destined to kill him. I understand this house belongs to Ms. Howell. I may need to ask for her protection from Ra’s al Ghul.”

“I’m guessing this is you asking,” Mac deduces.

Nyssa nods curtly, a sharp descent of her chin.

Mac takes a bite of her omelette. “I’m also guessing that you have a way to contact your father,” she says after she’s done chewing, “if you help me give him a message, then you’re welcome to stay.”

“Well,” Sara mutters, “she’s not staying with me.”

Nyssa extracts a sleek looking burner phone from the pocket of her long black coat and dials a number. “‘Beware of the man whose goodness you cannot ask for and whose evil you cannot be protected from,’”[200] she tells whoever answered the call in Arabic, “now give the phone to the Head of the Demon.”

Mac holds her hand out for the phone once Ra’s al Ghul is on the other end of the line. “Hello,” she says, “my name is Mackenzie Howell, but I think you know me as Perunika. If you remember meeting me in 1960, then you remember what you did for Sara. I want you to do the same thing for her now.”

“Why should I?” Ra’s wants to know.

It’s more of a challenge than a question. Mac sighs and uses her powers to sense the power grid at Nanda Parbat, the electrical wiring and enchanted pipes interwoven with the metamorphic rock of the mountain. It’s a seamless amalgamation of magic and technology, the synchronicity of the system so beautiful in her mind’s eye. Mac takes a few seconds to marvel at what she’s seeing. Then she cuts the power.

Ra’s blinks when darkness falls. “I see,” he says mildly. Of course he’s being hyperbolic, because it’s black as pitch.
“Yeah,” Mac says, “and if I can send you back to the dark ages from thousands of miles away, imagine what I would do if you or your ilk ever set foot in my city.”

“Understood,” Ra’s tells her, “let me speak to al-Ta’ir al-Usfar.”

“Sara,” Mac retorts, “her name is Sara.”

Sara finds Lisa at Saints and Sinners hustling pool and pissing off a bunch of skeevy looking guys. “Hi,” she says, incapable of dimming the smile on her face.

Lisa doesn’t look up from her pool cue until she takes a shot, pocketing two balls at once and smirking at the innuendo she implicitly made. “Hey.”

Sara leans against the rail of the pool table and cups Lisa’s face. “I don’t know what’s going on between us,” she says, “but I don’t want to lose you. I—”

Lisa drops her cue, grabs Sara by the hair, and kisses her fiercely. Sara melts into it and for one perfect moment they’re the only two people in the world. Oh, the kiss doesn’t answer the questions Lisa won’t let herself ask—it’s not an acceptable substitute for the inevitable conversation they’re going to have, or a solution to the problem of Nyssa back at the Clocktower—but in that moment, it’s enough.

Mac eventually gets overwhelmed by all of the people in her house and retreats into her basement apartment to keep her anxiety from swallowing her whole. “Sunflowers” is still propped up against one arm of her couch, the sketch of her at the Louvre is folded carefully into thirds on the coffee table, and she scoops it up on the way into her bedroom. There, she undresses and crawls into bed wearing only her panties. Then she unplugs her phone from the charger by her bedside table and calls Len before she overthinks it.

_I promised him_, she tells herself. _I’m not a Snart anymore, but I still keep my promises._

“Hi,” she says out loud after he picks up.

“Hi there,” Len says in that low, intimate voice.

Mac blushes and exhales a soft whoosh of air, her whole body abruptly heated and shivery all at once. “I miss you,” she tells him softly, and means it. “I wished you were here last night.”

Len smirks, pleased that she isn’t trying to pretend that nothing happened between them. Whatever this is, it isn’t all in his head anymore; she feels it, too. “What happened?” he wants to know.

Mac hesitates. There’s no way she can tell him the truth, not without explaining metahumans and how she became a vigilante mastermind because her coping mechanisms suck. “It’s a long story,” she says. Then, she starts talking.


[197] Huang Sī Chóu is the father of the Twelve Brothers in Silk and White Canary, and he first appeared in _Birds of Prey_
Vol. 2, No. 4 (“Endrun, Part 4 of 4: Impact Fracture”) October, 2010. Huang (黃) is the surname he has in the comics. Sī Chóu (丝绸) means “silk,” because I’m lazy.

[198] I translated the title of Heir to the Demon into Arabic and I got Warīṯ al Ghul (Warīṯ Ghul), so that’s what Nyssa goes by officially as a member of the League.

[199] I love Nyssa, but I was rewatching S2 of Arrow because I couldn’t remember most of the plot points, and hated her introduction. They introduced the first canonical lesbian in the Arrowverse as violent, manipulative, and incapable of understanding why her beloved wants to stop killing…until Sara tries to kill herself. Nyssa is later victimized by her father and forced to marry a cishet white man, and despite beginning her training before Malcolm (we see in flashbacks that she could defeat grown men when he arrived at Nanda Parbat, and she was an eight-year-old at the time) and defeating him once, she needs Oliver (who started his training after both Nyssa and Malcolm) to fight her battles as her husband. I was so mad that she didn’t get to kill Ra’s. I’m still mad that she continued to refer to Oliver as “husband” and Thea as “sister-in-law” through her last appearance in S4. Nyssa deserves better and she’s not going to get it from the shitshow that is Arrow. Ugh.

[200] This is a proverb that’s written thusly in Arabic (أحزروا من لا يرجى خيره ولا يؤمن شره). Ra’s al Ghul has been around for thousands of years in the comics, so it’s possible that it’s about him on Earth-1, lbr.
New Phases in the History of Life (1) The Family Is Living on Borrowed Time

Indeed there will be time
for the yellow smoke that slides along the street,
rubbing its back upon the window-panes;
there will be time, there will be time
to prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet;
there will be time to murder and create,
and time for all the works and days of hands
that lift and drop a question on your plate;
time for you and time for me,
and time yet for a hundred indecisions,
and for a hundred visions and revisions,
before the taking of a toast and tea.

T. S. Eliot, *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*

Shock Value

Part 2

Myth Can Make Reality More Intelligible

Book I

With a Stroke of Lightning

Chapter 16

New Phases in the History of Life

(1 of 3)

“We didn’t choose to be what we are. And it could be argued that this life chose us. We live it. With all its changes and challenges. Obstacles. Disappointments. Failures. Its successes. Its joys. I have no idea where I’m going to be tomorrow, but I accept the fact that tomorrow will come. And I’m going to rise to meet it.”

Donna Troy

*Titans & Young Justice: Graduation Day* Vol.1, No.2 (“Part Two: Commencement”)  
July, 2003

I

The Family Is Living on Borrowed Time

*Arrow* had four canonically disabled characters that I can remember:

#1: Amanda Chen,[201] a paraplegic girl whose rape was a plot device to explain why her father Frank Chen got involved in the Undertaking, was the first. Moira Queen framed Frank for her attempt to assassinate Malcolm Merlyn, who wanted to kill her to send a message after he murdered her father. Amanda was mentioned in three episodes[202] of season one,[203] but she was never seen onscreen.
#2: McKenna Hall, whom the Huntress crippled in episode seventeen of season one and was never seen again in the aftermath. McKenna lives in Central City now, but that doesn’t change how badly the show treated her.

#3: William Tockman, the version of the Clock King who appeared in episode fourteen of season two of Arrow and episode seven of season one of The Flash. Oliver sent him to jail and they wouldn’t let him out to visit his dying sister, so after they transferred him to Central City, he attacked the C. C. P. D. and escaped. Tockman has MacGregor’s Syndrome, a terminal disease that doesn’t exist on Earth-33. Only people with dormant metagenes are susceptible to MacGregor’s. I know, because that’s what killed my biological father in the timelines where Eobard didn’t get to him first.

#4: Beverly Tockman, who didn’t have a name on the show, but I know her name because I read the comics when I was on Earth-33. Oliver knew she needed a lung transplant, and he was still a billionaire in season two, but instead of helping her, he went after her brother and put him in jail because cool motive, still murder. Which is valid, but he could’ve foiled Tockman and then saved his sister. Oliver chose to let her die instead.

When heroes fight, they’re so focused on the problem in front of them that they can’t always see the bigger picture.

I’m not a hero.

I am something else.

From the Watchtower Archives
Recorded 26 February 2014

Nyssa was born and raised in the depths of a mountain, buried in the earth like a seed until she finally saw the light. Sara is that light, so warm and so bright that she turned against the only family she had ever known. It was her choice to attack her father, her choice to run to Sara instead of accepting the punishment for her treason, her choice to renounce her title. Nyssa has no regrets, but she’s always known what her future held. Until now. Ra’s, the father who taught her everything she knows and made her what she is, wants her dead; and Sara, the love she gave up everything for, is with someone else. It isn’t working out the way she had expected, and she has no idea where she goes from here. Nyssa has never been stuck before. It’s a new feeling—one she’s not at all fond of.

After she notices that Mac cleans excessively when she can’t sleep, Nyssa tries to clean the carpets. Mac comes home from work to find her on the floor swearing at a bleach stain in Arabic. Of course Nyssa has never cleaned anything in her life, so she didn’t know bleach would ruin the triexta. Until she assassinated the carpet in the front hallway.

Lisa, meanwhile, has all but moved into Sara’s room to nonverbally stake her claim. Subtle, the Snarts aren’t. It’s getting so crowded and tense in the Clocktower that Mac is actually looking forward to spending a few days in Starling City with Team Arrow.

After she packs her bags, she hobbles into the kitchen for snacks. Laurel went to work hours ago, but everyone else is still upstairs. The Little Mermaid is playing in the den, Ariel singing “Part of Your World” as Sin watches in rapt attention. Lisa isn’t particularly good with kids, but when Sin told her that she’d never seen a Disney movie before, she couldn’t plan a marathon fast enough. Nyssa is scowling at Lisa while she braids Sin’s hair; Lisa is glaring right back at her over the top of Sara’s head. Sara keeps glancing at Nyssa when she thinks no one is looking, while she slowly
caresses the corrugation of Lisa’s knuckles with her thumb. Sin is aware of the tension seething between the adults in the room, but she’s smart enough to ignore it and watch a mermaid sing about wanting to marry a prince and read books that aren’t underwater—not necessarily in that order.

*Yikes,* Mac thinks. *Jean-Paul Sartre was right: hell is other people.* Out loud, she says: “Okay, enough is enough.”

Lisa smiles at her. “There can never be enough Disney,” she deadpans, thinking Mac is talking about the nonstop movies and not the love triangle being obtuse on her couch.

“No,” Mac sighs, “I’ve had enough of the deathglares and sidelong glances and goo-goo-eyes you guys are throwing at each other. You need to stop fighting over Sara. You’ve got her,” she puts a poppy seed muffin in a plastic Ziploc bag and drops it into her purse before she adds, “she’s yours. What you should be doing is learning how to share.”

Nyssa folds her arms and cocks her head, not unlike a bird of prey. “What do you suggest, that Sara date us both?” she asks.

“Yes,” Mac tells her, “exactly.”

Unfortunately she doesn’t have a mic to drop, so instead she hobbles to the door and lets it slam behind her on the way out.

There are five thousand, six hundred and twenty-seven registered hospitals in the US. Only seventy-six of them are certified to perform lung transplants. Of those seventy-six, two are in Starling. Approximately fifteen hundred lung transplants are performed annually, and three thousand people are currently on the waiting list. There are never enough donor organs for everyone who needs them. It’s sad, but true.

Beverly Tockman is a good candidate for a transplant, but this would be her third one. Beverly is forty-six years old: she had her first lung transplant at twenty-one, and a second at thirty-three. It’s nothing short of a medical miracle that she lived thirteen more years before her lungs started to fail again. Beverly’s insurance won’t cover a third lung transplant. UNOS found a match for her, but she can’t afford the surgery, and the lungs won’t be viable for long after they’re removed from the donor. Unless she can make eight hundred thousand dollars appear out of thin air in the next twelve hours, she won’t live long enough to buy herself any more time.

Which is where her brother comes in. William Tockman, otherwise known as the Clock King, has always been excellent under pressure. It’s something about the time crunch, the deadline. Only now it’s a more literal deadline than any he’s ever met before.

If his plan fails, then his sister dies.

Mac hobbles into the lobby of the Kord Industries building wearing her usual outfit (an oversized sweater, a knee-length dress belted at the waist, thigh-highs, and orthopedic shoes) and a cloche hat with a brim that covers all of her conspicuously blue hair and most of the right side of her face. It’s a bit over-the-top, but while people are looking at her, nobody has recognized her. Yet.

“In six seconds,” she hears Tockman saying over the scrambled radio frequency he’s using to talk to his henchmen, “lobby security will undergo a shift change. When that happens, make for the elevator bay.”
Mac bypasses the elevator bay and goes through a door labeled EAST, cutting her connection to the security feed in the elevator while the henchmen change out of their cheap suits and into janitorial uniforms.

“Now,” Tockman says, “remember what I told you: timing is everything.”

Mac snorts. Oh, she thinks, you have no idea.

“Maintain a pace of 1.3 meters per second,” he continues, “six seconds to target. Five. Four. Three. Two…”

Mac uses her powers to watch them attack the men guarding the skeleton key and waits for Tockman to crack the fingerprint sensor.

“Now,” Tockman says, “you have 5.3 seconds to get down the east stairwell—” then he sees two security guards are coming their way and hisses, “—stop!”

Mac stays in the hallway where the henchmen can’t see her.

“Forget this,” one of the henchmen mutters and ducks into the hallway, the other henchman reluctantly bringing up the rear.

Mac covers her mouth to muffle a yelp and flails into an empty room before they run past her down the hallway. When one of the security guards tries to stop them from getting away, one of the henchmen tries to shoot him.

“Don’t do it,” Tockman snarls over the radio.

Mac sighs and steps out, using her powers to stop the bullet from leaving the chamber when the henchman pulls the trigger. It backfires, the bullet going off inside the chamber and exploding with enough force to make him drop his weapon.

“Hi,” she says after the henchmen turn to look at her in shock, “someone called the S. C. P. D., and now you have twenty-two seconds to get out of this building. What are you waiting for?” she makes a shooing motion at them with the hand she isn’t using to hold onto her cane. “Run.”

Tockman is good at what he does, but Mac is what she does—being a technopath puts her lightyears ahead of every hacker on the planet. After all, she doesn’t have to crack any codes: she slips through the cracks, decodes and recodes almost without thinking. It’s in her nature.

It takes her a few seconds to find out where he’s running mission control from and seven minutes to drive over there in her rental car without breaking any traffic laws.

“Sorry,” the henchman who almost murdered someone for no reason grumbles as she hobbles into the abandoned arcade Tockman is using as his lair, “I wasn’t gonna bet five to twenty years in Iron Heights on your skills with a stopwatch.”

“’The strongest of all warriors are these two—Time and Patience,’” Tockman quotes. Then his throat constricts and he coughs into his fist.

“What?” the henchman asks.

“It’s from War and Peace,” Tockman informs him, “fourteen hundred and forty pages—it takes a while, but it’s worth the read. Tolstoy knew that patience was the epitome of strength. It takes
fortitude to stand still. Just as it is a sign of weakness or cowardice to move when you should not!"

“Look,” the henchman steps forward and puts a threatening hand on the grip of his holstered gun, “we did the job. You owe me.”

Tockman spins a cog like a top before he slowly reaches for a long metal hand, one that would do for stabbing an insubordinate henchman in a pinch.

Mac taps her cane on the floor, making a dissonantly hollow sound to get their attention. “‘Everything comes in time to him who knows how to wait,’” she quotes, “and by your own logic, you’re the one who owes me.”

When he looks her up and down and leers, she rolls her eyes. Tockman gives her another look entirely, an assessment rather than an appraisal. “You’ve read *War and Peace*?” he asks.

Mac nods. “ Twice,” she tells him. “Once when I was ten, and again when I was twenty-three. ‘All we can know is that we know nothing. And that’s the height of human wisdom.’ Now,” she hobbles to sit on a chair that creaks in protest when she crosses her ankles, “are we done being pretentious? Or do I need to quote more depressing Russian novels at you before you’ll listen to what I have to say?”

“Young lady,” Tockman actually tuts at her, “I don’t know who you think you are—”

“I’m Mackenzie Howell,” she tells him, “but you can call me Medusa.”

Namedropping her alias doesn’t have the desired effect: both henchmen flee while Tockman gnashes his teeth, and then he tries to stab her with the minute hand that belongs to the clock he’s tinkering with. Of course it ricochets off an electromagnetic field before it can hurt her. Tockman stumbles at the force of the blowback and knocks into the desk, the impact sending cogs and other clock parts clattering onto the floor.

“Beverly Tockman went in for surgery twenty minutes ago,” Mac tells him as he knocks more timepieces to the floor in his efforts to stay on his feet. Tockman stops clawing at the tabletop mid-cough and looks at her in shock. “I paid for your sister’s lung transplant,” she clarifies, “so you’re the one who owes me. Check your phone if you don’t believe it.”

Tockman hasn’t checked his phone all day because he was busy planning a last minute heist. When he does, he finds a voicemail and a string of text messages from Beverly confirming Mac’s story.

“Anything,” he rasps, his voice scraped raw and full of hope.

Mac holds out her hand for the skeleton key. Tockman gives the device to her without hesitation. It could open any bank vault, but no amount of money is worth more than what she’s given him: more time with his sister.

“I’ll be expecting you in Central City in a few weeks,” she tells him before she hobbles out of the arcade and makes a mental note to send him details on where she’ll be expecting him later. *I should probably figure out what to call my organization if I keep bringing people in,* she thinks. *Team? Syndicate? Cabal? Consortium? Gang?* After she gets back into her rental car, she looks at herself in the rearview mirror and snickers. *Definitely not a League.*

[201] *Arrow* 1x15 (“Dodger”) 20 February 2013.


[207] MacGregor’s Syndrome first appeared in *Batman: The Animated Series* 1x17 (“Heart of Ice”) 7 September 1992, but it didn’t have a name until *Batman & Robin* (1997), a film produced by Peter MacGregor-Scott. There are four people in the DC universe who canonically have MacGregor’s: Alfred Pennyworth in that movieverse, William Tockman and Francine West in the Arrowverse, and Nora Fries in every continuity. Obviously the idea that only metahumans are susceptible to MacGregor’s is just my headcanon, but it’s not a stretch, imo.


**New Phases in the History of Life (2) It’s Vital to Live in Harmony with Nature**

*Your pocket, half-open and flapping like a gill, held a manual for time travel in two opposite directions without unhooking the couplers. Ink dissolves in water, starfish swim themselves apart to grasp a greater bamboozlement, we careen gently toward the present tense until it’s ominous when you don’t say “I love you.”*

Annelyse Gelman, “The Electrician”

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**Shock Value**

**Part 2**

*Myth Can Make Reality More Intelligible*

**Book I**

*With a Stroke of Lightning*

**Chapter 17**

New Phases in the History of Life

(2 of 3)

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**II**

It’s Vital to Live in Harmony with Nature

In the twenty-second century, genetics are all the rage: genome mapping, gene therapies, gene splicing, basically any form of learning what might be hidden in your genetic code and paying through the nose to reach that potential. Rose couldn’t afford the gene therapy that would’ve cured her rheumatoid arthritis. Which won’t exist until 2101, so that point will be moot for about eighty-seven years. (RA isn’t a fatal or flashy disease, so it’s nowhere near the first illness they use the new gene therapies to cure—it takes over a decade after the process is invented for rheumatologists to even try.) Which is why Mac goes to the hospital once a month to get an infusion of immunosuppressants.

Mac has been in Central City for almost two months when, in the aftermath of her second infusion, she feels the earth move under her feet and the sky tumbling down. After she ducks underneath the checkout desk along with the clerk, she tries to sense whether it’s an earthquake or a tornado.

*Okay, Mac thinks as she forces herself to breathe, the energy released from thunderstorms creates tornadoes. If a tornado was coming, I would’ve felt it without trying, so it’s probably a quake.*

Thousands of quakes have occurred in Missouri since 1795, thirty-five years before Central City was founded and fifty-seven years before the city was officially incorporated. Kansas City, Missouri isn’t part of the New Madrid seismic zone on Earth-33, but on Earth-1, it’s called the Central seismic zone—after Central City. There was an earthquake in 1812 that changed the typography of Central and Keystone, a quake so massive it split the earth open to reveal dolomite,
barite, gold, silver, iron, copper, and quartz. Which is how the Gem Cities got their name: from the mining that ensued.

What’s happening at the hospital isn’t like those quakes: these tremors are coming from above, not below. Mac uses her powers to access the hospital records and learns that Julie Jackham is upstairs getting an ultrasound. There’s no one else in the hospital who has the gene for geokinesis, as far as Mac knows.

_Welp, she thinks, I didn’t see that coming._

When she darts out from under the table and hobbles over to the elevator as fast as she can, the clerk squawks after her but makes no move to shatter the illusion of safety beneath the desk. According to the map of the hospital in her mind’s eye, obstetrics is two floors up. When she gets where she’s going, Julie is hyperventilating with her feet in the stirrups, hunched over and wheezing with her fists tangled in her dark curls.

Mac sighs and generates an electromagnetic pulse to nullify her powers temporarily. “Hey,” she says. Julie doesn’t even look up, because her heart is pounding so loudly in her ears that she can’t hear anything else. Mac heaves another sigh. “Hey!” she shouts, using her powers to make her voice boom and crash like thunder as the quake subsides.

Julie startles and scrambles backward on the examination table before she recognizes her. “You’re Mac Howell,” she huffs. “I’ve seen you on the news.”

Mac nods. “I’m also the anonymous benefactor who’s paying the Mardon brothers’ medical bills,” she says, “they’re under observation in a private clinic that I own.”

Julie narrows her eyes. “Why would you do that for them?” she wants to know. Then she splays her fingers over her belly and shyly adds, “for us?”

_Well, Mac thinks as she folds herself into a chair with its back against the wall and crosses her ankles over the stem of her cane, eight months from now, Joe West is going to shoot Clyde Mardon twice in the chest. Which sets a precedent for people to see metahumans as monsters, and it spirals down after that. Until we’re still fighting for the inalienable rights we deserve a hundred and seventy years from now, because people call us “metas” and conveniently forget that we’re human, too. “Well,” she says out loud, “because they’re metahumans. Otherwise known as people with powers. I know this because I’m a metahuman, and so…” she pauses more to bury a yawn in the hollow of her palm than for dramatic effect, “…are you._

“Wait,” Julie splutters, “what?”

_One Month Later_

Mac emerges from the elevator to find Cisco waiting on one of the sofas outside of her office, jiggling his legs and tapping his feet as his fingers slip and slide over the screen of his tablet. Like he’s trying not to shake out of his skin.

“Hey,” Mac says, unlocking the door to her office and putting her purse on her desk before she hobbles back out into the cortex. “What’d I miss?”

“Okay,” Cisco flails as he rises to his feet and practically shoves his tablet at her in his excitement, “remember when I told me to scan the city for thermonuclear anomalies?”
Mac nods, a slow descent of her chin. “I’m guessing you needed a few weeks to collect data and compare your results?” she asks.

Cisco nods in return, so fast he almost discombobulates himself. “I found one. I think it might be another metahuman,” he shows her a map of the city festooned with orange lines, “he keeps moving, but sometimes he stays in one place for hours. I think he stops moving because he’s a person, and he needs to sleep. Lately he’s been staying close to the wildlife preserve near Granite Peak National Park. There have been five reports of people who went camping in the woods and never came out filed with the C. C. P. D. in the past three months, and reports of dead white-tailed deer are being made to the Department of Agriculture, but they haven’t sent anyone from the M. S. P. C. A. out to investigate because they think it’s our problem.”

“Why do they think that?” Mac wants to know.

“Um,” Cisco taps the screen of his tablet to bring up a slew of necropsies, “because the deer apparently died of radiation poisoning. There are other reports of feral hogs, bobcats, and mountain lions, all killed by exposure to high levels of radiation. I think someone with a dormant metagene went radioactive after the particle accelerator exploded, and he went out into the woods so he wouldn’t hurt anyone, but he probably can’t control his powers, so he’s been reducing the wildlife population and making white-tailed deer more endangered than they already are.”

“Okay,” Mac cocks her head, “do you have any idea who this metahuman might be?”

Cisco nods again. “Iris was telling Barry and me about the Burning Man,” he explains. Mac gives him a quizzical look, a nonverbal request for further explanation. Cisco shrugs. “I like to sit with her while she talks to him, sometimes. Anyway, the Burning Man is this guy on fire—”

“I read Iris’s blog, too, Cisco,” Mac points out gently, “the Burning Man was first seen three weeks after the particle accelerator explosion and is supposedly responsible for giving over a dozen people radiation poisoning. None of them have died, but he’s also responsible for the explosion at Concordance Research that put a man in the hospital—a man who is still in critical condition.”

“I know,” Cisco says, “but Quentin Quale is a nuclear physicist. What if the Burning Man wasn’t trying to kill him? What if he was trying to ask him for help and he lost control of his powers?”

“Cisco,” Mac says, trying not to let on that she knows the answer to the question she’s about to ask, “who do you think the Burning Man is?”

“Dr. Martin Stein,” Caitlin answers from a desk on the other side of the room, “a physics professor at Hudson University. I took his class on thermodynamics during my undergrad. Dr. Stein has been missing since the night of the particle accelerator explosion, after he went to ask Dr. McGee at Mercury Labs to fund a project called—”


Caitlin nods, sharply. “Dr. Carew, a professor in the engineering department, petitioned that the university shut down the project after Dr. Stein went from stage one—transmuting grains of sand—to stage three. According to his research assistant, their experiment melted the concrete wall between Dr. Stein’s lab and Dr. Carew’s audiovisual workshop and the next day, the army confiscated their research.”

Mac sighs. “I’ve read the paper they published on the theoretical applications of the F. I. R. E. S.
“T. O. R. M. matrix,” she murmurs, “all eight hundred pages. It scares me that the army has something with that kind of power.”

“Me too,” Caitlin tells her softly, but vehemently.

“Me three,” Cisco concurs.

Mac sighs and hobbles into her office, shrugging her sweater onto the back of her chair before she yanks a S. T. A. R. Labs sweatshirt and a pair of sweatpants out from under her desk.

“What are you doing?” Caitlin wants to know.

“I’m going out into the woods,” Mac calls through the crack in the doorway as she undoes her garter belt and rolls her stockings down her thighs, “where I may have a close encounter with a radioactive metahuman. I’m probably going to have to burn the clothes I wear for decontamination purposes, and I like this outfit.”

Caitlin purses her lips thoughtfully and nods to herself before she goes to find a pair of sweatpants and a sweatshirt to wear. There’s a pair of old Converse high-tops in her locker that belonged to Ronnie, the once bright red material faded to a softer hue; the shoelaces frayed from white to gray, the rubber soles lovingly scuffed. Caitlin laces them all the way up and methodically ties a double knot before she wiggles her toes in the emptiness their previous owner left behind.

“So,” Cisco says, eyeing a corkwood tree suspiciously, “do you think there could be meta-animals?”

Mac shrugs, one shoulder hunching toward her earlobe as she hobbles over the protruding root of a towering shellbark hickory. “I think only hominids were affected by the dark matter wave,” she tells him as she looks up through its branches, “but that’s just my theory.”

“I only ask,” Cisco says, “because people started going missing before the Burning Man showed up. What if there’s something else out here?”

Mac narrows her eyes at a wad of odd, stringy stuff attached to the trunk of another tree. “What,” she quips, “like Rodents of Unusual Size?”[217]

“No,” Caitlin says, her voice pitching higher on the oh sound, “like giant spiders.”[218]

There’s a horrendous shriek as the bastard offspring of Shelob[219] and Aragog[220] jumps out of a tree and tries to land on top of them. Mac yelps and generates a dense electromagnetic field that shocks the spider. It screams and gnashes its pincers like teeth. Cisco creeps backwards and drags Caitlin with him, the field shrinking as they get closer to Mac, who is huffing and puffing with the effort it took to create a field of that magnitude. Caitlin clings to Mac’s sweatshirt with one hand. Cisco is trying to wrap himself around her other arm, holding onto her like his life depends on it. Three more giant spiders crawl out of the foliage around them, summoned by the shriek of the first. When all four of them crawl over the field, it wavers and their chelicerae rub together to create eerie sounds. Almost like they’re talking to each other.

Mac grits her teeth as her knuckles go white around the handle of her cane. “I can’t hold it,” she tells them, “shields aren’t my specialty. I could conduct a high voltage electric current into the field, but it might hit us too. I’d be fine—I’m superconductive—but you’re not.”

“So,” Cisco ekes the oh sound out, gulping as the spiders look at him with their many dark eyes,
“either way, we die. Awesome.”

“There has to be another way,” Caitlin insists. “There must be metal in the ground you could use as a weapon—”

“I can’t do everything at once,” Mac tells her through clenched teeth. “I can attract the iron strips from old railroad tracks that I can feel in the earth and kill the spiders with those, or I can protect you. I can electrocute the spiders, or I can keep shielding us. I don’t have the energy for both.”

“Okay,” Cisco says. “Here’s the plan: you drop the deflector shield,[221] you electrocute the spiders, we all live happily ever after.”

“Except the spiders,” Caitlin points out.

“I don’t care about the spiders!” Cisco says, his attempt at shouting muted into something like a whisper by his fear. “I know I’ve always said I wanted to go to Middle-Earth, but I didn’t mean I wanted to get dragged back to Shelob’s lair without Sting or the Light of Eärendil!”[222]

_There’s another way I could get more power_, Mac thinks as the shield thins enough for pedipalps to get through. _I could take the light out of them and make my own Silmaril out of their bioelectricity._

It’s an ugly thought, one that comes from the darkest timeline—where Rose was taken to Belle Reve, where she grew up with the twenty-second century Suicide Squad, where she activated the device lodged in her spine and killed herself.

Mac shakes it off and tries to swallow as nausea coils in her stomach like barbed wire. _That’s not me, she thinks, it never was and it never will be._ “Okay,” she says out loud, “I’m going to drop the shield in three…two…”

Then, before she gets a chance to count down to one, Firestorm lands with a burst of flame and blasts the spiders. Mac drops the shield as they scatter into the trees, screaming in agony.

“Ronnie?” Caitlin gasps and starts to run to him.

“No,” Stein raises Ronnie’s hand to hold her off and yells at her in Ronnie’s voice, “stay away from me!”

Of course he’s still confused and disoriented by having the voice of another person in his head, so instead of flying away, he tries to shuffle off into the woods.

Cisco is struggling to hold Caitlin back. “Cait, that’s not Ronnie,” he tells her. “I don’t know how it happened, but that’s Dr. Stein.”

Mac hobbles after him as she reaches out with her mind to find a tornado somewhere and siphoning the power from it until she glows like starlight, like silima. “Dr. Stein,” she says.

Stein halts and turns sluggishly to look at her, moving disjointedly, unaccustomed to such a young body. “You know my name,” he says.


Stein flinches and shakes his head. “No,” he says, tangling his fingers in his hair as the shaking overpowers him. “No, I don’t…” his eyes white out as his face and hands go up in flames and he glares at her before he shouts, “I don’t believe you!”
Mac flails backward and trips over a thick root as she watches him fly away. “Ow,” she whines as she uses her cane to get back on her feet. When she looks around, Caitlin and Cisco are both gobsmacked.

“Um,” Cisco arches his eyebrows as high as they can go and points at her incredulously, “did you just say you’re from the future?”

[212] Carole King, “I Feel the Earth Move” from the albumTapestry (1971).


[214] Concordance Research first appeared in The Brave and the Bold Vol. 1, No. 172 (“Darkness and Dark Fire”) March, 1981 and in The Flash 1x13 (“The Nuclear Man”) 10 February 2015. One thing I disliked about The Flash S1 was their persistent contrivance that other metahumans’ story arcs didn’t start moving forward until Barry had become the Flash. Firestorm causing the explosion that put a man in critical condition is canon, but what I want to know is this: if Stein became lucid in January 2014, why did he wait until February 2015 to ask Quentin Quale for help? Obviously the answer is contrivance, but since I’m trying for pseudo-realism here, I moved his timetable up.


[218] The Flash: Season Zero Vol. 1, No. 23 (“Mentors & Meltdowns, Part 1 of 2”) July, 2015. There were giant spiders living in the sewers of Central City in this issue. Which totally jossed my headcanon that hominidae were the only species affected by the dark matter wave. (Unless the giant spiders were human. Which is what I alluded to, here.)


I move through space and startle myself with it. I am still afraid and trying desperately not to be, still too fast for my own skin. Each year feels faded beneath my eyes—now time-starched, and forlorn.

Mallory Pearson, “How to Time Travel”

Shock Value
Part 2
Myth Can Make Reality More Intelligible
Book I
With a Stroke of Lightning
Chapter 18
New Phases in the History of Life
(3 of 3)

III
Separatism Is the Way to a New Beginning

After they make it back to the van, Caitlin speeds away from the woods like a bat out of hell. Cisco scampers around the backseat looking for something while Mac slumps in the passenger seat and tries not to vomit all over the dashboard.

Cisco frowns when his Geiger counter doesn’t pick up abnormal levels of radiation from any of them. “Weird,” he mutters more to himself than Caitlin or Mac.

“Weirder than Mac claiming she’s from the future?” Caitlin says pointedly.

Mac sighs. “I am from the future,” she retorts petulantly. “I don’t care if you believe me.”

“So,” Cisco says, “theoretically you must be able to fulgurkinetically accumulate a massive amount of energy, enough to create a tear in the spacetime continuum and travel through a wormhole.”

Mac chortles with her temple pressed up against the window, hoarse laughter shaking from her shoulders down to her belly. Eobard still hasn’t deduced that she can travel through time—if he’d thought of that, he would’ve changed his plans for Barry and tried to force her to return with him to the future by now—but it took Cisco all of five seconds to figure it out. How ironic. “I changed the past,” she tells them softly once her chortles subside, “and retconned the future that I remember. I woke up in an alternate timeline with memories of other timelines inside my head. Don’t worry,” she says and heaves a sigh and it condensates on the windowpane, “this isn’t like *Terminator*[^223] or *12 Monkeys*[^224] or that two-part episode in season four of *Enterprise*[^225] or even *Sidewise in Time*.[^226] There’s no apocalyptic event I’m trying to avert or alteration to the timeline I’m trying to reverse. I did that before I came back here. What I’m doing now is more *The Shape of Things to Come*, only I’m trying to effect small changes in certain events I have foreknowledge about to
create a brighter future for metahumankind.”[227]

“You knew,” Caitlin whispers, clenching her teeth accusatorially around the words. “You knew Ronnie survived the explosion.”

Mac shakes her head slowly and covers her mouth to keep herself from throwing up before she responds to that. “I didn’t know for sure,” she says. “Barry Allen didn’t have a sister, before. Armie Ramon was a cis dude, not a trans girl. Clyde Mardon was a doctor, not a bank robber. Tess Morgan was alive, Harrison Wells was happily married, and their particle accelerator didn’t explode until 2020.”

Aliens were also supposed to conquer the earth and make humanity extinct in 2175,[228] she thinks, but on the morning before I opened the wormhole that brought me here, I woke up back in 2183 and that invasion never happened. Anything is possible.

“I don’t have the technology to see every divergence from the previous timeline as they occur in this one,” she clarifies. “When the timeline is altered, it resonates to affect the past as well as the future. I may have foreknowledge, but it’s not accurate. At this point I’m flying by the seat of a pair of quasi-precognitive pants. I don’t even know whether I’m dealing with one timeline that’s been altered on multiple divergent points or a multiverse of infinite variations that exist as equal and opposite reactions to the timeline in which we’re having this conversation.”

“So why now?” Cisco wonders, still reeling from all of the information she just gave them, possibilities spinning through his mind.

“You could have gone anywhere,” Caitlin says as she pulls into the handicapped parking space in front of S. T. A. R. Labs. “Or any when. What made you decide to come here, to this point in time?”

Mac thinks Len, and she’s abruptly mortified that he is the only reason that comes to mind. “I’m what’s called a time remnant,” she answers. “I shouldn’t exist, but paradoxically, I’m still here…and I don’t have anywhere else to go.”

One Week Later

Mac told Caroline that she’s a metahuman about a month ago, but nothing has happened. Oh, a new vigilante has been sending evidence that’s put half a dozen mobsters in jail so far to the precinct in envelopes with Medusa’s head stamped on the front, a creepy serial killer came after an assistant district attorney, and Iris still hasn’t told Joe that she’s dating Eddie—even though they’ve had twelve dates so far this month and it’s not a casual thing for either of them—but no superhuman abilities have asserted themselves.

“I hate waiting,” Caroline tells her twin. Barry can’t talk back, but he can probably hear what she’s saying to him. Caroline has never been without Barry: even when they went away to college in different cities, they still talked every day. It helps to know he might be listening.

“Hey,” Cisco says, the vibrancy of his voice ruining her melancholia. “Sorry,” he says and grins sheepishly at her after she whirls to look at him, startled. “I just wanted to wish you happy birthday.”

Caroline exhales a weary sound caught somewhere between a laugh and a sigh. “I used to hate our birthday,” she confesses. “Joe planned these great parties for us every year until we left for college,
but when I thought about the parties that mom and dad used to have, it felt like my whole childhood was a lie. Now?” she glances sidelong at Barry. “Now I don’t know how I feel. Barry might’ve been right all along, and that scares me. I spent the last fourteen years believing one thing, only to learn that I might’ve been wrong all this time.” When she looks at him, Cisco is watching her with a horribly soft look in his eyes. It makes her want to look away. No one is supposed to look at her like that. Not anymore. “I used to think, What kind of husband and father could do that to his wife and kids?” she tells him. “Now I think, What kind of daughter refuses to believe that her father didn’t murder her mother?”

Cisco sits in the chair beside her and scoots until his knee bumps hers. “Hey,” he says, leaning closer to her with his elbows perched on the tops of his thighs. “You were eleven years old. It’s not like you could’ve known that metahumans were a thing. You thought you had all of the facts. It wasn’t your job to ask questions. You can’t blame yourself for not assuming the impossible.”

“You didn’t see what Barry saw,” Cisco reminds her. “You had no reason to believe he was telling the truth.”

“I know,” Caroline retorts, “but I should’ve believed him anyway. Barry isn’t just my brother. We’re twins. It’s always been us against the world. I should’ve trusted what he saw over what anyone else said.”

“You met Armie, right?” Cisco asks.

Caroline nods. “You were there,” she reminds him. “You introduced us.”

Cisco nods. “Yeah,” he says, “but I just told you she was my sister. I didn’t tell you she’s my twin, or that our parents have been playing favorites with our brother Dante for, like, ever. It’s us against the world, just like you and Barry,” he interlaces his fingers in the negative space between his legs, “except I grew up thinking Armie was my brother, and the first time she told me she was a girl, I didn’t believe her. I should have, because I’m intersex and I identify as intergender and honestly there was no reason Armie couldn’t be trans, but I didn’t. So trust me, I get it.”

Fact: Cisco is less than a foot away from her. Caroline is made abruptly, startlingly aware of that fact when he tucks his hair behind one ear. It would be easy to lean in and kiss him. Caroline vividly imagines putting one hand on his knee, cupping his face in the other, kissing the corner of his mouth and nibbling on his bottom lip. Oh, she wouldn’t kiss him full on the lips until she’s kissed the column of his neck, the pulse in his throat, the jut of his collarbone, the soft angle of his jaw.

Fact: Cisco has seen the worst part of her—and he understands it, because they’re the same.

Fact: Cisco has something crucial in common with her, but he’s a good person and he deserves better than to get hit (or hit on, technically) by a Category 5 human disaster like Hurricane Caroline.

I wanna do bad things to him, Caroline thinks. What is wrong with me?

Then her phone buzzes. Caroline exhales a sigh of relief as she extracts her phone from the pocket of her jeans, uncomfortably aware of Cisco as he leans back in his seat and taps his fingers against the denim covering his thighs. Which are spread wide, because guys are never told to keep their legs closed. Caroline huffs and swipes her thumb across the screen.
From: an actual rainbow

Dad just told me you’re celebrating your birthday at S. T. A. R. Labs tonight.

Iris usually texts with correct grammar, but when she’s concise, it means her feelings are hurt. Maybe because Caroline hasn’t seen her in weeks, between the closing shifts at Jitters and her dissertation and her secret boyfriend.

To: an actual rainbow

yeah
do you have a problem with that

Iris has her shit together, and Caroline is a mess; Iris is falling in love, and Caroline is falling apart.

From: an actual rainbow

No, except I thought you hated your birthday.
Why didn’t you tell me that you wanted to have a party this year?
We’re like sisters. Barry is like my brother.
I shouldn’t have found out about it from my Dad.

Avoiding her seemed like the best option for Caroline, but: Iris deserves better.

To: an actual rainbow

you’re right. i should’ve told you.
i haven’t seen you lately and i let it slip through the cracks. i’m sorry.
but Iris: Barry has NEVER thought of you as his sister.

Iris doesn’t text Caroline back because she doesn’t know how to respond to that, but she’s still thinking about it when she arrives at S. T. A. R. Labs that night. There’s a party hat tilted slantwise on Barry’s head, and that makes her smile because she knows Caroline did it. Caitlin hands her a piece of birthday cake on a galaxy print paper plate, Cisco asks her what she thought of the *Veronica Mars* movie,[229] and when Caroline takes a picture to capture the moment, she uses the flash.

Mac is ascending from the records room on Level 100 to the cortex on Level 600 when Eobard gets in the elevator with her. Then he presses the button to stop between Level 200 and Level 300. Mac jolts and forces herself not to back into the corner to get as far away from him as possible.

Eobard flexes the fingers of his left hand like he wants to reach for her before he intertwines his fingers and folds his hands in his lap. “You disabled my bugs,” he says lightly, but she knows him well enough to hear the underlying threat in his voice.

“You had cameras in their bedrooms,” Mac retorts. “You don’t need to film everyone to stay two steps ahead of everything. You’re just a creep.”

Eobard takes his glasses off before he turns to look at her. “You didn’t used to think so,” he says. There’s no threat in his voice now. It’s all innuendo, with an edge of confidence because he thinks he knows her—what she likes, what she thinks, what she needs.

Mac snorts and uses her powers to make the elevator move. Eobard looks up and watches the
numbers change as she rises. “I didn’t know you,” she tells him. “I didn’t know you were a murderer.”

“You’re the only one here who really knows me,” Eobard says. “I’ve spent the past fourteen years trying to find my way back to you. You’re my home.”

When he learned that his connection to the speed force was unstable, Eobard blamed the Flash and set out to ruin his life. When he didn’t get the job at the Flash Museum, he blamed his brother and traveled back in time to keep him from being born. When she rejected him, he blamed her for failing to fulfill the fantasy he’d built up inside his head and ripped her heart out. Literally. Eobard might have convinced himself that everything he does is for her, for their future, but she knows better. This isn’t about her. It never was. This has always been about him and his chronic inability to accept the things he can’t change.

Mac exhales in sharp relief as the doors slide open. “You know what they say,” she tells him. “You can’t go home again.”

Caroline doesn’t get home until fuck off o’clock in the morning. After she kicks off her heels, hangs her handbag on the hook by the door, and drops her jacket on the floor by the couch, she shuffles into her bedroom and shrieks when someone wraps a hand around her throat.

“Don’t scream,” a familiar voice snarls into her ear.

Danny? Caroline thinks. What the hell?

Then she feels the sharp edge of a knife against the shell of her ear. Caroline doesn’t scream, but when she shuts her eyes, something impossible happens. White energy blooms around her into a forcefield that knocks Officer Doyle down and sends his knife rattling harmlessly onto the floor. Caroline gasps for air, her throat squeezed raw.

“About time,” she chokes out.

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[228] Legends of Tomorrow 1x15 (“Destiny”) 12 May 2016.

[229] Veronica Mars (2014) was released on 14 March 2014. According to the 1976 DC calendar, Barry’s birthday is March nineteenth, so it’s possible Iris and Cisco both saw it the weekend before the twins’ birthday. Also: Iris would totally be a fan of Veronica Mars. Fight me.
After the notorious mob boss Alfredo Bertinelli\(^\text{[230]}\) was sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of parole, his only son Guido left Gotham City to reinvent himself. Guido became Frank Bertinelli,\(^\text{[231]}\) married Starling City mob princess Maria Panessa,\(^\text{[232]}\) and they had a daughter. Helena Bertinelli became the Huntress a year and a half ago, and she was seen working with the Arrow in Starling before she fled the city and systematically began dismantling the mafia families in Gotham, where her grandfather once ruled the criminal underworld. After the Batman decided Gotham wasn’t big enough for both of them, the Huntress traveled to Italy. While no proof has been found to connect her to the crime, Sicilian capo di tutti capi Stefano Mandragora\(^\text{[233]}\) went missing the week she arrived and they found his body the day she returned to Starling.

*That was yesterday.*

*This is today—the day the Huntress died.*\(^\text{[234]}\)

From “What Is Thicker Than Blood?” by Iris West

First printed in the *Central City Citizen* on 27 March 2014
Kate Spencer—the district attorney in Starling—is smart enough not to touch the Bertinelli case. When it crosses her desk again, she delegates it to an assistant district attorney named Adam Donner, who concocts a plan to use Frank Bertinelli as bait to set a trap for the Huntress. It’s been in the works for months by the time he calls Laurel and asks her to prosecute the case for old times’ sake.

Laurel has been preparing for weeks. It’s like the case has invaded the Clocktower, with the size of the files on Frank and Helena she’s been studying all night every night. Sara had to take the files away after she finds out that Laurel hasn’t slept for three days. It took hours for Laurel go through the evidence to make sure that her sister didn’t misplace anything.

When the day of the trial arrives, something changes. Laurel is sharp and focused, but still nervous enough that she keeps stuffing her hand in her pocket to feel the numbers on her sobriety chips with her thumb. At this point, Laurel has three of them on her keyring: 30 Days Sober, 60 Days Sober, 90 Days Sober. It’s been ten months since the Undertaking, three and a half months since the particle accelerator exploded, and over two months since her powers emerged. Which is viscerally, mind-bogglingly surreal.

“So much has happened since I left Starling City,” she murmurs.

Sara cocks her head and nods sideways, head slowly bobbing towards her right shoulder. “Yeah.”

“So,” Laurel says, changing the subject to break the silence that ensues, “how exactly did you get your girlfriends to agree to stay out of this?”

Sara smiles without showing her teeth. “I suggested they go on a date without me,” she explains. “If we’re doing this whole poly thing, they need to try and find out what could happen between them when I’m not around. I mean,” she rolls her eyes and smiles wider, “besides glaring and eyefucking.”

“I don’t know if you should force it like that,” Laurel tells her, “you can’t make Nyssa and Lisa get along.”

Mac snorts. “Lisa doesn’t come to watch you sparring with Nyssa because she’s a mixed martial arts enthusiast,” she points out, “she comes for the unresolved sexual tension and stays for Sara in yoga pants.”

Sara shrugs, as if to say That’s true. Laurel chortles and leans back in her seat, loosening some of the knots of tension in the line of her shoulders. Mac is about to shove a handful of sunflower seeds in her mouth when she hears her name.

“Hey, Mac,” Iris says, grinning down at her. “I thought that was you.”

Mac smiles back and lets the seeds sprinkle into the bag. “Hi, Iris,” she says before she turns to the Lance sisters across from her, “this is Sara,” she flails one hand at them, “and Laurel.”

Iris gives Laurel a nod of recognition and a knowing smile. “Assistant District Attorney Dinah Laurel Lance,” she says. “Lola told me all about you.”

“What am I, chopped liver?” Sara asks.

Laurel exchanges a glance with Mac when they hear the thread of hurt creeping into the forced lightness of her voice. Growing up with an older sister like Laurel made her feel insecure sometimes. It felt like Laurel got everything she wanted, and that made Sara resent her until she
thought stealing her sister’s boyfriend was justified. Apparently not even surviving a shipwreck and becoming an assassin could make those feelings go away.

Iris shakes her head. “No,” she says. “It’s not that I don’t know who you are. It’s just that you aren’t my sister’s ex-girlfriend.”

“Oh,” Sara smirks and ekes the *ooh* sound out into vulgarity, “*that* Lola.”

Mac takes her bag out of the empty seat beside her. Iris takes the hint and sits, crossing one knee over the other. Mac offers her a bottle of water from her bag and yawns into the hollow of one palm while Iris hydrates. “Are you covering the Bertinelli case?” she asks.

Iris nods again. “I’m three months out from defending my dissertation,” she explains, “so I started applying for reporter jobs a week ago. There’s an opening at *Central City Picture News*, and my article on the Bertinelli case is going to be my audition piece.”

Laurel cocks her head and narrows her eyes, shrewdly. “You didn’t come over here to talk to Mac,” she says. “You want a quote for your article.”

Iris shrugs, and an artfully loose dark curl falls back over her shoulder. “Saying hello to a friend and getting a quote for my article aren’t mutually exclusive,” she points out. “I’ve always been a great multitasker.”

“Oh,” Laurel says, “here’s your quote: Frank Bertinelli is a criminal, a mobster, and a murderer. Helena Bertinelli is a vigilante. Unlike her father, she’s never killed an innocent person. I believe in the legal system, but I’m not naive. I know sometimes things slip through the cracks, that men like the ones the Huntress has killed are almost never punished for their crimes. Everyone is talking about what his daughter has done, but no one is talking about the man who made her what she is today. Frank Bertinelli is facing over fifty felony charges for crimes he committed before his daughter ever picked up a crossbow, and I’m going to prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that he should pay for all of them.”

Mac hobbles up the steps the courthouse with Iris and Sara and they sit on one of the seats, which is too long to be called a chair but nowhere near comfortable enough to be considered a couch. Laurel is meeting with Donner to go over her case before the trial begins. When she arrives, Oliver is looking up at the Department of Justice seal on the wall.

Laurel glances over her shoulder at Sara before she smiles at Oliver. “Please don’t tell me you’re worried about me, too,” she says.

Oliver shakes his head and smiles back. “No,” he tells her. “I just wanted to watch the trial. I heard the prosecutor was something special.”

Sara rolls her eyes as Frank Bertinelli is brought into the room by a pair of police officers, his hands in cuffs behind his back.

“That’s odd,” Laurel says, “why are they bringing him in through the front entrance?”

“Well,” Mac mutters as a smoke grenade rolls across the floor, “because, in the immortal words of Admiral Ackbar: ‘It’s a trap.’”

“Everybody get down!” Oliver yells before the grenade goes off and puffs of smoke snarl into the air. Two crossbow bolts slice through the screams, targeting the cops flanking Frank.
“Hi, Dad.” Helena steps out of the smoke and smirks. “Sorry I’m late. You’re a hard man to track down, but it’s fitting that you came back to Starling. Where it all began,” she glares at him from behind her mask and something in her voice sharpens. “Where you killed Michael.”

Mac closes her eyes and uses her powers to see. Neither of the cops are dead: the bolts went through their shoulders to hit bone, not lung. Helena is willing to hurt the people who stand between her and the revenge she’s starved for, but she’s never killed anyone unless they deserved it. What she wants is vengeance, not justice—but that doesn’t mean she’s not worth saving.

Oliver tries to tell her to stop. Of course it doesn’t work, so Frank taunts her until she opens his shirt to reveal the wire he’s wearing underneath.

“So this was all a big trap,” Helena says, “with you as the bait. What did they offer you?”

“Oh,” Frank tells her with a shit-eating grin, “they didn’t have to offer me anything.”

Well, Mac thinks, at least they didn’t offer immunity to a mob boss so they could stop a vigilante. I guess that’s something.

“What was it you always taught me, Daddy?” Helena smirks wider. “Be prepared for anything.”

Oliver grabs Laurel and shoves her through the closest door before he goes to get Frank out of the building. Sara practically flies out of her seat after her sister. Iris stays right where she is, crouched next to Mac. “You knew it was a trap,” she whispers. “You knew before we got here.”

Mac nods. “Don’t worry,” she murmurs, “I have a plan.”

“Now,” Helena orders, “take hostages and fall back!”

Sara finds Laurel in the hallway and yanks her into the ladies’ room before she offers her a duffle bag. Laurel unzips it and finds a suit inside. Sara tucks her hair under her wig and smiles at her sister. “Cisco made something for you,” she says, “he and his sister thought we might need more than one Canary someday.”

Laurel squares her shoulders and shrugs her blazer off. Donner brought me here as decoration, expendable decoration. “You think I’m ready?” she asks as she kicks off her heels and puts on thick black socks before zipping up her boots.

“Yeah,” Sara tells her softly, “I do.”

Laurel is smiling when she puts her on her mask. “How do I look?” she wants to know.

Sara smiles back. “Like a hero.”

Iris side-eyes Mac as the mercenaries shove them both onto the floor with their hands tied behind their backs. “Was being taken hostage part of your plan?” she whispers angrily.

“Yes,” Mac hisses back.

Helena crouches in front of a crying woman with an engagement ring on her finger. “I was almost married once,” she says wistfully.

Mac watches her kick a male hostage to expose his belly. “I actually was married,” she says, “he died a few months ago.”
Helena turns to look at her. “So what,” she croons sardonically, “you think you understand what I’m going through?”

Mac forces herself to look Helena in the eyes. “I know how it feels to learn that a man you love isn’t who you thought he was,” she retorts, “and I can tell you what you went to Italy to find out. Frank Bertinelli isn’t your biological father.”

“What?” Iris blurs in a voice caught between a shout and a whisper.

“I’m sure you wondered how your father could do that to you,” Mac says, “murder your fiancée, I mean. I think it’s because your father sees a woman who betrayed him when he looks at you. So he loves you, but he hates you, too—and that means he can hurt you. It’s that simple.”

Helena is staring at her, gobsmacked, when Laurel screams and shatters the windows. Mac uses her powers to electrocute the mercenaries and they all drop to the floor at awkward angles. Like puppets with their strings cut. Sara is keeping Helena occupied while Laurel unties the hostages. “Go,” she says as she cuts through the zip tie binding Mac’s hands, “they’re sending in a team to get you out of here.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” Iris tells her, “this is the biggest story of my career.”

I doubt it, Mac thinks. Out loud, she quotes: “‘We must take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented. Sometimes we must interfere.’”

Helena stops trying to throw Sara out the window. “‘When human lives are endangered, when human dignity is in jeopardy,’ she quotes back, “‘national borders and sensitivities become irrelevant. Wherever men and women are persecuted because of their race, religion, or political views, that place must—at that moment—become the center of the universe.’”[240]

“Um,” Iris draws the mmm sound out awkwardly, “you guys know Elie Wiesel is a Zionist, right?”

“Yikes.” Mac fizzles out on the sibilant and sighs. “Iris, we have two options here: one of the Canaries can clock you so you won’t be lying if you tell the police that you don’t know what happened to Helena.”

“What’s option two?” Iris asks.

Mac gnaws on the inside of her cheek. “You said we were friends,” she murmurs.

“I meant it,” Iris tells her. “I still do.”

Mac exhales a soft whoosh of air. “I’m Medusa,” she says, “and I’m here to recruit Helena into my… I still haven’t figured out what to call it, actually…”

“Organization?” Laurel suggests.

“Cabal?” Helena snarks.

“Definitely not a League,” Sara quips.

Mac rolls her eyes. “I’m trying to bring down Vincent Santini,” she clarifies. “You know, the guy who makes Donald Trump seem likeable by comparison.”

“How exactly do you plan to recruit the Huntress if she’s wanted for murder?” Iris wants to know.
“I’m going to fake her death,” Mac explains, “and give her a new identity.”

Iris is quiet for a long stretch of time, trying to decide what she should do. “Who hired the mercenaries?” she finally asks.

“I did,” Helena answers.

“Who ordered them not to kill anyone?” Iris wants to know.

“I did,” Helena says, repeating herself. Like history.

Iris turns to Mac again. “Okay,” she says, “tell me what you need me to do. I trust you.”

SWAT finds Helena Bertinelli dead on the floor half an hour later.

If anyone bothered to look at her autopsy report, they’d see that she died of a cerebral aneurysm and that her body was cremated. Maria Panessa died of a hereditary condition that caused aneurysms, so nobody questions it and no one is going to wonder what happened to her body.

If anyone else bothered to look at the list of passengers on the last train leaving Starling for Central that night, they’d see a woman named Janice Panessa sitting with Mackenzie Howell, Sara Lance, Dinah Laurel Lance and Iris West.

“Janice was my grandmother’s name,” Helena says as she idly twirls a lock of fake blonde hair around her finger. “Also,” she looks down at the hair between her fingers and pouts, “do I have to dye my hair from now on? I know blondes supposedly have more fun, but it washes me out.”

Sara pokes Mac in the shin with her foot. “Please tell me she’s not staying with us,” she says pointedly.

“Um,” Mac avoids eye contact by looking at the ceiling, “someone might recognize her if she stays in a hotel, so…”

Sara groans and buries her face in Laurel’s shoulder. Helena smiles—a soft, tentative quirk of her lips. Iris looks at Mac as she tries and fails to muffle a loud yawn and wonders, suddenly, whether her friend is hiding anything else.

From: COLD AS ICE

8:03pm

**I’m flying home tomorrow.**

8:08pm

**When can I see you?**

Mac stares at her phone as the train chugs back to Central and rereads those messages from Len over and over before she hobbles to the bathroom and calls him. “I have to tell you something,” she whispers.

“Hello to you, too,” Len drawls.

Mac exhales a soft whoosh of air. “Hi,” she says.
“Okay,” Len tells her in a soft voice that makes her heart ache, “shoot.”

Mac swallows thickly. “I was married,” she says, “and my husband died two weeks before I met you.”

Well, Len thinks, flicking his gaze to his ring finger without really thinking about it, I didn’t see that coming. “I’m sorry,” he tells her.

It’s a lie, because he’s thrilled the woman of his dreams isn’t married to someone else, but he’s sorry she’s hurting. Len feels like she betrayed him by marrying another man, but he knows that isn’t fair to her. After all, Mac doesn’t know about his dreams, or that he’s been waiting for her for so long, or that he…

No, he thinks, shaking his head. I don’t love her. That's impossible. Get a grip, Snart.

Mac claws her fingers through her hair and sparks fly before she snuffs them out. “I loved him,” she says. “After he died, I thought my life was over because he was gone, but it’s not. I have a life in Central City now. I’ve made new friends, I’m running a company… I’m living my life without him. I’m just…” she claws one hand through her hair and snuffs the sparks that fly in the aftermath, “I’m not ready to move on.”

It’s not a lie, because she’s thought a lot about her marriage and she’s not sure whether they wanted the same things, before. Maybe all they wanted was each other. Maybe things would’ve fallen apart if the version of Leonard Snart that she married had survived the mission. Maybe not. Despite her foreknowledge and meta-knowledge, she doesn’t know anything for sure. All she knows is this: whatever she could have with the new version of Len isn’t worth the possibility of losing him.

I remember the timeline where I spent twenty-five years in another world, she thinks, one where he didn’t exist. I won’t do that again. I can’t.

Mac hangs up on him and folds in on herself until she’s sitting in a ball on the toilet, bawling her eyes out until her throat is raw and her face is a blotchy mess of tears and snot. There’s a part of her that wants to call him back and tell him everything, but that would be too selfish.

Len is coming home tomorrow, she thinks. I have to do everything in my power to keep him alive… even if that means breaking my own heart.


[231] Helena’s father was named Guido when he first appeared in Huntress Vol. 1, No. 1 (“Code of Silence”) April, 1989. Then he was renamed Franco in Cry for Blood and reimagined as Frank in Arrow 1x07 (“Muse of Fire”) 28 November 2012.

[232] Helena’s mother was named Carmela when she first appeared in Huntress Vol. 1, No. 1 (“Code of Silence”) April, 1989. Then she became Maria Panessa in Cry for Blood and Huntress: Year One.


[234] Marc Guggenheim’s version of the Huntress is self-indulgent in the worst way, because he retconned her origin story to make it all about Bargain Basement Batman his version of Oliver Queen. I’m forever bitter that the episode I rewrote in this chapter was titled “Birds of Prey” but instead of giving us a team of female superheroes, we got the Huntress and the Canary fighting over Green Arrow. Ugh.

[236] Adam Donner first appeared in *Arrow* 2x01 (“City of Heroes”) 9 October 2013.


[238] I told you this chapter was my rewrite of *Arrow* 2x17 (“Birds of Prey”) 26 March 2014 in one of the footnotes above, but I’m going to elaborate on another thing that bothered me: the implication that Helena’s crimes (i.e. murdering a bunch of criminals and crippling McKenna) are somehow worse than her father’s. If we’re supposed to think she’s a monster that Oliver created and she’s so lost in the darkness that she can’t be saved, pointing out that she only kills bad guys wasn’t the best way to convince me. I’m also forever bitter that Malcolm Merlyn gets to commit mass murder and he’s one of the Arrowverse regulars and he got his own comic, but we haven’t seen Helena in two seasons. I see your misogyny, show. I SEE YOU AND YOU ARE UGLY.


[240] Elie Wiesel, from the Nobel acceptance speech he gave in Oslo, Norway on 10 December 1986.

[241] Helena’s middle name is Rosa, but in the family tree included in *Huntress* Volume One, it’s Janice. Hence her pseudonym.
Telltale Hearts (2) Wishing Things Away Is Not Effective

Me in every scene that matters, looking towards all the spaces you should have been filling. Me with hands outstretched, begging you to stay just once, just this time.

Elisabeth Hewer, “Classical Fiction”

Shock Value
Part 2
Myth Can Make Reality More Intelligible
Book I
With a Stroke of Lightning
Chapter 20
Telltale Hearts
(2 of 3)

II
Wishing Things Away Is Not Effective

Joan Williams has been picketing in the parking lot outside S. T. A. R. Labs since the particle accelerator exploded. There was a picket line ten people deep for a few weeks, but after Eobard lost Missouri v. Wells, most of the protestors ran out of steam and the press coverage evaporated. Now—almost three months after the explosion—Joan is the only one left. Mac parks her MINI Cooper in one of the handicapped spaces in front of the building and hobbles over to her with a cardboard cup holder balanced on the palm of the hand she isn’t using to grip the handle of her cane.

“Hi.” Mac puts on what she hopes is a disarming smile and not an alarming attempt at being nonthreatening. “I got you a caramel latte with extra whip.” Joan folds her arms instead of taking the peace offering disguised as a caramel latte. Mac shrugs and balances the cardboard cup holder on the bend of her elbow as she sips her mocha. “What do you know about corporate personhood?” she asks as the warmth from the coffee and chocolate concoction seeps into her belly.

Joan blinks, nonplussed. “It’s the notion that corporations have the same legal rights as human beings,” she answers.

Mac nods. “Ms. Weathersby—Dr. Wells’s defense attorney—was planning to petition the judge to declare a mistrial by claiming that his company should be held legally responsible for the fallout of the particle accelerator explosion, not him. Dr. Wells could’ve transferred all the money from the corporate account into his personal accounts, and he could’ve buried all of you in legal fees instead of using his wealth to fix some of the damage he caused. I persuaded him to settle in court—in front of the entire city and several parts of the world—so people could see him take responsibility for the consequences of his arrogance. I know it doesn’t change what he did to your family. I just wanted you to know I’m doing the best I can in the aftermath.”

Joan bursts into helpless giggles, huffing and puffing, shaking with shrieks of laughter. “You think
I’m still upset about my family?” she wheezes with her hands in her pockets. “You were at the trial. You know my father had Alzheimer’s. I couldn’t afford to keep taking care of him, and I couldn’t pay someone else to do it, either, so I went to my uncles for a loan and they laughed in my face. You know what they said?”

Mac shakes her head, but doesn’t say anything.

“Uncle Abner said he didn’t care what happened to my father,” Joan tells her, “and Uncle Ezra thought he deserved to get sick, to lose everything that made him who he used to be, until he became this shell of a person who couldn’t even wipe his own ass. I hated them when they were alive. I’m not sorry they’re dead, and my father…” she sniffs and wipes her eyes hastily with one sleeve of her sweater, “…he died a long time ago. I’m upset because of this.”

Joan yanks one hand out of her pocket and flails at the pavement. Mac yelps, but that sound is obscured by the explosion that booms in the space between them. When she looks down, she sees a hole in the pavement deep enough for her to fall in and get stuck.

“I can’t get mad,” Joan says, “or I make things blow up. It’s like I’m Piper Halliwell at the end of season three of Charmed, only without the sister witches and the leather pants. Also, I’m blonde.”

Mac eyes the hole warily as she awkwardly hobbles sideways. Then she puts the cardboard cup holder on the ground and generates a wad of lightning, holding the electricity in her palm while Joan gapes at her. “I think I can help with that,” she deadpans.

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Two Weeks Later

Rosalyn Naydel married Russell Glosson straight out of college. After her grandfather died, she inherited the Naydel Library, and instead of trying to manage the archives on caffeine and nepotism, she went back to school and got her degree in archival studies. Then she became the archivist of antiquities and spent her life curating and cataloguing the special collections her grandfather had left behind.

Russell, on the other hand, never amounted to much of anything; he was a mediocre thief and a lackluster husband, and he knew it. When he proposed to Rosalyn, he promised her that he wouldn’t be a criminal anymore. Almost two decades later, she found out that he’d been lying to her since before they were married about his petty criminal activities. When she tries to leave him, he snaps and kills her in slow motion.

There are four possible forms of potential energy: elastic, gravitational, electric, and electrostatic. When he uses his power, Russell generates a time-variant electromagnetic field that allows him to slow things down around him. Which creates the illusion of speed, even though it’s actually the opposite. Fulgurkinesis is the ability to manipulate any form of energy on the electromagnetic spectrum—including electric potential energy. Which is why Russell doesn’t get to kill his wife this time.

Plot point: Russell murders his wife and keeps her chemically preserved corpse in a glass case because he wants to make her “his” forever. Retconned.

Rosalyn calls the C. C. P. D. and Mac stays with her in the archival storage room until they arrive. Joe looks from her to the unconscious man on the floor and back again. “I take it you just happened
to be in the right place at the right time?” he asks.

Mac nods her answer, even though it was obviously a rhetorical question. “I’d put him in the new cell block if I were you,” she says.

When she went to the courthouse to watch Eobard’s trial, Mac talked to Commissioner Fells and got him to hire people to rebuild Iron Heights with a cell block that has power dampers built into the walls. Joe heard it through the grapevine: Cisco told Caroline, who told Iris, who told him.

Joe gives her a nod of recognition in return. “I’ll make it happen,” he says before he flicks his gaze to Rosalyn and asks, “did you call anyone for her?”

“Yeah.” Mac nods again, slowly. “Jerrie, her niece.”

Joe heaves a loud sigh that flares his nostrils as she uses her cane to get back on her feet. As a homicide detective, it’s rare for him to arrive at the scene of a crime and find the victim alive. After twenty years on the force, he knows exactly how much worse this could’ve been. Whatever else she is, Joe knows Mac is the reason that Rosalyn is still breathing. Which is good enough for him. “Okay,” he tells her, “then I guess you’re free to go, Ms. Howell.”

“Thank you, Detective.”

Mac adjusts the strap of her purse over her shoulder and hobbles away. When she passes her on her way out, Jerrie Rathaway winces at the dissonant chorus of loud quavering whoops that she hears. There’s no way for her to know it, but to a metahuman with superhearing, that’s what an electromagnetic field sounds like.

Len returns to his apartment to find his sister on his couch with her feet propped on his coffee table. “Hey, Sis,” he says and sits in the chair perpendicular to the couch before he arches his eyebrows pointedly at her.

Lisa gives him a sardonic smile as she puts her feet on the floor. “Hey, Lenny,” she says.

“Welcome back.”

Welcome back, but never Welcome home. If home is where the heart is, then her home isn’t with Len anymore. If it ever was. Lisa loves her brother fiercely and unconditionally, and she owes him for making sure she didn’t turn out worse, but he can be a selfish jerk. When he left her with Megan and started spending half the year out of the dissonant chorus of loud quavering whoops that she hears. There’s no way for her to know it, but to a metahuman with superhearing, that’s what an electromagnetic field sounds like.

Lisa gives him a sardonic smile as she puts her feet on the floor. “Hey, Lenny,” she says.

“Welcome back.”

When he asked her why she became a criminal and asked to join his crew, she said: “I wanted to be like my brother. With my brother.” Len has always known what he wants. Lisa had envied that, once upon a time. Only now she’s older, and wiser, and she can finally see that her brother has always had all the same insecurities that she does—he’s just always been an excellent liar.

“You look like shit,” she says.


Lisa shrugs. “I’ve been working a job since you left,” she tells him, “found the woman who told us about Louise. Turns out she’s kind of a criminal mastermind. You’ve haven’t been in the city for a
while. You probably haven’t heard of her—"

“You’re working for Medusa,” he deduces. Lisa pouts; Len smirks. “I pay attention,” he says. “This is my city. Doesn’t matter where I am. I always try to keep an eye on what’s going on at home.”

Mac has nightmares, sometimes. Sara has been getting out of bed in the middle of the night all week, untangling herself from Nyssa and Lisa to check on her before she causes a blackout. Lisa followed Sara downstairs at fuck off o’clock in the morning and heard Mac saying her brother’s name in her sleep, begging him: *Len, please don’t do this, I can’t, I won’t…*

“No one I talked to has actually seen Medusa,” Len tells her. “I didn’t know whether she was a person or just another urban myth. Like a boogeyman for criminals. Be careful, or she’ll get you…” he cocks his head and scoffs. “Ooh, scary.”

Lisa’s never met anyone like Mac before. Someone who has the luxury of caring about people. Someone who still thinks the world is worth saving. Someone who knows the darkness intimately, but chooses to shine. Mac could ruin her brother. Break his heart into a million pieces. Make him soft. Where would that leave her?

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“Who told you about Medusa?” she wants to know. “Was it Mac?”

Something happens to her brother then. Len reacts to her name with his whole body: his eyes narrow into sharp focus, the corners of his mouth unfurl into a tiny smile that he hides by flattening his lips into a thin line, and his fingers curl like he wants to get his hands on her. Inexorable. Instinctual. Inevitable.

“Why would Mac know anything about Medusa?” Len asks in his calmest voice, the one that means he’s trying not to lose his cool.

“Well,” Lisa smiles poisonously before she draws the *l* sound out, “because they’re the same person. Obviously.”

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*Lencioni’s* is Mac’s favorite Italian restaurant in Central City. Or ristorante, in the vernacular. It’s owned by Stefano Lencioni. Steve Lencioni—one of Stefano’s sons—is a detective with the C. C. P. D. It’s run by Steve’s wife Andrea, whose daughter from her first marriage is Patty Spivot. There’s a picture on the wall of a teenage Carter Hall with his uncle the judge and Don and Hank, his cousins, before Don told her family she’s trans. It’s a family place, one with a lot of history.

Lisa texts Mac to invite her to a late lunch and lets her pick the restaurant. Which should’ve been a dead giveaway that something was afoot. Lisa takes a perverse sort of pleasure in dragging people to oddball fusion eateries, the weirder the better. Although the dessert pizza was magically delicious, the potato skins with caviar were too weird and the broccoli hot dog was just gross.

All things considered, Mac shouldn’t have been surprised when the hostess brings her to the booth to meet her party and Lisa isn’t sitting there.

Len glances up from his menu and smirks at her. “Hello, sweetheart,” he drawls.

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[244] Martin Naydel and Gardner Fox created the Turtle, and in The Flash 2x10 (“Potential Energy”) 19 January 2016, the Arrowverse version of the Turtle uses the Naydel Library as his hideout. I decided that his wife—who doesn’t canonically have a name and whom the show fridged offscreen because the writers hate women—was a Naydel. Cisco said the library closed down three months after the particle accelerator explosion, and here we are.

[245] The Flash Vol. 2, No. 182 (“Absolute Zero”) March, 2002. I have referenced this issue before and I’ll probably reference it again because it’s the basis for most of the extrapolations I make about show!Len, especially about his relationship with his sister. Lisa isn’t much younger than Len in the comics, and they aren’t half-siblings, but I decided the Arrowverse versions of the Snart siblings have different mothers, because Wentworth Miller is biracial and Peyton List isn’t. Which also explains why he’s fourteen years older than her. Not that siblings with the same parents can’t be born fourteen years apart, but I refuse to whitewash Len like 99% of fandom does. Which is why I’m writing it this way.


[248] Patty Spivot’s mother is canonically named Andrea in the New-52. I’ve extrapolated her backstory from the things we know about show!Patty, who never mentions her mother.


[251] Here is a picture of a broccoli hot dog. You’re welcome. (x)
You move like a thief in a jewelry store, 
always poised for an alarm, for 
a mistake, and I don’t know how 
to tell you that the diamonds are already yours.

Caitlyn Siehl, “For the Dinner Table”

I think about the other Len, sometimes—about the way he liked to kiss me. Intense. Meticulous. With teeth. Holding me flush against him so there was no negative space between us. Touching my face. Caressing my jaw with his thumbs. Pulling my hair. Stealing the air from my lungs. Leaving me desperate and breathless. Consumption. Consummation. Chock-full of promise.

Snarts keep their promises. Always.

Len promised to love me until death did we part, and look how that turned out. I’m a time remnant who’s died three times over and he’s not the man I married, but we’re both still alive…now all I have to do is keep it that way.

It’s not like I can expect this version of him to keep a promise he never made.

From the Watchtower Archives
Recorded 31 March 2014

Mac sits in the booth across from Len, propping her cane against the wall and slipping her purse off of her shoulder before she smooths her skirt underneath her thighs. “I’m not your sweetheart, Mr. Snart,” she tells him softly. “I’m not your anything. I belong to myself.”

Len smirks wider. Mac said the same thing to him in his dream the night before. Only in his dream she’d said those words while he was inside of her.

“Tell me that you’re mine,” he’d ordered, savoring the sensation of her tight and wet and pulsing around him. “Say it, Mac.”

“I’m yours,” she’d gasped, “but I don’t belong to you. I belong to myself.”
It was a rerun—one of his favorites—but somehow the dreams feel more real now that he knows she actually exists.

“So,” Len drawls, “it’s Mr. Snart now, hmm?”

“That depends,” Mac tells him.

“So why you’re here,” Mac retorts. “I know it’s not just because you wanted to see me.”

Len grins at her, showing his teeth. Mac blushes and looks away, heat rising so her cheeks and neck and even the tops of her breasts are flushed. Which only makes his grin widen. “True,” he says. “So what should I call you? Ms. Howell?” he takes a sip of ice water and holds her gaze after he puts the glass down. “How about Medusa?”

Mac exhales a soft whoosh of air as one of the waitresses comes over and takes his order, then leaves with their menus after confirming that she wants her usual. “Lisa,” she sighs once the waitress is out of earshot, “she told you.”

“Why didn’t you?” Len wants to know.

Mac shrugs, one shoulder hunching toward her earlobe. “Why didn’t you tell me you’re a thief?” she retorts. “Trust goes both ways, Mr. Snart.”

“So we’re both criminals.” Len cocks his head and smirks at her again. “Good.”

Mac huffs indignantly. “Medusa is a symbol,” she tells him, “a thing that goes bump in the night. I created the idea of her to make the worst kind of men think twice about hurting innocent people.”

“Like someone hurt you?” Len says pointedly.

Abruptly, the lights flicker off and the electricity wired through the walls buzzes loudly enough to make people wince and cover their ears with their hands. Mac squeezes her eyes shut and bites down on the inside of her cheek, hard. Len looks up when the lights flicker back to life and shifts his focus back to the woman of his dreams.

“So it’s true,” he mutters. “You’re one of them.”

“I’m a metahuman,” Mac retorts. “It’s not a bad word.”

Len tentatively reaches across the table to take one of her hands in his. Oh, he feels a spark when his thumb strokes a slow circle over the back of her hand, but he can’t tell if that’s because she’s superconductive or just because he wants her. No matter the cause, he’s still feeling something he’s never felt before outside of his dreams, and he likes it. “Nothing about you is bad,” he says with slow vehemence.

Mac squeezes his fingers and takes her hand back just as the waitress returns with their food. “So why are you here, Mr. Snart?” she asks as she spools fettuccine around her fork and takes a bite of pasta.

“I want in,” Len tells her, “on whatever you’re doing with my sister and whoever else you’re working with. Now tell me,” he taps his fingers against the edge of the table and asks, “why did you hire my sister?”
What he really wants to know is: *why did you hire Lisa and not me?*

Mac finishes chewing before she answers. “Lisa has skills that you don’t,” she informs him. “There’s a reason you have a record and she doesn’t: you want people to know your name and that you’re good at what you do. Lisa knows the perfect crime is one that’s never solved because no one knows who did it. Which is why she doesn’t get caught. I hired her instead of you because I’m going for lack of visibility.”

Len chuckles, a deep laugh that moves through his belly and makes him hunch over until his shoulders stop shaking. “Oh, sweetheart,” he drawls, “you couldn’t be invisible if you tried.”

Mac spools more pasta onto her fork and silence blooms in the space between them while they eat, more comfortable than awkward. “So,” she says after her bowl is empty, “you’re here for business.”

Len shrugs and cocks his head to look at her with an arch of his eyebrows, a quirk of his lips. “Doesn’t mean pleasure is off the table,” he tells her lowly. “I know you said you’re not ready. I respect that, but I’m not giving up. There’s a connection here. I know you feel it, too.”

There’s no point in denying it. Len is acting like he knows her better than he should, and that makes it easy to slip back into old habits now that he’s right here in front of her. Only whatever is brewing here isn’t an echo, something quiet and hollow compared to what happened between them before. This is something new; something passionate and electric.

*I want him,* Mac thinks, *but I don’t know if I love him…and he doesn’t love me. Which is a good thing, because the people who love me always end up dead.* “So,” she says out loud, “where is Lisa?”

Len smirks at her again so his mouth unfurls in a crooked line. (Mac is struck—not for the first time—by how pretty Len is. It’s becoming a problem.) “I have absolutely no idea what you’re talking about,” he says, because sometimes he’s full of shit.

Mac rolls her eyes at him. “Lisa loves messing with people,” she points out, “and usually she likes to watch the fallout of her machinations. I know she’s here somewhere.”

Lisa takes her cue and slides into the booth next to Mac before she stretches out and rests her arm along the top of the seat behind them. Len doesn’t miss the way his sister is smiling. There’s no poison, nothing sharp in the way her lips curl. While he was gone, his sister made friends with the woman of his dreams. At least that means Lisa approves. Not that she didn’t approve of Angie, or Mick, or Laura,[252] but Angie is a lesbian he pays for weekly “dates,” Mick was a partner in crime who became a friend with benefits, and Laura was his sub (his first and only, because trying BDSM taught him that he doesn’t like hurting people in a sexual context). Mac is something else.

Mac leans back until her head meets the crook of Lisa’s elbow and sighs. “Okay,” she says, eking the *oh* sound out into an *ooh,* “let’s go.”

“Where?” Len wants to know.

“Where no man has gone before,” Mac deadpans.[253]

*Lencioni’s* is three blocks from Len’s apartment and he walked to the restaurant instead of driving his (stolen) car, so Lisa takes her motorcycle while he rides in the passenger seat of Mac’s MINI Cooper. It’s a small car—almost too small for someone as tall as he is—so Len ends up pushing
the seat all the way back and watching Mac from somewhere in her periphery.

“‘Space,’” Mac eventually quotes, because she can’t sit in silence for longer than a minute without screaming internally, “‘the final frontier. These are the voyages of the starship Enterprise.’”

“‘Its mission,’” Len drawls, “‘to explore strange new worlds, to seek out new life and new civilizations…’”

“…to boldly go where no man has gone before,’” they finish in unison, smiling at each other.

“I used to watch The Next Generation with my grandfather,” Len murmurs, “but he died before the season four finale. I never finished it.”

Lester is dead in this timeline, Mac thinks, season four of TNG aired from 1990 to 1991, so Len would’ve been eighteen, but Lisa was only four when he died. I wonder if she even remembers him. “I’m sorry,” she tells him. “I’ll rewatch all seven seasons with you sometime, if you want.”

“I’ll hold you to that,” Len tells her, but he’s making a promise, not a threat.

Mac smiles at him once more with feeling before she turns onto a road so heavily wooded that almost no light shines through the trees. After a few more twists and turns, she parks in front of a Queen Anne style Victorian house and hobbles onto the wraparound porch.

Len watches her extract a tarnished key from a tiny pocket on the side of her purse and unlock the door. “Where are we?” he asks.

Mac looks over her shoulder at Lisa, who leaves her helmet on the seat of her motorcycle before she walks up the stairs, her heels making hollow sounds against the sturdy wood. “Home,” she answers.

Bobby “Bovine” McFeely (Central City’s greatest hero, before the Flash came along)[254] commissioned the house in 1890 and gave the deed to his granddaughter Philippa as a wedding gift. Under the law of coverture, the ownership of the property went to her husband: a man named Francis Russell. Centuries passed until the house belonged to Eric Russell, Rose’s father.[255] Emilia Russell—Rose’s aunt—sold it after he died. Todd Russell,[256] the former owner, sold the house to Mac before he shipped out for his second tour in Afghanistan. Rose had always mourned the loss of her home, but if Mac has her way, that won’t happen again.

“Nice place,” Len says, taking in the white climbing roses blooming at the edges of the angled bay windows, the shards of blue light refracting through the stained glass onto the hardwood floor in what looks like the dining room.

Mac smiles at him with a hint of sadness that makes his heart clench horribly in his chest. “Thank you,” she says before she props her cane against the wall and toes her shoes off so she’s in her stocking feet.

Len kneels smoothly to take his boots off, too, and arches his eyebrows at Lisa until she does the same. Mac hangs her discarded sweater on the banister and hobbles up the stairs, slowly. Len stuffs his hands in the pockets of his leather jacket to stop himself from steadying her with a hand on the small of her back and glances around to take it all in, mapping the house out in his mind out of habit.

Never thought anyone would actually invite me into this kind of place, Len thinks, wryly. When he
was a kid, Lewis would break them both into empty mansions and make a game of teaching him how to case a joint inside and out. Whoever owned those places was probably on vacation at the time, and they never got caught because security in the seventies was crap. Which was the most fun he can remember having with his dad, now that he thinks about it.

“Why don’t you live here?” Lisa wants to know.

Mac shrugs. “I don’t want to live in such a big house all by myself,” she says. “I know it’s crowded at the Clocktower, but I’d rather be alone with everybody than alone with no one.”

“Flesh covers the bone,” Len murmurs as they reach the end of the hallway, “and they put a mind in there and sometimes a soul, and the women break vases against the walls, and the men drink too much. Nobody finds the one, but we keep looking, crawling in and out of beds. Flesh covers the bone and the flesh searches for more than flesh.”

“There’s no chance at all,” Mac says in a heavy, hushed voice, “we are all trapped by a singular fate.”

“Nobody ever finds the one,” Len continues, “the city dumps fill, the junkyards fill, the madhouses fill, the hospitals fill, the graveyards fill.”

Mac takes another key out of the pocket of her dress. “Nothing else fills,” she whispers before she opens the door.

Lisa side-eyes both of them. “Bukowski was an asshole,” she grumbles, “and you two need to get a room so I don’t have to listen to your weird foreplay anymore.”

“Excellent idea,” Len drawls.

Mac ignores them as she hobbles down another staircase into the depths of the turret and flops into an overstuffed armchair. “I told you I’m a widow,” she says, “but I didn’t tell you that I’ve been engaged three times. Once to my husband, before we got married. Once to my college sweetheart, who was murdered—and again to the man who killed him, and my father, and everyone else I ever loved, or even thought about loving.”

Len glances around the room and gapes, his mouth hanging open slightly. There are pictures on the walls, neon post-it notes, lengths of yarn in every color of the rainbow pinned into lines, and shreds of notebook paper with scribbles on them. Benito Santini marries Veronica Sinclair; reads one. Flashpoint, reads another.

There’s a magnetic whiteboard in one corner with ASSETS written in block letters that were obviously made with a stencil. Len recognizes a pair of mug shots: Cyrus Vanch, a power-hungry career criminal who escaped from Iron Heights in the aftermath of the particle accelerator explosion, and Kyle Reston, the Ace of Spades from the Royal Flush Gang. Other people are listed by name: William Tockman, Bea da Costa, Tora Olafsdotter, Julie Jackham, Brie Larvan, Lia Briggs, Lilith Clay. Homo sapiens metae is scrawled next to Bea’s name, and Julie’s. Homo sapiens magi, Skaði’s bloodline is written next to Tora’s name, and daughters of Theia is noted with a bracket linked to Lia’s and Lilith’s, because they’re twins. Tockman’s note reads 1/128, cryptically.

It’s hard to follow the information festooned all over the turret, but he sees the word “divergence” over and over: Divergence 1.0, Divergence 1.1, Divergence 1.2, Divergence 1.3, Divergence 1.4, Divergence 2.0, Divergence 2.1, Divergence 2.2, Divergence 2.3, Divergence 2.4, Divergence 3.0, Divergence 3.1, Divergence 3.2, Divergence 3.3.
“Mac,” Len says, biting down on the consonant in her name before he asks, “what does all this mean?”

“Um…” Mac fizzes out on the mumble before she bites the bullet, metaphorically; and bites her bottom lip, literally. “I’m from the future,” she deadpans. “Still want to date me?”

[252] Laura Lamont first appeared in *The Flash* Vol. 1, No. 93 (“Captain Cold Blows His Cool”) December, 1969. Laura is a former starlet and Len was a fan of her movies when he was young and she was in her Hollywood prime (i.e. early twenties), so somehow he uses his cold gun to restore her youth before he proposes to her. If you’re wondering where my characterization of Len as a giant nerd comes from, look no further than his Golden Age appearances in the comics. Anyone who thinks Captain Cold isn’t over 9000% nerd knows nothing about his character, imo.


[255] Eric Russell first appeared in *The Flash* Vol. 1, No. 203 (“The Flash’s Wife Is a Two-Timer!”) February, 1971. Eric is Iris’s biological father in the comics, and he’s from the thirtieth century, but I’m ignoring it because the show obviously is.

[256] Todd Russell first appeared in *Catwoman* Vol. 3, No. 1 (“Anodyne, Part 1 of 4”) January, 2002. Todd is the seventh Clayface in the comics, but he was a soldier first, so that’s where we’re at with his supervillain origin story.


[260] These were taken from my notes for this fic. I’ve broken down every “timeline” that exists in the show based on divergences both canonical and fanonical, and I infodumped them all into this chapter because I am a NERD.
I cannot stay out of crevices.
I cannot abstain from tipping
things over and stirring up dust.
You closed doors and windows against me
and stayed safe. I make you up now
out of pain you deposited in me decades
ago, eggs of blood red dragonflies.
Your abandoned history became me.

Marge Piercy, “Brotherless Six: Unconversation”

Shock Value
Part 2
Myth Can Make Reality More Intelligible
Book I
With a Stroke of Lightning
Chapter 22
Slings and Arrows
(1 of 3)

“You’ve got your memory. You’ve got your intelligence. Use them.”

Marcy
Batgirl Special Vol.1, No.1 (“The Last Batgirl Story”)
May, 1988

I
Planning for the Future Is Escapism

Len grew up with a grandfather who loved science fiction. When he spent nights with Lester in the
trailer park as a kid, his bedtime stories were The Time Machine,[261] A Sound of Thunder,[262] The
Clock That Went Backward,[263] Burnt Norton,[264] The Chronic Argonauts,[265] Slaughterhouse-
Five,[266] Crusade in Jeans,[267] and The End of Eternity.[268] Only now that he knows time travel
is a thing, he doesn’t know how to feel about it. Oh, the possibilities alone are sorely tempting—
crime before forensics, traveling back to create a causality loop by stealing treasures lost to history,
changing his past—but he’s not thinking about himself at the moment. Mac, the woman sitting in
front of him that he thought was a figment of his imagination until a few months ago, is all that
matters to him right now.

“Oh, Len says, “you’re from the future. Still trying to wrap my mind around the whole alternate
timeline thing, but I’ll get there. What I want to know is this: why are you taking out random
criminals instead of trying to put down the bastard who killed your family?”

Lisa snorts. “What makes you think she didn’t try?” she asks snidely.
Len flicks his gaze to his sister before he focuses on Mac again. When she tugs her bottom lip between her teeth and looks away, his nostrils flare and a snarl unfurls in his throat. “You couldn’t do it,” he says in his calmest voice, the one that means he’s trying not to lose his cool. “You still love him.”

Mac bursts out laughing and slaps both palms over her mouth to muffle her cackles. “How about no,” she wheezes. “I do still care about him, in a fucked up sort of way, but I’d kill him if I could. There’s an external reason why I couldn’t disempower him, not an internal one.”

Len smiles at her, softly, the knot in his stomach loosening at the sound of her laughter. “What reason is that, exactly?” he wants to know.

“It’s…” Mac fizzles out on the sibilant and sighs. “It’s a long story.”

“I’ve got time,” Len tells her.

Lisa doesn’t say anything. Mac looks to her so she knows they didn’t forget she’s in the room with them. Seeing her brother so intent on someone is weird, but it doesn’t make her feel as left out as she thought it would. Actually, she’s worried about the possibility of Len hurting Mac as much as the possibility of Mac hurting Len.

It feels like Mac is family, Lisa thinks, startled. I trust her. When the hell did that happen?

“Oh, okay.” Mac exhales a soft whoosh of air. “It’s just a theory, but theories are pretty much all I’ve got at this point, so. Here’s what I know,” she pauses to tuck her arthritic ankle in the hollow under her right knee. “There’s a kind of metahuman called a speedster. They get their powers from a quasi-sentient extradimensional energetic entity known as the speedforce. Which is exactly what it says on the tin: an unstoppable force that gives speedsters their powers, including the ability to run fast enough to break the sound barrier and travel through time. It’s not capable of interacting with our dimension without a conduit, though. Which is why speedsters exist.”

“So a speedster is a conduit for this…speedforce…?” Lisa frowns at how silly the words actually sound coming out of her mouth, “…and their superpower is superspeed, like the Windrunner?”

There’s a legend of the local Osage tribe that tells the story of Ahwehota, He Who Runs Beyond the Wind. Otherwise known as the Windrunner. According to the legend, the half-breed son of an Osage shaman was a scout with the United States Cavalry in 1832 and he was sent on a wild goose chase while the rest of his unit massacred the village where his father lived. When his father died, he used his shamanic abilities to give his son the power of superhuman speed. Then he was known as He Who Runs Beyond the Wind until he supposedly vanished. Ahwehota is lost to history, if he’d ever really existed, but that legend lives on.

Mac nods. “Of course not all speedsters are created equal,” she clarifies. “I was engaged to one whose connection to the speedforce was unstable, to the point that he spent most of his adult life studying the speedforce to the end of stabilizing his powers. Of course he didn’t succeed. Which is how he got stuck in this century for over a decade with no way back to the future. Also, he doesn’t know I can time travel. Which is good, because my abilities don’t give me much accuracy. I lost six months the first time I opened a wormhole, and I overshot by a quarter of a century the time after that.”

“How many times have you torn holes in the fabric of the universe?” Len wants to know.

“Three,” Mac tells him softly. “Once to get to a parallel world, although that wormhole technically created a causality loop by taking me from that world to this universe and back again.”
Len holds up one finger to stop her. “There are other worlds, now?” he asks, incredulous.

Mac nods again, slowly. “I told you this was a long story,” she says. “Here’s the short version: the multiverse is real. I got an upgrade from a temporal computer and I remember multiple timelines—including one where I grew up in a parallel world—but I want to focus on this universe. What happened before isn’t relevant to you because you don’t remember it.” Here she pauses to remind herself to breathe, since thinking about Eobard makes her heart beat faster in the worst way. “There’s an unstable speedster,” she explains, “he loves me, he murdered everyone else I loved because he wanted me all to himself, and he ruined my life because he didn’t know how to take no for an answer. I think the speedforce wouldn’t let me kill him because he hasn’t served his purpose yet, so I have to wait until he does. I can’t just travel back to the future with him and leave his ass in the twenty-second century, because he’d just come back to get me and he’d probably kill everyone I love in the present so I’d have no reason to stay.”

“Wait,” Lisa holds up her hand instead of just one finger, “I thought you said you came here from 2016.”

Mac chugs the contents of the water bottle she keeps in her purse before she responds, because her throat feels raw from talking so much without hydrating. “I was living in 2016 with my husband before the mission I told you about,” she clarifies, “but I was born in 2157. After the mission was over, the timeline changed. I fell asleep alone in 2016 and woke up next to the man who ruined my life in 2183. I remember everything he did to me in every version of reality he tried to erase. Which is why I left him to come back here.”

Len is seething, his teeth clenched and hands curled into fists on top of his thighs, hard enough to dig harsh red half-moons into his palms. Okay, he thinks, as much as I’d love to beat that guy to death, I’d rather be the guy who gets to treat her better when she’s ready. “When you kill him,” he says with slow vehemence, “I want to watch.”

Mac’s eyes widen behind her glasses in shock, pun unintended. Len never even wanted to hear about the possibility of her killing anyone, before. Now he wants to watch her take the revenge she deserves rather than trying to steal her thunder. Okay, she thinks, I might love him after all.

“Augh!” Lisa’s phone shrieks.

“Wait…” Mac giggles and covers her mouth with one hand, “…is that the Wilhelm scream?” she asks through the space between her fingers.

“Yeah.” Lisa extracts her phone from her pocket and nods, a sharp descent of her chin. “It’s my text noise for Nyssa.”

“Of course,” Mac shakes her head, still giggling, “that makes perfect sense.”

Len grins without thinking before he realizes that no one has ever made him smile this much. Mac trusts me enough to share the secrets of the universe, he thinks. I need to show her that I deserve this, that I deserve her.

“So,” he says as Lisa saunters up the stairs and leaves them alone in the turret, “to answer the question you asked me before: yes. Doesn’t matter where or when you’re from. I still want to date you, when you’re ready. I’m patient,” he leans to rest his elbows on his thighs and interlace his fingers while he holds her gaze. “I can wait.”

Mac exhales sharply. “I’m not asking you to wait for me,” she tells him.

Another thing that’s changed about him is how he uses certain words—the version of Leonard Snart from before didn’t call people “sweetheart” unless he was being rude. This version of Len is calling her that because he’s declaring his intentions: to date her, to seduce her, to love her.

“Okay,” Mac says, “when I’m ready, I’ll call you.”

“Promise?” Len drawls, his smooth voice loaded with innuendo.

Mac flushes all over and nods, a quick bob of her head. “Promise,” she says.

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**Three Days Later**

Caroline has been putting off going to visit Henry for weeks, even though she finally believes he’s innocent beyond a shadow of a doubt. After they turned eighteen, Barry started visiting him at Iron Heights every week. When they turned eighteen, her twin bamboozled her into driving him to the prison and staying for a visit with Henry. Barry talked, she glared, and that was that. Caroline hasn’t seen their father since then. Until now.

Fact: Henry has been incarcerated for almost fourteen years.

Fact: the man in yellow—whoever he is—stole her family from her.

Fact: Caroline doesn’t know her father, and that’s her own damn fault.

Here’s what she knows: Henry was a doctor, a pediatrician. He loved kids. He also loved dogs, but couldn’t have one in the house because Nora was allergic. He wore old man sweaters in winter that his mother, their grandmother, knitted for him before she passed away. His nose was always in a book, but sometimes it took him weeks to finish whatever he was reading. He hated people who dog-earred the pages in library books. He always used to crouch down to her level before he lifted her up into his arms for hugs.

It’s time to stop thinking about her father in past tense. He isn’t dead to her anymore.

His birthday is April third. Which is the day she finally goes to Iron Heights to visit him. Caroline looks at Henry through the pane of bulletproof glass and lets the reality of her father sink in, erasing the memories of him tainted by years of anger and grief.

*He looks so old*, she thinks. It’s one thing to know how much time has passed. It’s another to see the new lines on his weary face, the streaks of silver in his brown hair, the hollow sadness in his eyes.

Caroline swallows thickly before she tucks the phone between her shoulder and her ear. When she splays one palm flat against the glass, Henry tentatively does the same. Caroline inhales sharply, tears stinging the corners of her eyes because that sadness in his eyes is overwhelmed by the hopeful way he’s looking at his daughter.

“I’m so sorry,” she tells him. “I know you didn’t kill Mom. I should’ve believed what Barry said, I shouldn’t’ve doubted you, I—”

“It’s okay,” Henry says, his deep voice trembling. “I forgive you, spitfire.”
After that, Caroline is too busy sobbing incoherently to say anything else; but that’s okay, because Henry is blubbery, too. There’s so much—too much—unspoken between them. It’s impossible to externalize all of those feelings without shedding many, many tears.

When she walks out of Iron Heights, Caroline feels taller than five foot one, but she doesn’t feel any lighter. There’s still one thing she has to get done.

To: b-boy

hey, cisco. i need your help.
you’re designing an app to detect metahumans y/y?

From: b-boy

yeah why what do you need it for

To: b-boy

i want to find the man who killed my mother.


[269] This is a reference to Max Mercury, whom I’m not mentioning explicitly because his nemesis is going to be an antagonist for Barry in S3 of The Flash and I want to see what the show does with Max—if anything—before I rewrite it. Max is a white dude who got his speedforce powers from a dying shaman in the comics. Of course it’s never specified what tribe that shaman was from, so I’m going with the Osage, the indigenous people of Kansas City, MO. Also, the only fanon part of Max’s backstory in this fic is that the shaman was his dad—canonically it’s a racist mess, imo.

[270] If you don’t know this already, the Wilhelm scream is a sound bite that was first used in the film Distant Drums (1951) and later used in movies like Star Wars (1977), The Lord of the Rings (2001), Pirates of the Caribbean (2003), and many, many more. Here’s an article on that for my fellow nerds: (x) and a compilation for the lulz: (x). You’re welcome.
It is hard to think. I try to think. I try not to think.

I am somewhere else. Fascinated. I shine.
I don’t care.

Anne Sexton, “Dancing the Jig”

Three days ago, Lashawn “Shawna” Baez was a surgical intern at St. Andrews Hospital. Two days ago, she teleported out of the operating room in the middle of surgery and into the middle of the road during rush hour traffic. Yesterday, she was cut from the surgical program at St. Andrews. Today, Assistant District Attorney Dinah Laurel Lance agreed to act as the prosecutor in her wrongful termination case against the hospital. Ms. Baez was unavailable to comment, and when I spoke with Ms. Lance, all she had to say to this reporter was: “I took Ms. Baez’s case because a friend brought it to my attention, and I think it might be the best birthday present I’ve ever gotten.”

This isn’t a hoax. Or some kind of massive conspiracy. There are metahumans in Central City, and we have to acknowledge them. Not as monsters, or freaks of nature, but as people.

Not someday, after we’ve enslaved them and persecuted them and dehumanized them and justified murdering them in the streets.

Not in the future.

Now.

Before it’s too late.

From “Peek-a-Boo, I See You” by Iris West
First printed in the Central City Citizen on 10 April 2014
Reprinted in the Daily Planet

If you ask Syd Palmer where he got his name, he’ll tell you he was named after the infamous opera house in Sydney, Australia—where he and his twin brother were conceived in the aftermath of a spectacular performance by Olivia Newton-John.
Ray (the older twin, the perfect twin, the superior twin) was named after their granduncle: Raymond A. Palmer, the disabled fanboy who published Isaac Asimov’s first short story[272] and edited the first sci-fi fanzine. Syd was named after the iconic expressionist building where their honeymooning parents went bareback after a royal charity concert because they couldn’t wait to get back to their hotel suite. If you couldn’t tell who the black sheep of the family was, this would be your first clue. Syd (the younger twin, the second-best twin, the gives no fucks twin) was doomed from the start.

“She didn’t sing ‘Physical,’” he’d clarified during his follow-up interview with Mac. “What a missed opportunity.”[273]

It startled Mac that she didn’t end up comparing him to Ray during their initial interview—they’re identical twins, so they look alike, but they aren’t the same. Syd wears glasses with thick plastic frames. Ray was farsighted before, and it’s possible that hasn’t changed, but he wore contacts. Syd is nearsighted, but he’s not at the Velma Dinkley level of blind that Mac is without her glasses. Ray had always worn two kinds of outfits: hundred thousand dollar suits, or plain t-shirts and designer jeans. Syd wears cheap button-down shirts over t-shirts with logos or quips on them, corduroy pants, and low-rise Converse. Ray kept his hair on the short side and he put a lot of product in it; Syd’s hair is shoulder length and he likes to put it in a manbun to keep it out of his face. It’s clear from the start that they’re individuals who just happened to be born identical.

Syd is the only person Mac hired to work onsite at the main lab, because as head of research and development, he needs access to company records and inventory in order to determine whether any of the aborted projects the company has accumulated are worth salvaging. Eobard made every research project ever funded by S. T. A. R. Labs proprietary by including a clause in all of his contracts that allowed him to take possession of all research materials upon termination of employment, or partnerships, or the projects themselves. Which is why their storage facility in Starling is overfull. It’s like a shelter for abandoned science projects and failed experiments.

Unfortunately, the owners of the storage space don’t want to lease to them anymore. Mac debated buying the building and leaving their inventory where it was. Ultimately, though, she decided it makes no sense to continue to store everything offsite at a facility located six hundred miles from the main lab. Only a speedster would’ve come up with that idea.

*I’m the antithesis of a speedster*, Mac thinks. *What works for Eobard doesn’t work for me.*

Which is why they’re on their way to Starling. Syd’s job, at this juncture, is deciding what to keep and what to trash before they rebuild R & D from the ground up. Cisco gets to keep anything interesting they discard; Caitlin gets to visit her aunt Bethany Snow, broadcast journalist and anchorwoman for Channel 52 News.[274] Mac gets to poke around the company database and pointedly avoid Team Arrow, because Oliver is still mad that she erased Tockman’s criminal record—even though she kept Tockman’s henchmen from killing anyone and gave the skeleton key they stole to Felicity before she went back home to Starling. Oliver is chronically incapable of getting over himself and letting things go, though, so Mac isn’t surprised.

After he folds himself into the seat beside her, Syd closes his mouth around a soft groan and chugs the contents of his coffee cup before he says: “Hey.”

“Hey,” Cisco lifts his head from where it was resting on Caitlin’s shoulder and blinks at Syd blearily, “you look like you could be Superman. Has anyone ever told you that?“[275]
leaves them in the parking lot with the rental car, Mac calls shotgun and hangs her placard from the rearview mirror so they can park in a handicapped space without being ticketed. Syd drives them to the storage facility while Cisco stims by playing Fruit Ninja on his phone. It’s not shaping up to be a very professional business trip, but since two of her coworkers are also her friends and another is secretly her abusive ex-fiancée, professionalism was never really part of this equation. Mac puts her earbuds in and blasts Nicki Minaj to avoid sensory overload before she texts Len.

To: COLD AS ICE

I think we should be friends

Len pauses in his attempts to crack the hardest level of a program Axel created—one that mimics various security systems to simulate heists—and looks down at his phone, arching his eyebrows.

From: COLD AS ICE

What exactly do you mean by that?
Has something changed since the last time we talked about this?

Mac shakes her head before she remembers he can’t see what she’s doing when they’re texting.

To: COLD AS ICE

no, but some people start out as friends before they try to date
I think we should do that

Len exhales a breath he didn’t know he was holding and puts his phone down to type in a complicated encryption key before he responds.

From: COLD AS ICE

What about friends with benefits?

Mac snorts and makes a garbled noise in her throat.

To: COLD AS ICE

I’ve had sex with three people, total:
two are dead
one is a time-traveling stalker who murdered my father and my college sweetheart and, in two of the timelines that I can remember, he also killed me
do you really want to be the next person on my list?

Len hisses a soft, mellifluous “yes” when the fake security system shuts down and chuckles when he reads her messages.

From: COLD AS ICE

Yes. I really do.

Mac is still blushing when Syd parks the rental car and she goes to check that the U-Hauls she requested are in the parking lot. Which they are, one of them already loaded with boxes of medical supplies they had in storage that Mac wants to use to set up a free clinic for metahumans. Caitlin has agreed to see patients, but Shawna is still thinking about whether she wants to apply to another
surgical program or take the job and become a physician instead of a surgeon.

After she teleported into the middle of the street a week ago, traffic camera footage of Shawna went viral. It’s only a matter of time before the metahuman thesis is proven and people start trying to deprive them of their inalienable rights; especially since the first metahuman caught on camera was black.[276] Shawna is only suing the hospital because Mac convinced her that she could win—and she has to win.

There’s no going back now, and losing isn’t an option.

Team Arrow blew up the Queen Consolidated applied sciences lab to keep Slade Wilson from getting his hands on the tech he needs to make an army of Mirakuru soldiers the night before Mac, Syd, Caitlin, and Cisco arrive in Starling. Slade escalates that afternoon and attacks them at Verdant, but he leaves them alive because he got what he came for. Mēi, Diggle, Felicity, and Oliver are standing in the Arrowcave trying to figure out what his next move will be.

“Where is the most cutting edge technology housed in Starling City?” Oliver asks no one in particular.

Felicity almost falls out of her computer chair in her efforts to extract her phone from her purse and calls Mac because she knows the answer to that question. “Hi,” she says, “just a heads up: Deathstroke stole the skeleton key from us and he might be coming to steal something from you.”

Mac snorts and thinks, you mean he’s coming to try. “Thanks for calling,” she says out loud.

Felicity is smart enough to deduce that Mac isn’t alone, so she can’t get more specific. “Anytime,” she says before she hangs up.

Mac tucks her phone back in the pocket of her dress and glances at Syd, who’s on the computer and scrolling through the database with Caitlin while Cisco gapes at the towering shelves of inventory.

“I hereby christen this building Da Bomb,” Cisco decrees.

“No one says that anymore,” Syd informs him without bothering to look away from the computer screen.

“I say it,” Cisco points out indignantly. “I define my own cool.” Mac offers him a fistbump. Cisco presses their knuckles together and makes explosive sounds when they blow it up in the aftermath. “I still can’t believe you and Dr. Wells are shutting this place down,” he tells her.

“S. T. A. R. Labs blew a hole in Central City when we turned the particle accelerator on,” Caitlin mutters as she goes to check that something listed in the database is where it’s supposed to be. “We’re not exactly the poster children for ‘let us store our unregulated prototypes in your neighborhood.’”

“It was an accident,” Cisco protests.

“Yeah? Well, try telling that to the families of the people who died,” Caitlin says petulantly.

“Maybe you can figure out how to tell that to yourself,” Cisco tells her, his tone gentle.

Caitlin heaves a sigh and scribbles a note on her yellow legal pad. “Look,” she says, “let’s just get this inventory done so we can go home.”
“Okay,” Mac says, breaking the heavy silence that ensues, “I hate to ruin all this fun we’re having, but my friend who works with the Starling City vigilante just called to warn me that Deathstroke is coming here to steal one of our prototypes—”

“Wait,” Cisco holds up one hand to stop her. “Deathstroke, the guy with superstrength and mad skills with a sword?”

Mac nods and when an eerie metallic creak echoes through the room a fraction of a second later, she hisses a soft but vehement “shit.”

“Maybe he’s already here,” Caitlin says, her voice pitched slightly higher than before in fear.

“Maybe it’s one of the security guards,” Syd suggests, looking around to see if anyone is there instead of keeping his eyes on the screen.

Cisco shuffles to the end of the row they’re in and peers around the corner. “Oh,” he says to one of the security guards, “hey, man. We should be wrapped up any minute now.”

Mac uses her cane to get back on her feet and hobbles over to Cisco because Slade is close. When she swallows, she practically tastes the alloys in his armor.

“Are you getting a bad vibe off this guy?” Cisco whispers conspiratorially.

When the security guard coughs up blood and falls to the floor with a throwing knife buried in his back, Mac generates an electromagnetic pulse that knocks Slade into the wall. “Run!” she shouts over her shoulder.

Cisco shakes his head so fast he almost discombobulates himself. “No way,” he tells her.

“We’re not leaving you to fight him alone,” Caitlin says.

Mac glances back at Syd, who’s holding perfectly still like a deer caught in the beams of a pair of headlights. “Caitlin,” she says through clenched teeth, “remember Dr. Light?”

“Oh!” Caitlin nods and grabs Cisco’s sleeve to drag him with her.

Syd scrambles out of his chair and runs after them. Mac shifts her focus back to Slade, who’s coming at her from the other end of the aisle. There’s an application of her power that she’s never used as Mac, only as Rose. Now’s as good a time as any to see if it’ll work.

Mac waves to Slade before she converts her body to electrical energy and strikes, like a bolt of lightning, into another part of the facility. When she’s a person again, she looks down at herself and sighs because she’s in her bra and panties and nothing else.

Rose could teleport without vaporizing her clothes, she thinks bitterly. Why can’t I?

Cisco stares at her with wide eyes and an open mouth for a few seconds before he remembers they’re in immediate peril, and starts tinkering with Dr. Light’s photon blaster again. Syd drags his gaze up and down her body and he’s about to leer at her when he notices she’s glaring at him.

“Holy shit,” he mutters as he unbuttons his shirt and shucks it before he offers it to her. “You’re a metahuman.”

Mac is immensely grateful that Syd is a foot taller than her, because his shirt hits her at mid-thigh. It’s about as long as some of the shorter skirts she owns. “Yeah,” she says, her eyes whiting out as
she looks for Slade, “do you have a problem with people like me?”

Syd shakes his head so fast his hair flops out of his manbun. “Nope,” he says, popping the p sound. “No problem here.” Then something occurs to him. “Wait,” he says, “does that mean that blue is your natural hair color?”

Caitlin makes a disgusted noise and hauls Syd out into the open, using him as bait. Slade’s footsteps echo against the linoleum, heavy and metallic, because he wants them to know he’s coming. Mac feels lightheaded from all of the energy it took to unmake herself in one place and remake herself in another—with her bra and panties and earrings intact. Cisco and Caitlin hold the photon blaster in between them, because that thing is heavy.

When he comes around the corner, they blast Deathstroke and they run.

Mac, being disabled, is physically incapable of running away. Syd scoops her up and carries her into the entryway on pure adrenaline before he drops her on the nearest pristinely white loveseat and collapses to the floor in a heap of pit stains and aching muscles.

“I have never,” he huffs, “run so fast in my entire life. I think I deserve a raise.”

Caitlin slumps onto the other loveseat. “I think we all do,” she puffs. “Or hazard pay. Or something.”

Cisco groans and hunches over so his head is between his knees. “I think we deserve pizza,” he says, giving Mac a pointed look.

Mac exhales a wheezy laugh and nods before she blacks out.

Felicity must’ve called the S. C. P. D. after she called to warn her, because the cops arrive at the storage facility about a minute too late to apprehend Slade. Mac flails awake at the screech of their sirens and forces herself to breathe. It takes her a few long seconds to realize the bright red flashes are police beacons, not residue of her nightmares about Eobard bleeding into reality.

There’s a black raincoat on top of her, the one she left on the back of the chair in front of the computer at the other end of the entryway. Syd is giving his statement to one of the cops. Felicity, meanwhile, is trying to make up a bullshit explanation for how she knew their attacker was male while Cisco stims with something in the pocket of his sweater and Caitlin gives her an incredulous look that says, You’re full of crap.

Diggle glances at Mac as Felicity babbles something about man-parts that sounds vaguely transphobic and clears his throat to make her stop talking. “I’m John Diggle,” he says, “I work security for Queen Consolidated. Do you have any idea what Deathstroke may have taken? An industrial centrifuge, by any chance?”

“No.” Mac grits her teeth around the word and shakes her head slowly. “This place is full of prototypes and junk. It could’ve been anything.”

“Okay,” Felicity says before she asks, “how’s Barry doing?”

“Barry is the same,” Caitlin tells her softly.

“Barry’s condition deteriorated,” Felicity explains to Diggle, “Caroline moved him to S. T. A. R. Labs and they’ve been looking after him. Which is how I met Cisco and Caitlin.”
Diggle nods. “Right,” he mutters, caught somewhere between taciturn and exhausted.

“Well,” Felicity says, “I’ll come visit him again as soon as I can.”


Felicity whirls on her heels so fast her blonde ponytail flicks over her shoulder. “Iris?”

“Yeah…” Cisco ekes the _eah_ out awkwardly before he turns to Caitlin for help, an exercise in futility, “she’s, um, his…something.”

“Oh.” Felicity puts on a brittle smile, faking it until she makes it. “Good.”

Cisco gives her another grin—one that’s sheepish and apologetic. Caitlin folds her arms and desperately wishes that Ronnie could hold her instead. Mac blinks groggily, yawns into the hollow of one palm, and tries not to conk out again.

“That’s just swell,” she hears Felicity mutter under her breath, “Barry’s in a coma and he’s already moved on.”

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[271] This is your regularly scheduled reminder that Arrowverse! Ray Palmer has a twin brother named Sydney who is mentioned in _Legends of Tomorrow_ 1x10 (“Progeny”) 7 April 2016 and my version of him will inevitably be jossed, but idgaf.

[272] Isaac Asimov, “Marooned Off Vesta” (1938) first published in the March 1939 issue of _Amazing Stories_. Ray is canonically named after Raymond A. Palmer, a disabled sci-fi fanboy. Yes, I’ve referenced this fact in all three of the fics I’ve written for this fandom. You will pry this nerdy bit of trivia from my cold dead hands.

[273] Olivia Newton-John, “Physical” from the album _Physical_ (1981). Don’t let the music video fool you. This isn’t a song about working out. It’s about sex. (x)

[274] Bethany Snow first appeared in _New Teen Titans_ Vol. 1, No. 22 (“Ashes to Ashes!”) August, 1982 and in _Arrow_ 2x01 (“City of Heroes”) 9 October 2013. I previously headcanon’d Bethany as Caitlin’s mother, but since her mother actually exists in show canon now I’ve decided she’s Caitlin’s aunt—her father’s sister—instead.


[276] Disclaimer: I am white, but I’m not going to use speciesism (i.e. prejudice against metahumans, aliens, demigods, etc.) as a transparent excuse to write an allegory for oppression that’s all about my white protagonist. If metahumans existed, the speciesism that ensued would intersect with the axes of oppression that actually exist IRL. Mac is queer and disabled and mentally ill, but she’s also hella privileged, and in the immortal words of Flavia Dzodan: “MY FEMINISM WILL BE INTERSECTIONAL OR IT WILL BE BULLSHIT.” Capslock hers, not mine. (x)

[277] _Arrow_ 2x19 (“The Man Under the Hood”) 16 April 2014. Cisco and Caitlin first appeared in this episode and I lifted some of the dialogue in this chapter from canon because I wanted to rewrite their scenes with Mac there.

Slings and Arrows (3) You Can Live on Through Your Descendants

Are you healed or do you only think you’re healed?

I told myself
from nothing
nothing could be taken away.

But can you love anyone yet?

When I feel safe, I can love.

But will you touch anyone?

I told myself
if I had nothing
the world couldn’t touch me.

Louise Glück, “The Mutable Earth”

Shock Value
Part 2
Myth Can Make Reality More Intelligible
Book I
With a Stroke of Lightning
Chapter 24
Slings and Arrows
(3 of 3)

III
You Can Live on Through Your Descendants

After she recruits the Clock King, Mac goes to give the skeleton key to Team Arrow instead of returning the device to Kord Industries. It’s a show of good faith, trusting Oliver—a vigilante who went bankrupt a few weeks ago—with something that could open any bank vault in the world. When he folds his arms and glares at her, Mac knows the trust between them isn’t mutual. Which isn’t a shock, pun unintended, but it hurts her feelings more than she thought it would.

“What did you let Tockman go?” Oliver asks, his tone harsh and sharp-edged.

“I think what Oliver means to say is ‘thank you for entrusting this technology to us instead of returning it to Kord Industries,’” Felicity chimes in with a pointed glance at Oliver.

“It’s okay, Felicity,” Mac sighs. “I let Tockman go because he’s my great-great-great-great-great—she pauses after each “great” to count them on her fingers—“grandfather.”

“What,” Oliver says flatly.

“I told you I had personal experience with going back in time,” Mac points out. “Which part of that
was unclear?"

“Um,” Diggle says, “the part where time travel is real?”

Mac heaves another sigh before she shucks her sweater and rolls up the sleeve of the shirt she wore under her dress to expose her forearm. “I have a hundred and twenty-eight great-great-great-great-great-grandparents, but he’s the only one I know about besides Todd Russell and Lola Macintyre, who are in the ‘direct’ line.” Here she crooks her fingers like quotation marks around the word direct. “I found out about Tockman after I got tested for MacGregor’s. Which is what my father died of when I was nine, in the timelines where he wasn’t murdered when I was five.”

“Tockman’s genetic profile is archived in the hospital database,” Felicity realizes, “so if we get a sample of your DNA…”

“…we can do a genetic test to see whether or not you’re telling the truth,” Oliver says.

“I am telling the truth,” Mac retorts, “but I don’t expect you to take my word for it. Now,” she gestures at her pale forearm with her other hand, “who wants to dabble in phlebotomy? I may be a time traveler, but I don’t have all day.”

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Two Months Later

Oliver doesn’t have the technology to run a DNA test in the Arrowcave, so the blood sample Mac gave him goes through a chain of custody from Team Arrow to Alfred Pennyworth to Bruce Wayne. Which is how Batman does two impossible things before breakfast: proving the existence of time travel beyond a shadow of a doubt, and learning something about Mac that she herself doesn’t know.

Bruce adds a splash of bourbon to the coffee in his World’s Greatest Dad mug as the results glare starkly at him from his giant computer screen.

Mackenzie Howell has sixty-four great-great-great-great-great-grandparents, thirty-two great-great-great-great-grandparents, sixteen great-great-great-grandparents, eight great-great-grandparents, four great-grandparents, and grandparents on her biological father’s side—many of whom aren’t born yet. It takes a hundred and twenty-seven people to get from his parents’ generation to Mac’s.

Literally, because after he cross-references her results with every relevant database he can access from the Batcave, he compiles a list of her known ancestors…

…and one of the names on that list is his own.

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When she comes home, still dressed in her raincoat and Syd’s shirt over her bra and panties and wearing cheap flip-flops she bought at the train station on her feet, Mac finds Len asleep on her sofa.

Lisa invited Len to have dinner at the Clocktower and meet her girlfriends on the same night that Mac, Syd, Cisco, and Caitlin are attacked in Starling. Which made the news, but alas, the Channel 52 broadcast didn’t include any details beyond “a security guard was confirmed dead on the scene” and “the S. C. P. D. are in the process of linking this crime to a string of similar robberies and murders throughout the city.” Of course no one could get ahold of Mac, so Len decided to spend
the night on the couch so he’d be there when she came back home.

Mac fell asleep on the train home and she’s too exhausted to sift through the messages and voicemails that’ve accumulated in the past six hours. There’s one from Len, but instead of listening to his voicemail she shucks her raincoat and sits on top of the coffee table. Then she touches his shoulder lightly with two fingertips.

Len grabs her wrist before he sits up and squints at her in the dark. “Mac,” he rasps, his voice raw. “You’re here.”

Mac nods, slowly. “I live here,” she points out.

When he dreams about her, it always feels too good. Impossibly good. After all, guys like him—who steal and lie and cheat and hurt people just because they can—don’t get girls like her. Only now he knows she isn’t too good to be true. Which actually makes him want her more. Mac isn’t doing what he wants her to do, but somehow, the reality of her is better than his fantasies.

Len holds her gaze and strokes the inside of her wrist with the rough pad of this thumb instead of letting her go. When he touches her, he still can’t quite believe it’s really happening. “You’re safe,” he murmurs. “You’re real.”

There’s a thread of vulnerability in his voice, but Mac is too tired to unravel it. “Of course I’m real,” she tells him softly. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

Len uses the hand around her wrist to pull her flush against him without thinking it through. Mac wraps an arm around his waist and buries her face in the crook of his neck instead of pushing him away. Len closes his eyes and savors the warmth of her in his arms, the soft press of her body; the subtle, heady sweetness of her scent. Whether it’s the shampoo she uses or a fragrance she wears or just her, he can’t get enough.

“I was so worried about you,” he whispers. Almost indignantly, because part of him hates feeling this way about her. Like she’s all that matters. Like he can’t focus on anything else. Like he’s obsessed.


Len pulls back to look at her. It’s dark, but she’s so pale her skin glows in the slivers of moonlight and lamplight slinking through the window. “You never answered my question, sweetheart,” he drawls. “What about friends with benefits? I’m sure it’s been a while, hmm?” he tilts her face up and caresses her cheekbone with his thumb. “I could make you feel so good…”

Mac tugs her bottom lip between her teeth and shakes her head. “I told you that I’m not ready for whatever is happening between us,” she tells him. “because right now my head is a mess and my heart is broken. I need you to stop pushing your luck with me and give me time so I can heal. If you can’t do that, then we shouldn’t be friends. Maybe we shouldn’t be anything.”

Len makes a frustrated noise low in his throat and lets her go. Mac scoots back to sit at minimum safe distance and uses her powers to turn on the lights. Len closes his eyes and winces at the brightness. It’s not like he can really blame her for anything. Mac is trying to recover from an abusive relationship that transcends time and space. It’s not something he can relate to, exactly, but he understands how being hurt by someone you love can mess you up all too well. Len knows she needs to put herself first because that’s precisely what he’s always done.

“Sorry,” he says, trying not to sound petulant and failing miserably.
Mac swallows thickly. “Don’t be,” she sighs. “I should be apologizing to you for all of…” she flails one hand at herself as her words fail, “…this.”

Len cocks his head and follows the haphazard line of her gesticulation with his eyes. Only he stops cold at the hem of the flannel shirt she has on because she’s not wearing anything else. Now that the lights are on, he can see everything: her pale thighs, the black lace of her bra and panties showing through the thin material of the shirt, her lips dark pink and swollen from biting. Len clenches his teeth around a groan and tries not to think about all the dirty, nasty things he wants to do to her.

Cool it, he thinks. Now isn’t the time.

“If you need time,” he says, blatantly ogling her legs because he’s only human, “I can give that to you. Now tell me,” he drags his gaze up from her legs to look her in the eyes, “whose shirt is that?”

“Oh!” Mac cackles and slaps both hands over her mouth to stifle the sound. “It’s not what you think,” she tells him. “I had to borrow this shirt from an employee of mine after I teleported last night because the discharge from using my powers that way vaporized my clothes. Don’t worry,” she smiles, but doesn’t show her teeth, “he was wearing a t-shirt underneath. Also,” she uses her cane to get back on her feet and hobbles toward the elevator, “he’s not my type.”

Len cocks his head and checks out her ass. “What exactly is your type?” he asks as the sliding doors open.

Mac snorts and smiles where he can’t see before she gets in the elevator. “Um,” she yawns into the hollow of one palm and just as the doors are about to close he hears her mumble under her breath: “my type is pretty much you.”

When she hobbles into the cortex later that morning, Iris is waiting for Mac on the sofa outside her office.

“It wasn’t a metahuman,” Mac tells her before she opens her mouth and asks the obvious question. “It was a man who was injected with something called Mirakuru, a supersoldier serum created by the Imperial Japanese Army during World War II.”

Iris raises her eyebrows as high as they can go. “Seriously?” she gives Mac an incredulous look. “You’re telling me this on the record?”

Mac nods. “I’d rather you quote me as an anonymous source, though,” she says. “Also, the existence of the serum is classified information, so a shady government organization might get involved if you write an article about it. I’m not telling you that to keep you from writing your story. It’s your call. I just want you to know what you’re getting into.”

Iris nods in return and smiles at her. “I appreciate that,” she says.

“Here’s what’s off the record,” Mac says. “Deathstroke stole a prototype of a biotransfuser from our storage facility because he wants to create an army of supersoldiers. Cisco, Caitlin, and I are working with the Starling City vigilante to synthesize a cure.”

“You’re going back there,” Iris deduces, “to Starling. You’re going to help fight the Mirakuru army.”

Mac sighs. Iris is too smart for her own good, sometimes. “Yes I am,” she says, “and you’re going to tail me onto the train if I don’t invite you along, aren’t you?”
Iris smiles wider and reaches out to squeeze her shoulder before she walks away. “Text me after you buy the tickets,” she calls over her shoulder on her way out, “so I can pay you back for mine.”

Mac rolls her eyes and goes to open the door to her office. Which is unlocked, even though she locks it every time she leaves the room because she doesn’t trust Eobard not to snoop through her things.

There are two men standing in front of her desk. Their silhouettes are equal but opposite: both are tall men with dark hair and broad shoulders, but while one is dressed in a pair of beige slacks and a white dress shirt made to hide the supersuit underneath, the other is wearing an impeccably tailored black suit and cufflinks made to look like tiny platinum bats.

_Holy element of surprise, Batman_, Mac thinks.[280] Out loud, she says: “Omigod, you brought me a billionaire playboy. Clark, you shouldn’t have.”

Bruce exhales a soft noise that’s caught somewhere between a snort and a tut before he turns to face her. When he looks at her, his lingers in weird places: the shape of her chin, her ears, the flare of her nostrils. “Don’t bother downplaying your intelligence,” he says. “I know you’re smart. It runs in the family.”

Mac narrows her eyes at him. “What is that supposed to mean?” she wants to know.

“It’s been seven generations,” Bruce says with a strange hushed edge to his voice, “you shouldn’t look so much like her, but your eyes…they’re just like my mother’s.”

Clark slumps and folds himself into one of the chairs in front of her desk with a long-suffering sigh. “Why do you have to be so blunt, Bruce, buddy?” he wonders. “I’m not busting your chops, but couldn’t you have broken this to her more gently?”

Mac hobbles around them to sit at her desk and flops into her chair. “Oliver blew up the applied sciences lab at Queen Consolidated,” she says more to herself than either of them, “and he doesn’t have the equipment to run a DNA test in his lair. Felicity must’ve sent my blood sample to you.”

Bruce nods, curtly. “I ran your results until your sample was gone,” he tells her, “and he doesn’t have the equipment to run a DNA test in his lair. Felicity must’ve sent my blood sample to you.”

Bruce nods, curtly. “I ran your results until your sample was gone,” he tells her, “they came back the same every time. You’re from the future. There’s no other explanation. When you have eliminated all which is impossible—”

“Then whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth.”[281] Mac exhales a soft whoosh of air. “We’re family,” she says quietly, incredulously. Like she can’t quite believe it.

_Jeepers_, she thinks. _Just when I think my life couldn’t possibly be any weirder, it turns out I’m descended from the goddamn Batman._

Bruce is paranoid and he has massive trust issues. Not to mention how terrible he is at feelings in general. Orphaned at the tender age of ten. Raised by a former agent for MI6 who could make James Bond look like a rank, arrogant amateur.[282] Trained by David Cain,[283] Ted Grant, Henri Ducard,[284] and Giovanni Zatara,[285] among others. Caped Crusader, World’s Greatest Detective, Dark Knight, and part of the greatest trinity of superheroes this world has ever seen.

Mac doesn’t just come from villains like the Clock King, or the Viper, or Livewire—she also comes from the Batman.

“I wanted to meet you,” he says, and suddenly she realizes what that soft thread in his voice is.
Hope.

Mac flicks her gaze to Clark. “I’m guessing you overheard what I told my friend Iris,” she says, “about the Mirakuru and whatnot.”

Clark nods, a quick bob of his head. “I came here to make sure you were all right,” he tells her, “and to interview you about the attack, but if you don’t feel up to it, I totally understand.”

Mac plucks a pen from the owl-shaped mug on top of her desk and writes something on a neon blue post-it note. “Here,” she says, “that’s my cell phone number. Text me your questions and I’ll answer them. We’re in a league of our own.” Here she bites the inside of her cheek to stop herself from laughing at the anachronistic inside joke. “We should keep in touch.”


Tales of a Scorched Earth (1) War Is a Purification Rite

It’s a rebirth, a rebuilding
of what was never really destroyed.
In what is its own kind of starlight,
a thousand bright minds flicker on,
our imaginations like flashlights,
searching for a path,
blinking in the dark.

Mindy Nettifee, “The Connection Between God and Nature Beats Me Over the Head with Its Earthly Mallet”

Shock Value
Part 2
Myth Can Make Reality More Intelligible
Book I
With a Stroke of Lightning
Chapter 25
Tales of a Scorched Earth
(1 of 3)

“The world moves forward. Ours is a different time. We must create something better than that from which we came. Now stand and fight!”

Diana of Themyscira


I
War Is a Purification Rite

Mac hobbles onto the Ferris Air tarmac, blinking away the tears congealing at the corners of her eyes. Apparently the night wind makes her leaky. How unfortunate, she thinks as she yawns and swipes at her face with her sleeve. Caroline snaps a picture of her mid-yawn, the flash on her camera so bright in the dark that Mac blinks and tries to see with electroreception because she can’t see with her ordinary vision. When the phosphenes subside, she sees a line of training droids to her left and an assortment of metahumans accompanied by drabs for moral support to her right.

“Okay,” she says, eking the oh sound out into an ooh as her vision comes back, “as the only metahuman expert in the entire world at this point in time, I’d like to clarify a few things. Thing one: no two power sets are exactly alike, because every metagene expresses itself in a unique way. Thing two: because every person has different experiences and emotional responses, our triggers for tapping into our powers are also unique. I use anger as a focus, but anger can make other people get sloppy.”

Shawna folds her arms and cocks her left hip. “Mine’s fear,” she says. “I teleport without thinking
when I get scared.”

“If you asked me a few weeks ago,” Laurel murmurs, “I would have said that I channel my grief. I’ve been picturing my dad, or Tommy…thinking about what they would say to me if they were still here…what I lost when I lost them. Only now,” she glances at Sara and smiles, “I picture the people that I want to protect.”

Sara smiles back. “I’m the Canary,” she says. “I don’t need protection.”

Laurel cocks her head, birdlike, and shrugs. “You’re my sister,” she says. “I’ll always feel protective of you, even now that you’re a grown-ass woman, and a badass assassin to boot.”

“I was terrified the first time I made a forcefield,” Caroline says, “because Danny—the copycat Clipper—was about to slice my helix off, but my trigger is…Barry. I feel like half of me is missing, but then I focus on what the man in yellow took away from us. I don’t know if it’s resolve, or revenge, but it makes me feel stronger.”

Julie flicks her gaze to Shawna and stuffs her hands into the pockets of her puffy coat. “Mine’s fear too,” she says. “I panic, and things shake. I have a meltdown, and things shake. I made a sinkhole in my backyard, and it’s still open because I have no idea how to fill it.”

“I think I can help with that,” Mac tells her, “everyone get back.”

Mac flails her hands and makes shooing gesticulations at them until they’re at minimum safe distance. Then she stops generating the pulse that dampens her powers and starts glowing with bright ultraviolet light. Lightning slithers through her hair and in between her fingertips. Mac inhales and siphons as much energy as possible into herself before she lets it out again. Veins of electricity shred the asphalt until the tarmac is a mess of pulverized concrete, tar-grout, and macadam. Mac turns to look at her friends as the noise shudders to a palpable halt.

“As you can see,” she says, “I destroyed the tarmac. Without disturbing the surrounding structures, bursting the pipes in the ground, or harming any of you. There’s a difference,” she pauses to muffle another yawn, “between having power and having precision. Without the level of control that I have, releasing the amount of energy I accumulated for this demonstration would’ve created an electrical surge powerful enough to kill all of you. I absorbed that surge before it could do any more damage than I wanted it to do. However,” she exhales a soft whoosh of air, “I achieved this level of precision because I was tortured for years and pushed to limits I didn’t even know I had. I wouldn’t wish that on any of you.”

Sara exhales sharply and gives her a knowing smile. “Yeah,” she murmurs. “I’ve done that. It’s not an experience I’d wish on anyone, not even my worst enemy.”

Mac nods sideways, tilting her earlobe into it. “Cisco helped me create a series of tests to figure out where your limits are,” she says, “but first we need to resurface. I destroyed the tarmac. Julie,” she gestures until the geokinetic steps forward, “you’re going to put it back.”

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**One Month Later**

It takes Caitlin two weeks to synthesize a cure for Mirakuru. Cisco spends those two weeks designing bullets that are capable of wounding or killing the supersoldiers, while Armie makes customized supersuits for everyone with the help of her mentor, Paul Gambi.[286]
“Omigod,” Cisco intones as he gawks at the assemblage of vigilantes in the cortex. “This is the coolest thing that has ever happened to me.”

Mac smiles as she tucks her shirt into her shorts and uses her powers to zip up the bulletproof blue bustier that Armie made. It’s busked over a thin shirt that covers her from throat to fingertips in soft, gauzy material so she doesn’t chafe. (Mac didn’t want to wear a bra in the field, but she’s too busty to walk around without any kind of support, so the bustier was a compromise.) Cisco has been tinkering with a pair of superconductive gauntlets that cover her from wrist to elbow and serve a dual purpose as a brace for her arthritic wrist for a few months, but she hasn’t had any reason to use them. Until now.

After she exhales a soft whoosh of air, Mac zips her boots up over her leggings and puts her mask on over her glasses. “Okay,” she says as she emerges from her office in her outfit, “how do I look?”

“Like everyone who looks at you will be staring at your breasts,” Nyssa says, “so they won’t remember your face.”

“Hey,” Sara interjects, “that’s a solid strategy for concealing your identity.”

“…by revealing my iden-titties?” Mac deadpans.

Sara chortles loudly. Laurel rolls her eyes. “What you’re wearing isn’t that revealing,” she points out.

Mac shrugs and resists the urge to text Len that pun. Lisa isn’t here because she’s pulling a job with her brother: they’re stealing the Vandervoort diamonds,[287] a score that Mac told her about because she doesn’t want him involved in this. Len is wanted by the F. B. I. and A. R. G. U. S. Amanda Waller is going to send in the troops to capture Deathstroke (they’re the ones who gave him that codename) and keep the supersoldiers from leaving the city. Mac knows she won’t be able to focus on the mission if she’s worrying about Len. It’s not safe to have him on the team—for either of them.

So, to that end, the team for this mission consists of: Helena as the Huntress, Sara as the Canary, Laurel as the Black Canary, Nyssa as the Roc, Cynthia as Sin (because they couldn’t find a babysitter capable of keeping the ten-year-old assassin from tailing them to Starling), Shawna as Peek-a-Boo, Bea as Fire, Tora as Ice, Julie as Aftershock, Joan as the Flare,[288] Iris as the intrepid reporter, and Caroline as herself.

Cisco clears his throat to get their attention as soon as everyone is finally in costume and standing around the tables in the cortex that he set up showcasing the tech he made. “Okay,” he picks up a tiny earpiece from one of the tables and holds it for everyone to see, “everybody gets a com.”

“Cisco and I will be running mission control from the cortex,” Caitlin explains, “these devices will allow you to communicate with us and each other.”

“Now,” Cisco passes a clip to Iris, “these bullets are designed to put down any and all supersoldiers who try to put the hurt on you.”

“Never draw on someone unless you’re prepared to shoot them,” Iris murmurs as she loads the clip and clicks the safety on before she puts her .44 Magnum back in its holster.

Laurel and Sara exchange a knowing look. “Cop dad?” Laurel asks.

Eobard corners Mac in the hall before she leaves and grabs her wrist to keep her from walking away. “You shouldn’t be doing this,” he tells her softly. “You shouldn’t try to change history.”

Mac snorts. “Tess Morgan will never cure cancer,” she murmurs. “Harrison Wells will never have a chance to build his labs in every country and help people all over the world. Barry Allen will become the Flash six years before he was supposed to. Caroline Allen exists—”

“Our future is still intact,” Eobard says in a harsh, flat voice, “but every alteration you make to the timeline runs the risk of erasing that future.”

Mac generates an electromagnetic pulse to make him let her go and forces herself not to recoil as fear churns through her, visceral and nauseating. “Don’t tell me not to change history when you know we already have,” she retorts as she hobbles to the elevator. “This is the world we made. I won’t apologize to you or to anyone else for trying to live in it.”

There are still trains running from Central to Starling because the Mirakuru onslaught isn’t public knowledge yet. Felicity used the infrared thermographic imaging capabilities of the S. T. A. R. Labs satellite to find the biotransfuser he stole, but Team Arrow wasn’t fast enough to find him in time to stop him from using the serum in Roy Harper’s blood to create more supersoldiers. Slade is waiting until nightfall to unleash his army on the city. Mac bought every seat on every single train running to Starling that day to keep people safe, but that won’t be enough.

_Deathstroke has a hundred men, Mac thinks, and one woman who has some beef with Felicity. I have a quasigoddess\([289]\) with an affinity for ice magic, a pyrokinetic, a fragokinetic,\([290]\) an ergokinetic,\([291]\) a geokinetic, a teleporter, and assorted drabs,\([292]\) a reporter, a hacker, a soldier, three vigilantes, and three assassins. I’d say the odds are in our favor._

Mac has an eidetic memory, but it doesn’t work the same way it does in fiction. Nobody has a photographic memory. Elizabeth Stromeyer—the only person in recorded history whose ability to achieve total recall was ever documented with any level of accuracy and the subject of a controversial onetime study done by Charles Stromeyer, her future husband—was a metahuman.\([293]\) Mac remembers pretty much everything she reads and absolutely everything she writes down, but other things slip through the cracks. It’s like her brain is a sieve, only she can’t control what sticks in her mind and what falls out.

Unfortunately, her memories of season two of _Arrow_ are fuzzy at best. It aired from 2013 to 2014 on Earth-33, two years before she graduated from college and spent another two years on Earth-1 in the previous timeline. After five months in this new timeline, her memories of Earth-33 are starting to fade. It feels like a dream, not a life she lived.

_Mackenzie Harper-Lowell was just a girl; a romantic, hopeful, idealistic girl._

_Rose Russell was a woman in a refrigerator, an object, a footnote in someone else’s story._

_Rose Russell was a woman in a refrigerator, an object, a footnote in someone else’s story._

_Mac Howell is something else._

“Okay.” Mac exhales a soft whoosh of air. “These are your missions, should you choose to accept them. Joan and Shawna: evacuation duty. There will be trains waiting at the station to take people to the evacuation centers my paid volunteers have set up. Shawna, this is the time to test whether you’re capable of teleporting with more than one other person. Joan, you’re going to try to generate two or more explosions and take out multiple targets simultaneously.”
“Um…” Joan raises her hand out of habit before she asks: “What if I can’t?”

“Then you start with the closest enemy,” Sara tells her, “and go from there.”

“Sara and Julie,” Mac says, “I want you to keep the supersoldiers from taking over the S. C. P. D. headquarters. Cisco couldn’t make enough bullets to arm every cop in Starling, but what we have should make it possible to turn the precinct into a stronghold.”

Julie nods. Sara cocks her head, birdlike, and gives Mac a two-fingered salute.

“Laurel and Helena,” Mac continues, “I want you to find the vigilante and make contact with his team. According to a friend of mine who works with him, Deathstroke is tapping their phones. I don’t want to disable his surveillance system because seeing what he sees gives me the advantage, but Team Arrow should take point here because this is their city, not mine. Nyssa, I need you to find out where Deathstroke’s base of operations is. Cindy, you’re with Nyssa—”

“Wait,” Iris holds up one hand and gives Mac an incredulous look, “she’s just a kid. What is she even doing here?”

Mac bites down on the inside of her cheek hard enough to draw blood.

“Damita, she’s just a kid,” Emilia Russell had insisted.

“No,” Damita Waller had snarled, “she’s a weapon, and if A. R. G. U. S. doesn’t use your niece, someone else will.”

“Cynthia is a full member of the League of Assassins trained by myself and my father,” Nyssa informs her in a soft, deadly voice, “and for all intents and purposes, she is my daughter. I trust her with my life, and I trust her at my back more than I’d trust anyone else in this world, save for my beloved Sara.”

“I’m not comfortable with bringing a child into a war zone,” Laurel says, “but if she didn’t get permission to come with us, Cindy would’ve probably tried to get to Starling on her own.”

Sin nods, a slow descent of her chin. “I would’ve,” she says, “we don’t let those we love go into battle without us.”

“At least this way Nyssa can keep her safe,” Sara says. “It’s the lesser of two evils, trust me.”

Mac exhales with enough force to flap her lips and defuses the building tension with the rubbery sound. “Iris and Caroline,” she says, changing the subject, “I want you to find Liv Ortega.”

“Liv Ortega,” Iris says, “the reporter for Channel 52?”

Mac nods, sharply. “According to the notes on her computer, Ortega is investigating the theft of the biotransfuser that Deathstroke stole from me. I don’t want her to get killed in the process, and she’s planning to break the story live tonight, so she’ll have a television crew following her around.”

Iris writes something on a notepad she usually keeps in the pocket of her jeans and flips it closed. “You’re saying I’m going to cover this story live,” she deduces, “on a national news station. With one of my favorite broadcast journalists.”

Mac nods again, slowly. “Yes,” she tells her.

Iris scoops Mac into a big hug and squeezes her friend as she squawks awkwardly. Mac eventually
calms down and hugs Iris back. Laurel chortles as Mac squirms in her seat to keep them from tipping over. Sara coos at them, eking out a loud aww, but she’s not mocking. Nyssa strokes the back of Sara’s hand lightly with the fingertips before Sara takes Nyssa’s hand in hers and intertwines their fingers.

Caroline looks up from her book and squints at them before she puts her glasses back on. “What’d I miss?” she wonders.

Tora and Bea aren’t on the train because they’re on guard duty. Syd volunteered to bring the cure to the rendezvous point, and Mac let that happen because she knows his brothers live in Starling. A. R. G. U. S. hasn’t sent in the troops or blockaded the ways out of the city, so they arrive without a fuss. Then one of the supersoldiers halts in front of the van and flips it upside-down with one hand. Bea is snuffed out after she hits her head; Tora is muttering something under her breath in a language that sounds guttural and harsh. Old Norse, probably. Syd feels his femur snap, the ugly noise of bones cracking obscured by the shattering glass and crunching metal.

When his phone buzzes, Syd groans and scrapes his palms raw on the asphalt trying to answer it. “Hello?” he says, gritting his teeth in pain around the word.

“Hey,” says a female voice on the other end of the line, “it’s Felicity Smoak. Where are you?”

Syd flops onto his stomach and cranes his neck to look at the sides of the road. “Fourth Street, I think,” he tells her, “a guy in a hockey mask came out of nowhere and attacked my car. I don’t know what happened. Please help me.”

“Stay there,” Felicity says.

Syd guffaws and regrets it intensely and immediately. “I couldn’t move even if I wanted to,” he wheezes, “I think my leg is broken.”

Slade is eavesdropping on their conversation, but he isn’t the only one. When she teleports onto the corner of Fourth Street and Electric Avenue, Mac is pleased to see that all of her clothes are still intact.

There’s a van careening toward her, but it’s not hers. Mac hobbles into the street as one of the supersoldiers pushes an abandoned car in front of them and the van flips through the night air. Diggle, Felicity, and Oliver brace themselves for impact, but they don’t crash. Mac uses her powers to flip their van right side up before she lowers it onto the road.

Felicity gapes at her through the windshield. Mac waves to her as she eyes the four supersoldiers assembling in the street. “Hey guys,” she shouts over the chaos, “it’s four against one. How about we even those odds?”

Then, as if on cue, a man in a red cape lands to her right. Clark looks over his shoulder at Mac and grins wide and warm. “It’s a slow night in Metropolis,” he quips, “and I heard you could use my help.”

“Holy crap,” Felicity blurts as she practically falls out of the passenger seat and onto the asphalt, “you know Superman? Since when do you know Superman?”

“Since she saved my girlfriend’s life a few months back,” Clark says. “So,” he takes a step up and hovers a few feet above the crater he made in the street without thinking about it, “would you say the odds are even now?”
Mac snorts. There’s nothing derisive about the way her nostrils flare, though. “Nope,” she retorts and pops the p sound before she narrows her eyes at one of the supersoldiers and throws a bolt of lightning at his face. “I’d say they’re in our favor.”


[287] *The Flash* 2x10 (“Potential Energy”) 19 January 2016. It’s never specified what happened to these diamonds, but I’d be shocked (pun unintended) if there’s a gem in the Gem Cities that Len hasn’t tried to steal.

[288] There’s a character with the codename Flare who’s a member of the Fatal Five—a group that opposes the Legion of Superheroes—in the comics, but I’mma pretend Joan is her ancestor and it’s a legacy name. I’m also ignoring the other villain named Flare, who’s a dude who only appeared in one issue of *Sensation Comics* in 1947. Joan is vastly superior to some random dude anyway, imo.

[289] As opposed to a demigod or demigoddess, a quasigod or quasigoddess is a person who’s directly descended from a deity rather than the child of a deity and a mortal.

[290] Fragokinesis is the ability to create and manipulate explosions.

[291] Ergokinesis is the ability to create and manipulate forcefields.

[292] I’ve decided that “drabs” is the slang for “non-metahuman” that’s commonly used in the potential future Eobard and Mac are from.

[293] Elizabeth Stromeyer was a real person, the only one whose eidetic memory couldn’t be explained by some other phenomena, but it was also never proven to exist in the capacity that her husband originally claimed that it did, so who knows? (x)

[294] Damita Waller first appeared in *Secret Origins* Vol. 2, No. 14 (“The Secret Origin of the Suicide Squad”) May, 1987. Damita is one of five children that Amanda Waller has in the comics, but since the Arrowverse version of her is (a) aged way down and (b) was killed off in *Arrow* 4x11 (“A.W.O.L.”) 27 January 2016, she probably didn’t have five kids in show canon. I’ve postulated that Damita is her direct descendant instead.

Tales of a Scorched Earth (2) You Must Disagree with Authority Figures

Press 2 if you wish to detonate.
Press 1 never to have been born.
Press 0 if you intend
universal Armageddon.
Have a nice day.

Marge Piercy, “All Systems Are Up”

Shock Value
Part 2
Myth Can Make Reality More Intelligible
Book I
With a Stroke of Lightning
Chapter 26
Tales of a Scorched Earth
(2 of 3)

II
You Must Disagree with Authority Figures

Diggle, Felicity, and Oliver find Syd with a broken leg, a pulverized hand, and an empty set of cuffs—the case that had contained the cure is long gone. Clark goes to help Shawna and Joan evacuate the civilians, while Mac teleports to the Glades.

Ray Palmer is engaged to Anna Choi-Loring,[296] daughter of Dr. Ryan Choi,[297]—a professor of particle physics at Ivy Town University—and Jean Loring, Esq.[298] Anna wasn’t always on his radar, though; she spent nineteen years as Ryan Choi, Jr. before she came out as trans, and she was best friends with his little brother since kindergarten.

When she was a kid, Anna spent her summers with her mother, who lived in the Glades until she made partner at the law firm where she works, and ended up following in her footsteps to become a defense attorney. Ray first kissed her at his mother’s funeral—two years before she told him that she wasn’t a boy, a year before she was legal—and he avoided her like a chickenshit for years. Then she became a law student at Ivy Town University. After that, it was only a matter of time until he made a move. Of course he didn’t plan on getting caught with his hand under her skirt in the faculty lounge by her father, but at least his brother Dan approved.

Daniel Palmer is four years younger than the twins and he has sickle cell disease, the same illness that killed their mother.[299] After she died, twenty-one-year-old Ray tried to shoulder her parental duties because their father had died of pancreatic cancer a few years earlier.[300] Syd, on the other hand, started blowing through his trust fund; spending his money on weed, magic mushrooms, anything that could make him stop feeling all the bad stuff for a while. Ray never forgave Syd for numbing out in aftermath of her death and leaving him to handle everything; Syd never forgave Ray for being the prodigal son, or for believing that his way was always the right way.
Dan moved to Starling a year before the public resurrection of Oliver Queen to work at Kord Industries. Anna turned down a job at C. N. R. I. and an offer to practice at her mother’s law firm so she could work as the in-house legal counsel for Palmer Technologies instead, but she and Dan are still best friends even though he works for a rival corporation. When the supersoldiers attack, Dan is meeting Anna and Ray for dinner. Mac teleports to the Glades in time to thwart a hulking man who’s trying to snap Anna’s neck—but she’s too late to save Dan.

Plot point: Anna Choi-Loring dies in the Glades and losing her galvanizes Ray into building his exosuit. Retconned.

Ray’s broken femur is visible in the bloody meat of his right leg. Anna flops gracelessly to her knees and throws her arms around him. Ray buries his face in her shoulder and fists his hand in her shirt, his knuckles clenched bloodless and white. Mac sighs and extracts her phone from the pocket of her shorts to call Shawna. “I need you to evacuate two people in the Glades,” she says before she hangs up.

“I’m not…” Ray grits his teeth and hisses, his harsh exhale a flare against Anna’s clavicle. “I’m not leaving my brother.”

Shawna appears beside Mac and crouches in front of Ray. Anna chokes on a yelp, her throat sore enough that she knows it’s going to bruise later. Mac feels her phone vibrate and looks down to see a message from Felicity. “I’m so sorry, Ray,” she tells him softly.

“Wait,” Ray shouts as she hobbles away, “who are you? How do you know my name?”

Diggle, Felicity, and Oliver are regrouping at a shabby clock tower a few blocks from where Mac found the once and future Atom. There’s plastic sheeting hanging from the rafters and shards of broken glass where the face of the clock should be. Mac hobbles up the stairs and finds Team Arrow looking worse for wear. Felicity has blood congealing on her upper lip, Diggle is rigidly trying not to jostle a sprained shoulder, and Oliver just looks exhausted.

“We can’t stop Slade’s men without the cure,” Oliver says quietly, the promise of defeat heavy in his voice.

“We’ll find another way,” Diggle insists.

“There is no other way!” Oliver yells, “the foundry's been compromised and we need to get Roy and Mĕi out of there.”

“I’m on it,” Diggle says.

Felicity turns away as she tries to stop herself from crying. Mac pats her upper arm awkwardly and Felicity swallows thickly before she crumbles, her mouth trembling as she gulps and sobs.

“I didn’t know, Felicity,” Oliver tells her, “five years ago, I was a completely different person, and I had no idea that something like this was even…possible. I couldn’t have imagined it. When you and Diggle brought me back to Starling City, I made a vow to myself that I would never let anything like the Undertaking happen again.”

Felicity snuffles loudly. “What’s happening now is not your fault,” she says.

“Yes it is,” Oliver retorts. “I have failed this city. Yáo Fēi, Shado, Tommy…my father, my mother…all that I have ever wanted to do is honor those people.”
“You honor the dead by fighting,” Felicity says, her voice quivering with anger now. “You are not done fighting! Malcolm Merlyn, the Count, the Clock King, the Triad—”

“Hey,” Mac cuts in flatly, “don’t lump Billy in with the mass murderers and drug lords.”

Felicity ignores her. “You stopped everyone who ever tried to hurt this city,” she says. “You will stop Slade.”

“I don’t know how,” Oliver says, almost forlornly.

“Neither do I,” Felicity takes a step toward him, “but I do know two things.” When she takes another step, he has to force himself not to back away from her because the idea of getting close to her is unthinkable. “Oliver, you are not alone,” she tells him, “and I believe in you.”

Felicity goes on tiptoe to wrap her arms around his shoulders. Oliver exhales a sharp gust of air before he lets himself hold her, take comfort in her, accept what she’s trying to give to him.

Then, as if on cue, Bruce emerges from the shadows so silently that Mac doesn’t notice him until he’s right next to her. “Ms. Smoak is right,” he says, “it’s not your fault.”

Mac yelps. “Okay,” she blurts, “does the whole ‘I am the night’ thing run in the family too?”

Bruce snorts. “Slade Wilson made his choices,” he says, “you’re not responsible for what havoc he wreaks just because you chose not to kill him when you had the chance.”

Mac side-eyes him. Of course he’d say that. After all, he keeps sending the members of his rogues’ gallery to Arkham even though the asylum practically has a revolving door and more importantly, the doctors never actually help their patients.

“Yeah,” she sighs, “but sometimes bad people won’t stop until they’re dead.”

Bruce shakes his head slowly underneath his cowl. “There’s always another way,” he says. “I have to believe that.”

Diggle returns to the clock tower with Mĕi and Roy in time to break the silence that ensues. After Sebastian Blood offers to bring them the antiserum because he has buyer’s remorse about being in cahoots with Slade, he and Oliver leave to pick up the cure despite the possibility that it could be a trap. Isobel Rochev stabs the newly elected mayor in the heart and he bleeds out on his desk; but it doesn’t matter, because Team Arrow has the cure.

Bruce swoops onto the roof to keep watch as Felicity and Oliver argue over whether or not they should test the cure on Roy. Mac uses her powers to watch the live broadcast Iris and Liv are doing from downtown near the Dearden bridge. “A. R. G. U. S. is sending in the troops,” she says, “and they’re tapping security feeds all over the city to assess the situation before they decide Starling is a lost cause.”

Oliver makes a soft, frustrated noise that snarls through his chest and grabs his phone to call the Wall. “Amanda,” he growls, “what are you doing?”

“I’m not sure what you mean, Oliver,” Waller retorts.

“These troops aren’t army,” Oliver says, “they’re A. R. G. U. S. Those are your men. Tell me what they’re doing here.” When she doesn’t answer, he snarls again and yells, “Amanda!”
“Slade’s followers are a clear and present danger,” Waller says. “I cannot allow them to escape the city. There’s a drone en route carrying six GBU 43-B bombs, enough firepower to level Starling.”

“There are over half a million people in this city,” Oliver points out in a hush, horrified by the measures she would take, but not remotely surprised.

“I have to think about the people in every city,” Waller tells him gravely, “you once told me that Mirakuru made a man virtually unstoppable. What could happen to this country—to the world—if I don’t end this here and now?”

“I have the cure,” Oliver tells her urgently. “I can stop Slade and his men.”

“I can’t take the chance that you’ll fail, Oliver,” Waller says.

“Amanda,” Oliver whispers, “I just need more time.”

“I’m sorry,” Waller says, “you have until dawn, and then Starling City is a crater.”

[296] Anna Loring, Ray’s dead fiancée who was fridged offscreen at some point between Arrow 2x22 (“Streets of Fire”) 7 May 2014 and Arrow 2x23 (“Unthinkable”) 14 May 2014, was first mentioned in Arrow 3x09 (“The Climb”) 10 December 2014 and she first appeared in Legends of Tomorrow 1x12 (“Last Refuge”) 21 April 2016. I created my own version of Anna before the show deigned to give her a surname and made her into a knockoff of Jean Loring (Ray’s ex-wife from the comics who appears in S2 of Arrow as a friend of Moira Queen who’s old enough that she could be Ray’s mother in show canon): Anna Choi a.k.a. the trans female version of Ryan Choi. I’ve modified the reboot version of her so she’s Jean’s daughter, not a demigoddess. I imagine my version of her as Chloe Bennet.

[297] Ryan Choi’s father in the comics is Professor Choi—no forename—so I decided to get lazy and postulate that he named his only son after himself. It works out in this ’verse, because he ended up with a daughter instead of a son.


[300] It’s canon that David Palmer—Ray’s father—died of cancer in the comics. I extrapolated the type of cancer, but not his cause of death.
10^{25} \text{ molecules} \\
\text{are enough} \\
to call wood thrush or apple.

A hummingbird, fewer. \\
A wristwatch: 10^{24}.

An alphabet’s molecules, \\
tasting of honey, iron, and salt, \\
cannot be counted—

as some strings, untouched, \\
sound when a near one is speaking.

So it was when love slipped inside us. \\
It looked out face to face in every direction. \\
Then it was inside the tree, the rock, the cloud.

Jane Hirshfield, “First Light Edging Cirrus”

Shock Value
Part 2
Myth Can Make Reality More Intelligible
Book I
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III
Nothing Upsets the Balance of Good and Evil

Oliver hangs up on Waller and tension weaves through his shoulders as he slams the phone down on top of the table. Roy, who’s lying flat on the table with an infusion of the cure circulating in his veins, doesn’t even notice. There’s a fire consuming a building across the street, the flames licking at the night sky as they gorge on glass and chrome. It reminds Mac of the potential future in 2046,\cite{301} of kissing Len in a post-apocalyptic bar; of Mick, and a series of unfortunate events that ended with the death of her husband.

When she hears her radio beep, Mac sighs. “Medusa here,” she yawns through the long vowel and covers her mouth with one hand before she says, “report.”

“Canary here,” Sara says, “two hundred members of the League of Assassins are in play. When I spoke to Sarab,\cite{302} one of Ra’s four horsemen, he said to tell ʿīrith al Ghul these warriors are at her disposal. Who’s the Legacy of the Demon?”
“Um,” Mac says, her voice pitching awkwardly higher, “it’s me. Ra’s al Ghul is one of my ancestors. I have no idea how he found out about that, but I’m not surprised he knows.”

“Wait,” Sara blurts, “is Nyssa…?”

Mac shakes her head before she remembers Sara can’t see what she’s doing. “No,” she says, “her sister.”

“Talia…” Sara fizzes out on the ah sound. “No offense, but she’s the worst.”

Mac snorts. “None taken. Why don’t you tell Sarab that I want the warriors to help us evacuate the civilians and contain the supersoldiers? Oh,” she grins, “and tell him they should be reporting to Nyssa. Not me.”

“Got it. Canary out,” Sara says, and Mac can hear the vicious smile in her voice before static blooms quietly over the radio.

“Hey,” Cisco says, breaking the silence. “How’s it going over there?”

Mac heaves another sigh. “Deathstroke still has fifty supersoldiers in play,” she tells him, “We’ve only taken out half of them. It’s been six hours.” Here she exhales with enough force to flap her lips. “We don’t have six more hours. A. R. G. U. S. has given us until dawn to fix this or they cut their losses and nuke Starling. We’re testing the cure right now, but nothing’s happening—”

Then, as if on cue, a siren begins to shriek. Mac turns her radio off as Bruce swoops back in through the broken clock face. “We’ve got company,” he says.

“What’s that?” Oliver asks, shouting over the cacophony.

“Proximity alarm,” Felicity tells him as she taps on her tablet to bring up the infrared rendering of the clock tower being recorded by the S. T. A. R. Labs satellite. “I rigged the tower with sensors just in case Slade’s goons came to kill us.”

Mac hobbles to peer out over the shards of glass and winces at how bright their bioelectricity is. “Slade’s goons are here to kill us,” she deadpans.

“They’re inside,” Felicity clarifies. “They’re right underneath us.”

Of course Roy chooses the moment a squadron of supersoldiers is stomping up the stairs to storm the tower to wake up. “Where am I?” he groans just as one of them opens the hatch next to his feet. When he tries to punch the supersoldier in the face, his knuckles split and he yowls in pain before he gets flipped into a heap of tangled limbs on the floor.

“I guess the cure works,” Mac quips as Oliver kicks the supersoldier in the head and closes the hatch.

Unfortunately, another one reaches up through a hole in the floor to grab Felicity by the ankle. Felicity screams until Mac kneels and siphons all of the energy out of the supersoldier through his forearm to make him let her go. Bruce pulls a tiny grappling hook out of his utility belt and shoots it across the street at one of the buildings that isn’t burning.

“I want one of those for my birthday,” Mac tells him. “July thirty-first. Don’t forget.”

Bruce nods and offers Roy a hand up onto the window ledge and watches him give himself rope burns on both palms on his way down. Diggle grabs the case containing the cure before he uses
his belt to get down the cable. Felicity hesitates until Oliver grabs her by the waist and jumps with her in his arms.

“After you,” Bruce says gruffly.

Mac cocks her head at him to acknowledge either his sexist double-standards or his chivalry, probably the latter. Then she jumps out the window, but she doesn’t bother to use the cable to get across the street. Instead she uses her powers to slow the trajectory of her fall until she floats onto the sidewalk without jostling her bad ankle.

“Since when can you fly?” Felicity wants to know.

“Since I was six years old and I figured out how to fly using the geomagnetic field,” Mac says as Bruce lands on the asphalt next to her, his black cape billowing around him.

When she notices the loud whoosh of chopper blades churning above them, Mac glances up and sees an A. R. G. U. S. attack helicopter hovering over the street. There’s a woman balancing expertly on the landing skid, holding a rocket launcher. Mac closes her eyes and looks away as the tower explodes in thick plumes of smoke and fire.

_Sixty-three monsters down, she thinks. Forty-seven to go._

Lyla Michaels, the A. R. G. U. S. special agent also known as Harbinger, lowers a ladder from the helicopter and flies them to the foundry. It’s a mess of toppled shelves and shattered fluorescent lights, the chairs and tables flipped, the computer system that Felicity had lovingly assembled in bits and pieces on the floor.

“What the hell happened?” Roy asks.

“Slade’s army,” Diggle answers before he glances at Oliver. “You were right about this place being compromised,” he adds.

“Your boss is going to bomb the city at dawn,” Mac tells Lyla.

“Yeah,” Diggle mutters, “the Wall has never seen a problem she didn’t think she couldn’t solve with a drone strike.”

Lyla nods once, a quick descent of her chin. “Why do you think I’m here?”

Diggle gives her a searching look. “You knew Waller was looking to level the city,” he says. “You came here anyway.”


Oliver awkwardly clears his throat and ruins the moment. “You need to go back to A. R. G. U. S.,” he says. “You need to stop Waller or buy us enough time to stop Slade.”

“Yeah,” Diggle nods in agreement, “not without me.” Then he shifts his focus back to Lyla and smiles at her again. “‘Til death do us part, right?”

Lyla doesn’t smile back. “This time it might,” she points out somberly.

“I need you to scrounge up as many weapons as you can find,” Oliver tells Felicity, “especially injection arrows. We’re going to fill them with the cure. Which clearly works. This ends tonight. Without killing. There’s been enough death already.”
Bruce—who’s holding one of the fallen shelves up while Roy scrounges a stack of assorted trick arrows out from underneath it—nods. “Slade has fifty or so human weapons left in play,” he says, “you’re going to need an army if you plan on curing them all.”

“I know,” Nyssa says. “Which is why an army is what we’ve brought.”

Lyla and Diggle scramble up from the seats they’d taken atop one of the overturned shelves to draw their guns on her. Sin pulls a knife out of one of the hidden sheathes and eyes Lyla’s hand until Laurel squeezes her shoulder gently, a nonverbal that woman is a friend and we don’t stab our friends. Diggle turns to aim at Helena, who smirks and waves to Oliver. Laurel rolls her eyes behind her mask.

Nyssa smiles at Felicity with a threatening edge to the curve of her lips. “I’m Nyssa,” she says, “daughter of Ra’s al Ghul.”

“Felicity Smoak,” Felicity says, “MIT class of ’09.”

Bruce narrows his eyes at Helena and turns his accusing gaze on Mac. “You faked the Huntress’s death,” he deduces flatly.

Mac nods mid-yawn. “Oh, don’t worry,” she tells him, “Helena won’t be coming back to Gotham anytime soon. I’ve given her a new mafia empire to destroy.”

Bruce heaves a sigh. “That should be comforting,” he deadpans, “but somehow it’s not.”

“Only if you don’t believe in second chances,” Mac retorts.

Oliver, meanwhile, gapes slightly when he realizes that his first love is decked out in black leather, dark lipstick, and a domino mask. “Laurel,” he says, “why are you dressed like Sara?”

“I’m not dressed like Sara,” Laurel tells him, “I’m dressed like me. I’m the Black Canary.”

Slade’s plan is convoluted, but he has a simple endgame in mind: to avenge Shado by taking revenge on Oliver. Unfortunately, he doesn’t seem to care who gets caught in the crossfire. Kate Spencer, Sebastian Blood, the city councilmen and women, the employees of Queen Consolidated who wanted to save the company from bankruptcy so they could keep their jobs, and thousands of civilian casualties were all just means to an end. Starling City is burning down around its denizens because Slade doesn’t care who he hurts as long as he gets what he wants.

Oliver’s plan is simple: cure and incapacitate the supersoldiers in the building while the assassins wait on the roof of the adjacent parking structure to preserve the element of surprise. There are twenty men in the building. Two guarding the main entrance. Three in the IT department. Two in the elevator bank. Three in the conference room on the fourth floor. Ten in the office on the twelfth floor. Oliver splits everyone into teams of two to storm the lower levels and takes Helena with him to keep an eye on her. Laurel walks in through the main entrance while Sara climbs into the elevator shaft. Mac follows Bruce down the hall to the IT department.

“Peek-a-Boo here,” Shawna says to her over the radio, “Deathstroke’s goons are on the move. I’m dropping Joanie at the S. C. P. D. HQ and then I’m going to follow them.”

Mac blinks at the nickname for the fragokinetic, nonplussed. It seems too cutesy even for Joan, so Shawna is probably calling her that to piss her off and make her more explosive. “Okay,” she says. “Don’t let them catch you.”
Shawna scoffs. “Bitch, please.”

Mac grins even though she knows Shawna can’t see her. “Medusa out,” she says before she switches frequencies.

“Elevator bank’s clear,” Sara reports over another frequency.

“Conference room’s clear,” Oliver adds.

Bruce snarls and stabs the third supersoldier in the thigh with an injection arrow. It’s obvious that he doesn’t like working with projectiles that aren’t bat-themed or bat-shaped. “IT department’s clear,” he says.

Mac offers him a fistbump in the elevator on their way to the twelfth floor. Bruce side-eyes her hand and she can tell he’s raising his eyebrows at her under his cowl, but he gently presses his knuckles against hers before the sliding doors open.

Mĕi, whose uncanny resemblance to her twin sister was enough of a shock to Slade to throw off his groove but not enough to keep him from abducting her, was subdued and captured by supersoldiers before Team Arrow and their allies stormed QC. Slade escapes with Laurel to orchestrate another throwback to that night on the island with Shado and Sara (his first stab at recreating this moment ended with the death of Moira Dearden Queen, who died to protect her children) and leaves Isobel Rochev at the mercy of his enemies.

After a tense moment between Sara and Oliver, Nyssa ignores his no-kill order and snaps Isobel’s neck. “I have no earthly idea what my beloved ever saw in you,” she says, her voice flat and sharp like the point of an arrow, “your reticence to do what is necessary is why your city burns.”

Mac sighs. “We’ve got bigger problems,” she informs them, “the remaining supersoldiers are gathering at the Giordano Tunnel.”

“I thought these guys were trying to destroy the city,” Helena says, “not escape it.”

“A. R. G. U. S. is going to level the city to stop them from getting out,” Oliver explains, “that’s what he’s planning on. Slade…he knows Waller’s tactics.”

“Fortunately,” Nyssa murmurs, “this means all of our targets will be grouped in a single place.”

Oliver nods. “We need to take it,” he says. “Gather your men. I’ll meet you there in half an hour.”

Oliver and Felicity set a trap by fooling Slade into thinking that he loves her, not Laurel or Mĕi. Lyla and Diggle break into A. R. G. U. S. to reason with Waller, who congratulates them on their unborn child and stops with her hand on the kill switch to watch in awe as Clark destroys her drones in midair.

“Aftershock here,” Julie says after she gives the cops the all-clear to help the people still in the streets, “do you want us with you or should we stay where we are?”

“We’ve got this,” Mac tells her as they arrive at the edge of the city, “have Shawna take you home.”

Julie is about to argue that she’s pregnant, not terminally ill, when Shawna teleports her into her living room and leaves her pouting on her couch. Joan blinks and she’s back in the apartment above
her bakery, her heatproof suit the only evidence that any of this was real.

“I think I’m done here,” Shawna says over the radio, “Peek-a-Boo out.”

Iris is waiting at the mouth of the tunnel with Caroline, Liv, and a Channel 52 camera crew to record the first teamup of Batman, Superman, the Canaries, the Huntress, the Arrow, and Arsenal. Mac stays out of the limelight during the charge and uses her powers to make sure they don’t waste any of the cure during the clash. Oliver goes to conduct his unfinished business with Slade in the aftermath while Sara, Nyssa, and Helena rescue Laurel and Mĕi. Felicity is the one who injects Slade with the cure—and because he can’t see women as anything other than objects to use against Oliver anymore, he doesn’t see it coming.

At some point between twilight and dawn, the assassins fade out in that eerie way members of the League of Shadows do. Cisco is snoring loudly on the other end of the radio frequency and Caitlin is mumbling to her desk in her sleep. Mac smiles and remotely turns the radio off as they arrive back at the train station, coming full circle.

When she’s finally home again, Mac drives her MINI Cooper from the train station to her house in the woods instead of going back to the Clocktower and finds Len on her doorstep with a bag of takeout. When he smiles at her, an incongruously soft unfurling of his lips, her heart clenches horribly in her chest and it takes all of the self-control she has not to throw herself into his arms. After she hobbles toward the wraparound porch and folds herself onto the steps next to him instead, Mac opens the bag and exhales a soft noise that makes Len want to get so much closer than merely sitting beside her with her warm thigh squished pleasantly against his.

Mac hunches to inhale the smell of the food wafting out of the paper bag. Unfortunately, she can’t tell if her mouth is watering because she hasn’t eaten anything in two days or because of him and his deliciously sharp, wintry scent. Like hot cocoa topped with an obscene amount of whipped cream and sprinkled with cinnamon. “You brought me cheesy bread?” she smiles at him almost shyly. “You’re the perfect man.”

“You’re easy to please,” Len murmurs, interlacing his fingers to stop himself from putting a hand on her knee.

Mac snorts. “I’m not,” she says. “You just happen to meet all my arbitrary standards.”

Len smirks, pleased with himself. “I’m leaving again,” he tells her, trying to sound nonchalant even though his heart is beating uncomfortably fast, “my flight’s in a few hours. I don’t suppose you want to make time with me before I go?”

Mac doesn’t know if it’s because she’s been up all night fighting, or because he smells so good, or because she can’t think whenever he’s this close, but part of her just screams fuck it before she gently cups his face in one hand, grabs the lapel of his leather jacket with the other, and kisses him full on the mouth. Len closes his eyes and makes a desperate sound low in his throat when he kisses her back. Mac flicks her tongue lightly over the seam of his lips, and that’s all it takes to make him lose control. Then his fingers are in her hair, and he practically hurls the paper bag of takeout onto the porch before he wraps his other arm around her waist and pulls her flush against him.

It’s been almost six months since they met, so the frizzy blue tendrils of her hair are long enough to grab now. When he tugs just hard enough, she gasps into his mouth and it jolts down his spine to his cock. Len kisses her deeply, savoring how soft and sweet her lips are, licking into her mouth. When he strokes her tongue with his, she moans softly and that sound undoes him so thoroughly
that he breaks the kiss and pulls away. Mac is flushed from her cheeks to the collar of her shirt and below—and as much as he’d like to see how far down her blush goes, he has a plane to catch.

Len heaves a sigh and untangles his fingers from her hair. “I’ll be home sooner than you think, sweetheart,” he drawls. “Don’t forget about me.”

Mac shakes her head so vehemently that her glasses almost fall off. “Not possible,” she tells him softly.

When he’s gone, the roar of his motorcycle’s engine swallowed by the dark woods, her fingertips are still hovering over her lips. Mac sits on her steps for a long stretch of time before she goes to pick up the paper bag, hobbles into the house, flops onto her floral print sofa, and exhales a loud whoosh of air.

*Welp,* she thinks, *I’m so screwed.*

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[301] *Legends of Tomorrow* 1x06 (“Star City 2046”) 25 February 2016.


[303] Talia al Ghul first appeared in *Detective Comics* Vol. 1, No. 411 (“Into the Den of the Death-Dealers!”) May, 1971 and in *Legends of Tomorrow* 1x09 (“Left Behind”), but since that version of Talia was whitewashed for some inexplicable reason, I’mma ignore it.
Beyond the Archetype (Coda)

An electrical impulse zings
out, ricochets
into meta-galactic orbits.

A streak of nervous energy rejoins the crucible
where origins and endings meld.

Adrienne Rich, “Itinerary”

Shock Value
Part 2
Myth Can Make Reality More Intelligible
Book I
With a Stroke of Lightning
Chapter 28
Beyond the Archetype
(Coda)

“You have the best of both worlds inside you. You can be great. Choose to be.”

Lois Lane
Superman Vol.4, No.4 (“Son of Superman, Part 4”)
October, 2016

Laurel prosecutes the case of Lashawn Baez v. St. Andrews Hospital six months after the particle accelerator explosion—and wins.

Somewhere along the way the Supreme Court gets involved, which is why it takes almost three months for them to reach a decision in Shawna’s case. When she finally gets to plead the case in a courtroom, it’s not just a wrongful termination suit anymore. Laurel is fighting anti-metahuman legislation and litigating the Equal Protection Clause to get metahumans legally recognized as people on top of trying to reach a settlement with the hospital. During those long three months, the case becomes her life. When the judge finally rules in her favor, Baez v. St. Andrews becomes a landmark case because it gives metahumans legal personhood.

Whatever happens next, Shawna Baez and Dinah Laurel Lance have changed the world.

Three Months Later

To: COLD AS ICE

1:31am

I miss you
After she kisses Len, Mac doesn’t sleep for three days. When she finally answers his texts, she tells him that she needs more space and time.

From: COLD AS ICE

3:03am

I miss you, too. Doesn’t change anything.
I told you that you were worth waiting for, and I meant it. I still do.
I just don’t want to wait forever, sweetheart.

It’s her fault for not being able to keep her hands or her mouth to herself, and the worst part is that she wants to kiss him again—but she can’t tell him that because she knows kissing her could get him killed.

To: COLD AS ICE

10:23am

speaking of not waiting, how’s your girlfriend?

After he pulls the Smithsonian job, Len tries to date someone else: Priscilla Varner, a vlogger who calls herself Dream Girl and practices oneiromancy.[304]

From: COLD AS ICE

10:28am

Priscilla wasn’t my girlfriend.

Len doesn’t tell Priscilla that his dream girl is another woman.

To: COLD AS ICE

10:30am

past tense?

does that mean you broke up?

After she finds one of his sketchbooks full of drawings of Mac dating back to 1988, Len tells Lisa about the dreams. Lisa has been avoiding Mac ever since because every time she sees her, she wants to scream at her to get over herself and talk to Len already.

From: COLD AS ICE

10:31am

Yeah, that’s exactly what it means.

Mac, in the meantime, spends more and more nights at her house in the woods—isolating herself from the people she loves to keep them safe because that’s all she can do.
Priscilla has streaks of sky blue in her dirty blonde hair and she’s fearless in a way that Mac never will be, but she’s never been through anything worse than marrying her high school boyfriend and divorcing him almost two decades later. Len can’t relax with her—can’t talk to her about anything real—and it gets old fast.

From: COLD AS ICE

10:37am

Because she wasn’t you.

S. T. A. R. Labs has two satellites: one in the air, and another that’s been slowly re-entering the atmosphere since the particle accelerator exploded. Mac started preparing for it during her first week as CFO: renting a dumpster, coordinating with the cops to clear the strike zone and cordon off Central City Plaza, and making sure Clark will catch the satellite before it gets too close to the city.

Of course when it happens, nothing goes according to plan. Clark is dealing with an alien menace in Metropolis and he had to get information from the archives at the Fortress of Solitude, which is over nine thousand miles away from Central. Despite the police blockade, the denizens of Central City are swarming into the plaza to watch Superman save the day. Mac is using her wheelchair because the arthritis in her ankle is flaring up. Eobard is parked next to her in his chair, Syd is standing behind her because he pushed her into the plaza, Caitlin is drinking an iced latte and squinting up at the noonday sky, and Cisco is glancing up from his tablet every few seconds as the satellite plummets through the atmosphere.

Iris waves to Mac from where she’s standing with Libby Lawrence-Chambers and a broadcasting crew from Central City Picture News. Johnny Chambers—Libby’s husband—is there with his camera to get stills for print articles. Mac smiles and waves back, curing her fingers into the hollow of her palm. Eddie is doing a horrible job of pretending not to gaze lovingly at Iris from afar, and Caroline is sitting with Joe at the edge of the blockade with her head tilted as far back as humanly possible.

Clark is still, according to their functioning satellite, approximately six thousand miles away.

“Superman isn’t going to make it,” Mac murmurs more to herself than anyone else, “he’ll be here in time to catch the satellite before it hits the square, but he won’t be able to shield everyone from the impact or control the shockwaves. There’s no one who can do that, no one except…”

…me, she thinks, no one except me.

Mac exhales with enough force to flap her lips before she takes her earrings out—eight of them, all except for the two cartilage piercings in her left helix—and shrugs her sweater off.

“What do you think you’re doing, Ms. Howell?” Eobard asks.

Mac ignores him and rises to her feet, wincing as she puts weight on her bad ankle and takes a hobbling step away from her chair without her cane.

“What is she doing?” Cisco blurts. “Caitlin? What’s happening?”
“Mac.” Caitlin puts a concerned hand on her shoulder. “Mac, you can’t walk.”

“I know,” Mac bites out as she tries not to cry about how badly her ankle hurts today. “Caitlin, back off. Please.”

Syd steps out from behind her chair and hesitates, unsure what to say or do here. “Mac,” he says. “What do you think you’ll be able to do that Superman can’t?”

Mac takes a deep shuddering breath and closes her eyes. “There’s a tornado in Salvation, Texas,” she says, “I’m siphoning power from it. There’s a category four hurricane brewing in Bermuda, lightning storms in the ionosphere, a thunderstorm in Manchester…”

There are people here—in this plaza, in the city she calls home, in this world—that she loves and wants to protect. It’s enough to make her throw away the anonymity she’s cultivated since she traveled back in time. Caitlin steps back and wobbles in her heels as Mac starts to shine with ultraviolet light. Libby shouts at the crew to start filming. Mac looks at the camera with her eyes whitened out and stares, unflinching, before she fluxes the geomagnetic field and hurls herself into the air.

Two weeks later, Barry Allen finally wakes up.

END OF PART ONE

[304] Priscilla Varner appeared in The Flash Vol. 1, No. 140 (“The Heat Is on for Captain Cold!”) November, 1963. Priscilla is a TV personality who calls herself Dream Girl in the comics, and she’s the inspiration for Mac literally being Len’s dream girl in this fic. Len breaks out of prison because of her and he goes after the Flash because he thinks she’s into the scarlet speedster. Heatwave also has a thing for Priscilla. When he admits this to Len, they start competing for her attention, and they end up fighting each other in the street. Barry defeats them by getting them to aim their guns at him and cross streams, not unlike what happened in The Flash 1x10 (“Revenge of the Rogues”) 20 January 2015, only the comic book version was hilarious instead of melodramatic and silly.

[305] The Flash: Season Zero Vol. 1, No. 19 (“Black Star”) May, 2015. S. T. A. R. Labs sent a satellite into space with a man inside it and he fell to earth in this issue. Therefore, it’s canonically possible that the particle accelerator explosion could affect a satellite in geostationary orbit, jsyk.


“We all know the dangers of sequels. Lightning doesn’t strike twice in the same place too often and I think you’ve got to move beyond it, go the extra mile and have the courage not to just repeat the first one.”

Colin Firth, from an interview with the *Evening Standard*[^308]

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I got sick of the legacy of violent men, the broken record history of heartsick girls waiting to be kissed, like that’s all we’re good for. So the prodigal son returns—yeah, well his sister never left.

Ashe Vernon, “Redefining the Classics”

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Shock Value
Part 2
*Myth Can Make Reality More Intelligible*

Book II
*Lightning Doesn’t Strike Twice*
Chapter 29
Enter the Fastest Man Alive
(1 of 3)

“I’m doing impossible things without even thinking about it.”

Kara Zor-El
*Supergirl* Vol. 6, No. 4 (“Escape”)
February, 2012

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I
Potential Counts for Nothing Until It’s Realized

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*I think I’ve finally come up with a plausible theory that explains how time travel works.*

*I was approaching it all wrong by assuming it was either one timeline or infinite timelines. I think each parallel Earth has a primary timeline, but since time is constantly in flux, at any given moment there are infinite potential futures. Only those aren’t set, so they can be retconned. Like the potential future where Savage ruled the world in 2166, or the potential future where Starling was a post-apocalyptic wasteland in 2046.*

*Savage died in 1958, so the future Rip came back from is impossible and, paradoxically, the mission isn’t going to happen in this timeline. Hence my theory that the team are somewhere out*
there as time remnants, because somebody has to protect time itself now that the Time Masters are gone.

Of course it’s possible to travel back to the past—or the present—from a potential future, but when you do that, you run the risk of creating a paradox by erasing the future from whence you came. After you do that, the possibilities are endless.

After you do that, the future is yours.

From the Watchtower Archives
Recorded 7 October 2014

“It’s been three hundred days since lightning struck,” Eobard tells Gideon, “Barry should be waking up any day now.”

Gideon looks over his shoulder at Mac and smiles at her. “Dr. Wells,” xe says. “There’s a fulgurkinetic metahuman in the Time Vault.”

Eobard puts his glasses back on without thinking about it before he turns to face her. “Mackenzie,” he says, “you’ve been avoiding being in a room alone with me for months. What possible reason could you have for coming to see me now?”

Mac snorts. Oh, he’s acting like he’s the victim here, like he didn’t literally tear her heart out. “It’s not whatever you’re thinking,” she deadpans, “the thought of being alone with you still makes me want to throw up. I came to find you because you haven’t signed off on the acquisition of Broome Industries[309] yet, even though I left the paperwork in your office a week ago.”

“Broome Industries,” Gideon helpfully supplies, “employers of Dr. Darwin Elias,[310] the man who isolated a chemical compound capable of inhibiting metahuman abilities in 2024.”

“I can’t keep stalling.” Mac muffles a yawn in one of her sweater paws and adjusts her grip on the handle of her cane. “If you aren’t going to sign, then—”

“Mackenzie.” Eobard steps into her personal space and tilts her face up with one hand, his thumb digging into her chin as she freezes. Which isn’t how he expected her to respond, because he keeps hoping for things to change between them…or rather, for things to change back to how they were before. There was a time when she would’ve wrapped her arms around his neck and let him do whatever he wanted to her. Eobard desperately wants to get back to that. “Look at me,” he tells her softly, his hushed tone an order and a threat.

Mac glares and grabs his wrist. Eobard’s eyes go wide behind Dr. Wells’s glasses and he lets her go, but he’s not fast enough to stop her from siphoning all of the speedforce energy he’s accumulated over the last fourteen years out of his body. Mac takes a ferocious kind of pleasure in the look of shock on his face, the dawning comprehension that she could ruin his life the same way that he ruined hers once upon a time.

“I know you’re trying to make things more difficult for me because you don’t care how I feel as long as I end up paying attention to you,” she says, “but this acquisition is important. Please just sign the papers, Eobard. I need this.”

Eobard tries to smile at her, but he can’t do better than a foul-mouthed grimace. “Return what you just took from me,” he says, “and I will.”
Mac sighs and lets the electricity flow out. It’s hard to hold the speedforce. (Its energy doesn’t belong to her.) It’s harder to let Eobard think he outsmarted her, outmaneuvered her. When she leaves the Time Vault, she knows he thinks he won.

When she walks into the cortex, Cisco is singing along to “Poker Face” by Lady GaGa. Mac smiles as the tension oozes out of her shoulders and flops into an empty swivel chair as Cisco goes to plug his iPhone into the speakers next to Barry’s hospital bed.

“What are you doing?” Caitlin wants to know.

“Barry likes this song,” Cisco informs her.

“How could you possibly know that?” Caitlin asks. “I highly doubt that Caroline told you about her brother’s musical taste.”

Cisco arches his eyebrows at her. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Caitlin goes to check Barry’s nasal cannula and fiddles with his IV bag as she answers Cisco’s question. “Nothing,” she mutters, “just that you two have been spending a lot of time together lately.”

“Yeah.” Cisco ekes the eah sound out while he gnaws on a whip of red licorice. “What’s wrong with that? I like Caroline. I thought you liked her, too.”

Caitlin sighs. “I do like her, Cisco,” she says, “but she lost her fiancée last year. I know better than anyone that you can’t just move on after something like that. I don’t think you should get your hopes up, that’s all.”

Cisco doesn’t know how to respond to that—he saw a picture of Caroline’s ex-fiancée on Facebook the other day, and he knows she probably doesn’t want more than friendship from him, and until that moment he hadn’t even realized he was getting his hopes up, frak—so instead he dials the conversation back. “Caroline helped me make a playlist for Barry,” he says awkwardly. “I mean, he can hear everything, right?”

“Auditory functions are the last sensory faculties to degenerate,” Caitlin tells him softly, apologetically.

Then, suddenly, Barry sits up and chokes on his own air. Cisco flails and winces after he knocks into the desk behind him. “Omigod,” he blurts. “Ow.”

“Where am I?” Barry asks as Mac hobbles out from behind the desk.

“It’s okay,” she tells him as she stands next to his bedside and shifts her weight off her bad ankle, “you’re at S. T. A. R. Labs.”

Barry groans. “S. T. A. R. Labs,” he says slowly, feeling his mouth form the name to give the words meaning, before he squints and focuses on her, “who are you?”

Mac tucks a flyaway tendril of hair behind her left ear with the hand she isn’t using to grip the handle of her cane. “I’m Mackenzie Howell,” she says, “but you can call me Mac. Everybody does.”

“Dr. Wells,” Cisco shouts over the PA system because he can’t reach Eobard over the phone, “get down to the cortex, like, right now.”
Caitlin goes to check his pulse and tries to shine the light from her pupilometer into his eyes. Barry recoils and makes an abrupt noise that sounds like *gah!* in response to the visual stimulus. “Pulse 120,” she murmurs more to herself than her patient. “Pupils equally reactive to light.”

“Hey,” Cisco says, “relax. Everything’s okay, man. I’m Cisco Ramon,” he cocks his head toward the woman with the stethoscope, “she’s Caitlin—” he rolls his eyes after she presses her mouth into a thin disapproving line and corrects himself, “—Dr. Snow.”

Caitlin brandishes a sterile cup. “I need you to urinate in this,” she informs Barry.

“Not this second,” Cisco assures him after he snatches the cup out of her hand.

Mac smothers a cackle with one of her sweater paws. Barry glances from Cisco to Caitlin before he gets out of bed for the first time in almost ten months and wobbles on his feet. “What is…” he stumbles away from them awkwardly. “What is happening? What is going on?”

“You were struck by lightning, dude,” Cisco informs him excitedly.

There’s a camera in the cortex that’s been filming him 24/7 because they can’t monitor him themselves at all times, and it’s still recording. Barry catches sight of himself on the screen and gawks. “What,” he mumbles incredulously, “lightning…gave me abs?”

Caitlin nods. “Your muscles should be atrophied,” she informs him as she palpates his abdomen, “but instead they’re in a chronic and unexplained state of cellular regeneration.”

“C’mere,” Cisco says in his best approximation of a soothing voice before he puts a hand on Barry’s shoulder and herds him back to the hospital bed, “have a seat.”

“You were in a coma,” Mac clarifies once he’s sitting down.

Barry frowns at her, the space between his eyebrows furrowing incredulously. “For how long?” he wants to know.

“Ten months,” Mac tells him.

“Welcome back, Mr. Allen.” Eobard gives the once and future Flash an ominous smile as his automated chair wheels him smoothly into the cortex. “We have a lot to discuss.”

Barry skedaddles after Eobard shows him the pit where the particle accelerator lurks in remnants and ruins. (Of course, being a theoretical metaphysicist whose research is focused on the speedforce, Eobard couldn’t actually build—or rebuild—the accelerator by himself. Which is why he stole the identity of Harrison Wells and took his place in history by founding S. T. A. R. Labs: to bring the people who could do what he can’t to him like moths to a bug zapper.) Caitlin goes through the data compiled on Barry over the last twenty-four hours of monitoring while Cisco texts Caroline to tell her that her brother’s up and on the loose.

“Okay,” Mac says, awkwardly stretching the *oh* sound out into an *ooh*, “I’m going out to lunch. Don’t blow anything up while I’m gone.”

Cisco grins with a new piece of red licorice between his teeth. “No promises,” he tells her over his shoulder as she hobbles away.

Iris is still working at Jitters part-time because *C. C. P. N.* hasn’t given her a fulltime job as a...
reporter yet. Which is good, in a way, because otherwise she would’ve missed Barry coming to tell her that he’s awake. Oh, when he walks into the coffee house the world percolates, the late morning sunlight seeping into something impossibly brighter as soon as she sees him.

(Barry’s heart is thundering when he takes her hand and holds it against his chest, and Iris can’t stop smiling at him. There’s an eerily long second where it seems like the world is moving in slow motion, and he wants to stay in that second with her smiling at him as long as humanly possible.)

Caroline is waiting for them when they arrive at the precinct with her camera hanging around her neck and a lump in her throat. Barry smiles and lets her snap a picture of him before he scoops his sister into a hug. Caroline swallows thickly and hugs him back as hard as she possibly can, resting her forehead against his chest and letting him tuck her head under his chin. Usually she hates that she’s a foot shorter than her brother, but that doesn’t matter right now. Barry is here, he’s okay, and things are finally back to how they should be.

Joe hugs Barry and as cops in the bullpen take turns welcoming him back. Until someone calls in a robbery at Gold City Bank. “Let’s go, partner,” he says.

Eddie shrugs on his jacket and smiles at Barry. “Hey, Allen,” he says, the warmth from his smile imbued in his pleasantly deep voice. “Glad to see you.”

There’s nothing fake about that gladness, and before he knows it Barry is smiling back without thinking. “Thanks, Eddie,” he says.

Caroline arches one thoughtful eyebrow as Eddie smiles wider at his secret girlfriend. “Hey, Iris,” he says. “Hey, Caroline.”

“Hi, Eddie.” Caroline gives him an awkward wave. *What the frak,* she thinks. *When did I become the outsider here?*

“Detective,” Iris says pointedly, “you should go. My dad doesn’t like to be kept waiting.”

Eddie nods. “Glad you’re back,” he tells Barry again on his way out.

“Welp,” Caroline says, “two people died and Jenn is visiting family in National City. I should probably go do my job. Barry, dinner tonight? Whatever you want to eat. My treat.”

Barry nods, an enthusiastic bob of his head. Caroline smiles at her brother and runs out front to meet Joe. (Eddie is sitting in the backseat of Joe’s departmentally issued unmarked police car because he wants to let Caroline sit in passenger seat, where the airbags are.) Barry’s ensuing smile wilts after he notices the photograph of Fred Chyre in the C. C. P. D. memorial case.

“Iris.”

McKenna waves to them from one corner of the bullpen. “Hey, Barry,” she grins at him, “good to see you.” Then she flicks her gaze from the case file on her desk to the intrepid reporter. “Iris, got a minute?”

Iris extracts her notepad from her purse and goes to see what McKenna found. Caroline is ten blocks away from the precinct by then, but somehow she feels it when Barry speeds without thinking to handcuff a perp before he can steal the sidearm from one of the officers who brought him in.

Joe side-eyes her as she hyperventilates, the furcated veins of her scar pulsing like an electric shock...
between her breasts. “Carrie,” he says her name softly, his voice equal parts worried and wary, “you okay?”

Caroline nods, but can’t quite find her voice. *What the hell was that?* she thinks.

Meanwhile, in the alleyway behind the precinct, Barry starts to vibrate like a tuning fork until he crashes into the rear window of a police cruiser. “What’s happening to me?” he wonders out loud before he gets an idea and grins to himself before he starts to run.

There’s a moment when everything blurs together: the street under his feet, the brick/mortar/stone/chrome/glass buildings on either side of him as he moves through the city in a flash, the bright light he’s chasing. Then he realizes that he has no idea how to *stop*.

Mac finds him in the back of a laundry truck a hundred miles from the C. C. P. D., around the corner from the place that makes her favorite grilled cheese sandwich. “Hi,” she says, “I think we should talk.”

[308] Jeff Dawson, “‘I’ve Been Cursed by Darcy,’ Says Firth: As His New Film, *The Importance of Being Earnest* Opens, Colin Firth Tells Why His Most Famous Role Continues to Haunt Him” (2002). (x)


I don’t really care what the geniuses say. 
I know about chance. 
I believe there must be one ambitious photon who made it. 
One particle of light that remembered the secrets to charming barriers. 
One rogue spark, who, in the opposite of a flash, 
found the other side and became the first to break free, 
to prove everyone wrong about everything, 
to take a leap against the tide of what we know is true, 
the price of which is always 
ever coming back.

Mindy Nettifee, “One Mile Per Hour Faster Than the Speed of Light (Or: Suck It, Einstein)”

Clyde Mardon was diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia when he was sixteen years old, after his delusions got so bad that his condition couldn’t be misconstrued as anxiety or depression. Mark Mardon, his brother, was diagnosed with borderline psychosis a year later.

Claudia Mardon—their mother—died in the Great Flood of 1993, when Clyde was ten and Mark was twelve. Then the Mardon brothers were adopted by Jacob Mardon, their uncle. Jacob was a farmer from Smallville, Kansas who died in a house fire in 1998. Mark and Clyde were placed with Flannery Calhoun, a widowed librarian who lived a few hundred acres away in a farmhouse that belonged to her grandson. Flannery died in 2012, a month after celebrating her hundredth birthday.

Mark and Clyde were forced to stop taking their medication because their insurance company went under a year ago, and after months of trying and failing to find jobs with medical benefits, they robbed their first bank. Then the Mardon brothers went on a crime spree, but they didn’t drop any bodies until the week before the particle accelerator explosion. Fred Chyre was loved, and he will be missed, but this reporter has to acknowledge that mental illness played a crucial role in the crimes perpetrated by the Mardon brothers. Without the possibility of gainful employment or access to medical care, anyone would get desperate enough to buy a gun and rob a bank.

We live in a world of masked vigilantes, but it’s wrong to see that world in black and white. We
have to acknowledge that sometimes, people commit crimes because they think have no other choice.

From “The Metahuman Theses: Weather Wizard” by Iris West

First printed in the Central City Citizen on 8 October 2014

Barry sits in the passenger seat of Mac’s MINI Cooper and glances sidelong at her as she drives him back to the main lab. “So how’d you know where to find me?” he asks.

Mac keeps her eyes on the road as she answers. “Barry,” she says, “you just ran a hundred miles in five minutes.”


Mac snorts. “What about the man who killed your mother?” she asks. “Was he impossible?”

“Wait,” Barry says, “how do you know about that, about him?”

“Because,” Mac slows to a halt at a red light and turns to look at him, “my biological father died in a car crash when I was five years old, and everyone thought it was an accident, but it wasn’t. There was a man in yellow who crashed the car and killed us. I still see his red eyes in all my worst nightmares. I died for three minutes, but then…” she glances at the light and watches it turn green before she steps on the gas, “…my heart defibrillated itself. I’ve had the ability to manipulate the electromagnetic spectrum ever since. I call it fulgurkinesis.”

“Because electrokinesis is a branch of electrohydrodynamics?” Barry asks. Mac hums her answer and he nods slowly, more to himself than her. “I’d have to generate a colossal amount of electrical energy to run a mile in three seconds,” he deduces, his voice soft and hushed like he can’t quite believe what he’s saying, “you sensed me somehow, didn’t you?”

Mac hums again as she parks in the handicapped space to the left of the front entrance. “It’s been ten months since you were struck by lightning,” she tells him softly, “and so many things have changed. I’m not going to elaborate right now because I think Iris and Caroline want to tell you certain things themselves, but I can tell you that my friends and I want to help you figure out what you’re capable of. Cool?”

Barry nods again, bobbing his head. “Yeah,” he says. “Cool.”

Barry agrees to let them run some tests on him at Ferris Air. Caitlin drives the team out to the airstrip in a white van with S. T. A. R. Labs decals on both sides and a satellite dish on top. Syd is mostly invited to help them unload the equipment and set up a blue canopy that covers everything, because the weathergirl predicted a smattering of freak thunderstorms that day. Mac sits at the opposite end of the folding tables they brought as makeshift desks to stay as far away from Eobard as possible while she eats her sandwich. (It’s still warm because they wrapped it up in foil for her.) Barry changes into the outfit Cisco designed to record his biometrics and awkwardly emerges from the van in a bright red unitard, fingerless gloves that reach his upper arms, shoes that won’t burst into flames when he runs, elbow and kneepads, and a bulky helmet.

“How’s it fit?” Cisco asks.

Barry frowns, clearly uncomfortable. “It’s a little snug,” he answers.

Cisco grins and stealthily texts a full body shot of him in the unitard to Caroline before he tucks his
phone in the pocket of his coat. “At least you’ll be moving so fast no one will see you,” he says, putting an arm around Barry’s shoulder as they walk past their haphazard work station. “You thought the world was slowing down,” he explains. “It wasn’t. You were moving so fast it only looked like everyone else was standing still. Dr. Wells will be monitoring your energy output, and Caitlin, your vitals. Syd is here because I have no upper body strength to speak of.”

Syd waves from his perch on top of some empty plastic containers. “Hey.”

Barry waves back. “What do you do?” he asks Cisco.

Cisco grins impossibly wider. “I make the toys, my man,” he says, “check it”—he pulls a gizmo shaped like a lightning bolt out of the utility belt around his waist—“this is a two-way headset with a camera I modified, typically designed to combat battlefield impulse noise…”

“Or,” Mac interjects as she dips one of her fries into her chocolate milkshake, “in your case, potential sonic booms.”

“…which would be awesome,” Cisco says emphatically before he goes to attach the headset to the helmet.

“Mr. Allen,” Eobard says after the helmet is back on Barry’s head and Caitlin has given the biometric monitoring system a final check, “while I am eager to determine your full range of abilities, I do caution restraint.”

Barry crouches with his palms flat on the tarmac and looks back at Mac over his shoulder. Mac stops trying to stuff half a grilled cheese sandwich into her mouth and gives him a thumbs-up. Barry doesn’t even know that metahumans are a thing yet, or that he’s one of them, but he knows Mac believes his version of what happened that night fourteen years ago. It’s enough to make him believe in himself.

Eobard puts a pair of protective glasses on and watches as Barry pushes off the starting block with a whoosh that knocks the canopy over. Cisco flails and falls on his ass because he was standing too close; Caitlin gapes at the vermillion streak in shock. Mac, of course, had the forethought to hold her takeout box down so her lunch doesn’t get blown away.

“He just passed two hundred miles per hour,” Cisco says.

“Holy shit,” Syd intones.

Eobard turns to smile at Mac, who doesn’t smile back. “Indeed,” he murmurs.

With the night of his mother’s murder fresh in his mind, running at superspeed triggers the traumatic memories he’s been trying to repress for over a decade—the bright flashes of lightning whirling around his mother, his throat raw from screaming her name, his father telling him to run, Barry, run!—and the next thing he knows he’s crashing into the blockade of plastic water barrels at the end of the airstrip.

“Barry,” Mac says, her soft voice jolting him back to the present. “What happened?”

“My wrist hurts,” Barry says, gritting his teeth around the words. “I think I broke it.”

Shawna has been working in the private hospital that Mac repurposed as a free clinic for metahumans since she was cut from the program at St. Andrews. Dr. Helen Claiborne, a board-certified general surgeon from Alabama who came to St. Andrews as their new chief of
surgery, gave up her position in protest and offered to teach Shawna at the clinic. Helen had been trying to adopt an eight-year-old girl named Lia Nelson[313] whose genetic screening test revealed a dormant metagene, and Lia was placed with her the same day she quit her job at St. Andrews.

There’s a test being offered at most local hospitals now that isolates a unique nucleobase in metahuman DNA to determine whether the subject has a metagene, regardless of dormancy. Caitlin identified the nucleobase as part of a research paper she published over the summer (titled “Homo Sapiens Metae: Introducing and Identifying the Unique Genetic Characteristics of a New Extant Subspecies of Humanity” and published in the American Journal of Human Genetics Vol.95 Issue 2) and classified the pyrimidine structure as metasine. It’s one reason Helen and Shawna have no shortage of patients: because the clinic is open to anyone who opposes making the screening test mandatory, metahuman or otherwise.

Caitlin hasn’t done an orthopedic rotation in years, so she sends the scans of Barry’s arm to Helen and consults with her over Skype to get a second opinion before she makes her diagnosis. “It looks like you had a distal radius fracture,” she tells him.

“…had?” Barry asks.

“It’s healed,” Caitlin informs him, “in three hours.”

Barry flicks his gaze from the scan of his wrist to her, still not quite believing what he’s seeing. “How is that even possible?” he wonders.

“We don’t know,” Caitlin says, “yet.”

Cisco is still grinning even though the headset he made broke when Barry crashed. “You really need to learn how to stop,” he quips.

“What happened out there today?” Eobard wants to know. “You were moving pretty well, and then something cause you to lose focus.”

Mac has to bite the inside of her cheek hard to stop herself from snorting. It’s obvious that while Barry never stopped believing his father was innocent, he let well-meaning people like Joe (and less well-meaning people like the bullies who tormented him after Nora was murdered) convince him that the things he saw that night were impossible. After fourteen years of doubt, your memories can be untrustworthy. Whatever he saw must’ve come rushing back in a flash.

“I started remembering something,” Barry says in a heavy, hushed voice, “when I was eleven, my mother was murdered.”

Cisco was born and raised in Central City, so he knew about the Nora Allen murder all along; and he’s been working with Caroline to track down the man who murdered her mother for five months now. Caitlin, though, didn’t come to Central until Eobard hired her almost four years ago. It’s clear that she didn’t know anything about it from the sympathy in her eyes, the horrified gape of her lips.

“It was late…a sound woke me up. I came downstairs and…I saw what looked like a ball of lightning,” Barry glances at Mac as Eobard takes Dr. Wells’s glasses off to look at him more closely, “inside the lightning there was a man. He killed my mom, but they arrested my dad. He’s still sitting in Iron Heights for her murder, and everyone—the cops, the shrinks—they all told me what I saw was impossible,” he swallows thickly, tears stinging at the corners of his eyes, “but what if the man who killed my mom was like me?”

Eobard puts the glasses back on and wipes the beginnings of a smile off his face. Mac can’t tell if
he feels remorse in that moment or if he’s reveling in getting away with murder. “Well,” he murmurs, “I think I can say unequivocally that you are one of a kind.”

*Whoop! Whoop!* Mac’s phone shouts into palpable silence that ensues, *that’s the sound of da police!* [314]

Mac flushes hot as she extracts the infernal device from the pocket of her sweater. Then she hobbles into her office and closes the door behind her before she answers. “Hello?”

“Clyde was caught on camera robbing Gold City Bank,” Julie says on the other end of the line, her voice trembling with tangible anger. “I called the clinic and Shawna said he checked out three months ago! I don’t know what’s going on with you, but I don’t care, because you promised you’d keep my family safe. If you don’t fix this, I will *never* forgive you.”

Josh Jackham was born on the twenty-second of September. Julie has been on paid maternity leave for about two weeks, adding insult to injury in the aftermath of the months of bed rest her doctor prescribed during her third trimester. Mac promised she would keep an eye on the Mardon brothers, but somehow Clyde has been out in the world for three months without anyone knowing.

*I can’t believe I missed this,* she thinks. *There’s only one person who wouldn’t tell me that Clyde woke up three months ago. If he dies tonight, metahumans suffer for centuries. There’s only one person who’d be selfish enough to keep that from me.*

Mac is seething quietly when she emerges from her office to find Barry gone. Syd is offsite at a meeting with Eliza and Brie to get a quarterly update on how their research is going. Eobard is elsewhere, and that’s probably a good thing, because Mac wants to electrocute him until he wets himself for setting this in motion and that would make her look bad.

“How’s Julie?” Caitlin asks, “is that sinkhole she made still in her backyard?”

Mac nods. “Clyde woke up,” she says flatly, “and since no one bothered to tell me, he’s been on the loose and off his meds for three months now. Cisco, retask our satellite to track meteorological abnormalities in Central and Keystone. Caitlin, call the clinic to check on Mark and rush order a refill of Clyde’s antipsychotics.”

Cisco is already reconfiguring the satellite as he asks, “What are you going to do?”

Mac heaves a sigh. “Clyde killed two people today,” she murmurs, “but he’s probably in a prolonged delusional state and that means he’s not responsible for his actions. It’s my fault, because lately I’ve been letting things slip through the cracks, but someone else let him out of the clinic and hid that crucial piece of information from me. I’m going to figure out who’s to blame for those deaths”—she glances at Eobard (who’s lurking ominously at the entrance to the cortex) and holds his gaze until he looks away—“and I’m going to bring him to justice.”

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Barry storms into the cortex after he fights Clyde in the middle of the street and loses to a massive influx of fog. “I wasn’t the only one affected by the particle accelerator explosion, was I?” he says, the blunt tone of his voice an accusation, “you said the city was safe—that there was no residual danger—but that’s not true. What really happened that night?”

“Well,” Eobard tells him, “the accelerator went active. We all felt like heroes and then it all went wrong, the dimensional barrier ruptured, unleashing unknown energies into our world. Antimatter. Dark energy. X-elements…”
Barry shakes his head as he watches a rendering of the explosion replay on one of the screens bolted to the walls. “Those are all theoretical,” he points out.

“How theoretical are you?” Mac retorts.

Barry opens his mouth to respond and shuts it again because he can’t argue with her there.

“We mapped the dispersion throughout and around Central City,” Eobard informs him, “though we have no way of knowing exactly who or what was exposed. We’ve been searching for other metahumans like yourself. Ms. Howell has befriended at least a dozen that I know of.”

“I saw another one today,” Barry says, “he’s a bank robber and he can control the weather. Mardon must’ve gotten his powers the same way I did, from the stormcloud, and he’s still out there. We have to stop him before he hurts anyone else.”

“What’s important is you, not me!” Eobard yells and Mac has to force herself not to flinch when he raises his voice, even though she knows he’s not angry with her. “I lost everything. I lost my company, I lost my reputation, I lost my freedom…and then you broke your arm, and it healed in three hours. Mr. Allen, inside your body could be a map to a whole new world. Genetic therapies. Vaccines. Treasures buried deep within your cells and we cannot risk losing everything because you want to go out and play hero!” Here he inhales sharply because he’s been wanting to say this to the Flash for years: “You’re not a hero. You’re just a young man who was struck by lightning.”

It takes an hour for Barry to run the six hundred miles to Starling City to talk to Oliver and back. Caroline is waiting for him at the precinct with pizza: pepperoni, olives, and jalapeños for him and classic margherita for her. “I’ve been collecting the freaky unsolved cases for you,” she says. “There’s been a sharp increase in unexplained deaths and missing people since the particle accelerator exploded.”

“You’re my favorite sister,” Barry tells her with his mouth full of pizza.

Caroline snorts. “I’m your only sister,” she retorts. It’s her default response, an old habit for them, and she can almost pretend that nothing has changed. Keyword: almost.

Fact: the world has changed.

Fact: Caroline herself has changed, too. There’s so much Barry doesn’t know, so much she needs to tell him; and she has no idea where to start, but maybe she just needs to find a beginning.

“You weren’t the only one who got superpowers that night,” she says, “and I’m not talking about Mardon or whoever else. I’m talking about me.”

Barry raises his eyebrows as high as they can go. “Okay,” he says, “does that mean you’re fast, too?”

Caroline shakes her head as she holds her hand out, fingers splayed, and generates a forcefield around her unopened pizza box. It floats in front of them in midair in a spherical energy construct, an unidentified flying pizza coming in for a landing. “I stopped the car you were in with Mardon from crashing earlier today,” she tells him softly. “I kept Iris safe.”

Barry reaches out to boop the forcefield and laughs when it starts to float away. “It must’ve been really hard,” he murmurs, “figuring that out on your own.”

“I wasn’t alone,” Caroline says. “We’re not alone, not anymore.”
Barry nods, more to himself than his twin. After all, he and Caroline have never really been alone. No matter what’s happened, they’ve always had each other.

Mac looks up when Barry speeds into her office and drops two boxes of unsolved case files on her desk. “Your metahumans have been busy,” he tells her as Cisco and Caitlin follow him inside to hear him out and look at what he brought. “I’m not blaming you. I know you didn’t mean for any of this to happen, but I need your help to catch Mardon and anyone else out there like him. I can’t do it without you.”

Cisco bobs his head as his mouth spreads into a slow smile. “If we’re going to do this,” he says, “I have something that might help, something I’ve been playing with.”

Mac hobbles into his workshop just as Cisco is showing Barry the suit. “It’s designed to replace the turnouts firefighters traditionally wear,” he explains. “I thought if S. T. A. R. Labs could do something nice for the community, maybe people wouldn’t be so angry at Dr. Wells anymore.”

“How is that going to help me?” Barry wants to know.

“It’s made of a reinforced triopolymer that my sister and I invented,” Cisco informs him. “It’s heatproof and abrasive resistant. It should withstand you moving at high-velocity speeds, and that aerodynamic design should help you maintain control. It also has built-in sensors so we can track your vitals and stay in contact with you from here.”

“How is that going to help me?” Barry says, “now how do we find Mardon?”

Cisco pings a meteorological abnormality on a farm out west of the city. Eddie and Joe are there looking for Clyde because they’ve been trying to track him down since morning. Clyde is suffering from the delusion that he’s God with a capital G. Which doesn’t make any sense, because (in the immortal words of Joe West) why in the hell would God need to rob banks?

Barry is unraveling the tornado Clyde formed out of thin air when Mac arrives at the farm. “It’s too strong!” she hears him shout over the radio as she texts Shawna to meet her there and sends her a blurry snapshot of the abandoned farmhouse.

“You can do this, Barry,” Eobard cuts in. “You were right. I am responsible for all of this. So many people have been hurt because of me. When I looked at you, all I saw was another potential victim of my hubris, and yes, I created this madness but you, Barry, you can stop it. You can do this. Now run, Barry, run!”

Barry stands in what was the eye of the storm as Clyde wavers. “I thought there wasn’t anyone else like me,” he says in a soft, broken voice.

“I’m not like you,” Barry retorts, “you’re a murderer.”

Clyde extends his hand; Joe draws his sidearm. When he fires, Mac steps in front of the bullets and stops them in midair. “No,” she snarls. “No one else is dying. Not today.”

“Barry?” Caitlin says in his ear as Mac knocks Clyde out and Shawna teleports him back to the clinic.

“It’s over,” Barry says. “I’m okay.”
Joe makes a big stink when Mac refuses to tell him where Shawna took Clyde, but he calms down after she promises that he’ll turn himself in when he’s back on his meds. It’s dawn by the time she wins the circular argument they’re having and she’s exhausted.

Barry catches up with her halfway to her car and puts his hand on her shoulder. “Caroline told me that you’ve been teaching her to control her abilities,” he says, filing the way she recoils from being touched away for future reference. “I was wondering if you’d be willing to teach me, too.”

Mac nods, a slow descent of her chin. “Not tonight, Mr. Allen,” she tells him with a yawn.

Barry smiles at her. “It’s tomorrow,” he says.

Mac rolls her eyes at him before she folds herself into the driver’s seat of her MINI Cooper and drives away.

Caroline drives Barry to Iron Heights to visit Henry the next morning. Mac, meanwhile, finds Eobard in the Time Vault and flops into the wheelchair he isn’t using. “I wish you would’ve just killed me sometimes,” she tells him softly. “I think it would’ve hurt a lot less.”

Eobard turns to look at her over his shoulder with Dr. Wells’s glasses dangling from between the thumb and forefingers of one hand. “Contrary to what you might think of me,” he says, “I never meant to hurt you.”

Mac sighs. “I don’t care what you meant to do,” she retorts. “I wish I could say everything that happened with Clyde was your fault, but it’s mine too. I’ve been letting things slip through the cracks because I’m scared of you. I have no idea what you’re thinking about the future, about us, but we can’t go back to the way things were before. I’m a totally different person now because of you. I’m scared to fall in love and be loved because of you. No matter what you do—changing the timeline, bringing my father back, trying to be a hero in your magnificently convoluted way—I won’t forget what you’ve done to me,” she forces herself to look him in the eyes so he knows she means it, “and I will never forgive you.”

Eobard turns back to the newspaper from 2024, the major headline of which screams: FLASH MISSING! VANISHES IN CRISIS.

Mac doesn’t see what’s written in the topmost right corner: CAPTAIN COLD SLAIN BY REVERSE-FLASH.

[311] “Yes, the metahuman thesis. More likely than not, these exceptional beings live among us, the basis of our myths. Gods among men upon our, our little blue planet here.” —Lex Luthor, Batman v. Superman: Dawn of Justice (2016). I’m not picturing Jesse Eisenberg’s version of Lex Luthor as part of this ‘verse, but I did name Iris’s weekly news column in homage to this quote.

[312] Helen Claiborne first appeared in Impulse Vol. 1, No. 3 (“How to Win Friends and Influence People”) June, 1995. Helen is the daughter of Max Mercury and in the comics she adopts Bart Allen, Barry and Iris’s grandson.

[313] Lia Nelson first appeared in Tangent Comics: The Flash Vol. 1, No. 1 (“Premiere”) December, 1997. Lia is the Flash on Earth-9 in the comics, so consider this version of the character her Earth-1 counterpart.


Enter the Fastest Man Alive (3) Decadence Can Be an End in Itself

How much can you change and get away with it,
before you turn into someone else,
before it’s some kind of murder?

Richard Siken, “Portrait of Fryderyk in Shifting Light”

Shock Value
Part 2
Myth Can Make Reality More Intelligible
Book II
Lightning Doesn’t Strike Twice
Chapter 31
Enter the Fastest Man Alive
(3 of 3)

III
Decadence Can Be an End in Itself

When I was Rose, I wanted to be a journalist, to follow in the footsteps of women like Lois Lane-Kent and Iris West-Allen in pursuit of the truth. When I was on Earth-33, I wanted to be a librarian, to spend my days surrounded by books.

I spent my time on Earth-33 living in other worlds because those worlds felt more real to me than reality ever did.
I spent half my life in stories.
I spent two lifetimes trying to find the truth.

I have lived six lives.
I have never survived to see my thirtieth birthday.
I have never wanted to be a hero.

I want to be loved.
I want to be able to live without being afraid.
I want to be something else.

From the Watchtower Archives
Recorded 14 October 2014

It’s been a week since Mac got Clyde back on his meds and he’s been charged with multiple counts of murder. There’s a warrant out for his arrest, and he’s going to plead guilty after he turns himself in. Laurel has offered to take his case because Julie is her friend, so that’s all taken care of, but this is only the beginning—not just for Clyde, but also for Barry. It’s the beginning of his hero’s journey.

There’s a fire downtown on the corner of Western Avenue and Third Street. It’s as good a place to start as any.
“This is Ladder Fifty-Two,” a fireman shouts over the wire, “we’re still at least two minutes out.”

“People are going to die in there,” the fire chief shouts back.

“I know,” says the fireman.

Mac hobbles into the cortex to find Cisco pacing erratically and yelling at his tablet: “Barry? Barry!”

Barry speeds to a halt across the river in Keystone. “What,” he shouts back, “did I miss it?”

“You overshot by about six blocks,” Cisco informs him.

Barry groans. “My bad,” he says before he speeds back the same way he came.

Mac arches her eyebrows at Cisco, who waggles his eyebrows at her. When she rolls her eyes at him, he grins at her around the sucker in his mouth, showcasing the adorable gaps between his teeth. Mac flops into the chair next to him as Barry speeds past a woman screaming her daughter’s name and into the building.

“You there yet?” Cisco asks.

Caitlin cocks her head at him as she returns to the cortex with a mug of hot coffee. “What are you doing?” she wants to know.

Cisco switches off all the screens in the cortex and turns in his chair with a guilty look on his face. “Nothing.”

Caitlin flicks her gaze to Mac—who won’t look Caitlin in the eyes, but that’s not out of the ordinary for her, because Mac doesn’t like to make eye contact most of the time. With an autistic person (even a supposedly high-functioning one like Mac) lack of eye contact isn’t an obvious indicator of guilt. “Who were you talking to?” she asks.

Cisco glances at Mac—who won’t look at him, either. “No one,” he tells her with the sucker in corner of his mouth.

“So you aren’t talking to Barry?” Caitlin says.

“Who?” Cisco says unconvincingly.

“Barry Allen, struck by lightning, was in a coma for ten months, woke up being able to run faster than the speed of sound?” Caitlin gives them a pointed look. “Ring a bell?”

“No,” Cisco shakes his head slowly, “haven’t talked to him.”

“Cisco, there’s fire everywhere!” Barry shouts over the radio. “Cisco, are you still there?”

Mac muffles her unladylike snort in one of her sweater paws as Caitlin glares balefully at Cisco.

“Everybody’s out,” Barry informs them smugly, “what else have you got for me, Cisco?”

“Barry, it’s Caitlin,” says Caitlin, and Mac can almost feel Barry wincing from miles away.

“Hey, Caitlin,” says Barry, “how’s your day?”

Caitlin is fuming by the time Barry speeds into the cortex. “Have you all lost your minds?” she accuses. “Who do you think you are?”

“Well,” Cisco says, “Mac’s the brain, I’m the eyes and ears, and Barry’s the feet.”

“Hey,” Mac holds up her hands in mock surrender, “I’m not part of this. I don’t care if you want to help Barry do hero stuff, but I am not a hero and I am not here for it.”

Barry opens his mouth like he wants to contradict her, but he shuts it when he sees the whites of Caitlin’s eyes. “This isn’t funny,” she tells him. “You could’ve gotten yourself killed. You can’t be running around the city like some supersonic fireman.”

“Why not?” Barry wants to know. “This is what we talked about: me using my speed to do good.”

“No,” Caitlin shakes her head, “we talked about you helping us contain metahuman criminals, and aside from Clyde Mardon, we haven’t found any.”

“People in this city still need help,” Barry points out, “and I can help them.”

“We can help them,” Cisco adds.

Caitlin huffs and looks over her shoulder at Eobard as he wheels into the cortex. “Will you please say something?” she beseeches him.

Eobard is smiling as he wheels over to talk to Barry. Which doesn’t bode well at all. “I think what Caitlin is saying—in her own spectacularly angry way—is that we are only just beginning to understand what your body is capable of,” he clarifies. “Not to sound like a broken record, Mr. Allen, but I do caution restraint.”

“Dr. Wells,” Barry says petulantly, “I doubt restraint is how you got to be the man you are today.”

“In a wheelchair and a pariah? Lack of restraint is what made me these things,” Eobard retorts with a quick glance at Mac. “Know your limits.”

“Don’t expect me to patch you up every time you break something,” Caitlin adds in a sharp, flat voice like the slice of a scalpel.

Barry deflates as she turns her back on him and winces at the furious beat of her heels as she stomps to pick up some of the papers scattered on the floor by the desk.

“Hey,” Cisco puts a hand on his shoulder to take him aside, “the sensors in the suit were kicking back some weird telemetry. Like your vitals spiked for a few seconds. Anything happen out there today?”

Barry frowns, shaking his head. “Never felt better,” he tells him.

Mac yawns long and loudly. When she looks up, Barry and Cisco are both staring at her. “Um,” she ekes the mmrm sound out awkwardly, “what have you eaten today?”

Barry doesn’t get a chance to answer that question because his phone buzzes and he has to get it back from Cisco to take the call. “I’ll be right there,” he tells Joe before he hangs up and speeds back out into the city.

“When do you think he’ll realize he didn’t take his clothes?” Eobard wonders.
Caroline, unlike her twin brother, has always been exceptionally punctual. Barry was hyperfocused on his studies when they were in high school, while Caroline learned to balance her schoolwork, soccer, photography, friends, boyfriends, and a part-time job scooping ice cream. Caroline schedules her time in neat blocks of hours and half-hours, sometimes down to the minute. There’s a semblance of order to her life she tries to keep by organizing everything into lists and schedules and facts. Whether it works or not all depends on the day.

Fact: someone broke into Hex’s gun shop after it closed the night before.

Fact: the Glock 19 Gen4 automatic pistol has an enlarged reversible magazine catch that’s changeable in three seconds.

Fact: whoever robbed Hex’s gun shop stole six G-19 Gen4 automatic pistols and enough ammo to gun down hundreds of people.

Welp, Caroline thinks, this can only end in tears and bullet holes.

Central City University has hosted the annual Regence Man of the Year award ceremony for over a century. It’s meant to honor the work of researchers in the medical community whose contributions to the field saves lives. Thomas Wayne won posthumously in 1989. Bruce had to accept the award on his father’s behalf as a solemn ten-year-old who’d buried his parents a few months earlier, and he’s been a guest of honor at the ceremony ever since. Usually his plus ones are supermodels, heiresses, starlets; but this year he’s taking a fulgurkinetic metahuman.

Mac changes into a midnight blue semiformal gown in her office and uses her powers to do up the zipper. After ten months in this new timeline, she still isn’t used to being rich. It’s great to have the ability to pay for all of the things she needs—meds, books, food, clothes, Rose’s ancestral home—but she’s been getting invitations to functions since her arrival and outing herself as a metahuman on national television has done nothing to curb the public interest in her. There are three reasons why she’s not constantly being swarmed by paparazzi. One, the exclusive interview she gave to Lois Lane two weeks ago. Two, the press conference she held to explain that she got her powers after a tragic car crash that killed her biological father and that she never knew her mother. Which got most people to take her story at face value and back off. Three, the false tips she keeps sending in about sightings of her around town.

After they catch wind of the Flash, the gossipmongers will probably leave her alone. At least she hopes so. Of course attending a high profile event with billionaire playboy Bruce Wayne is probably going to make people more interested in her personal life, not less.

Oh well, she thinks as she hobbles out to meet Bruce in the limo, you can’t win ’em all.

“So,” Bruce says after she curls up into one corner seat and opens a bottle of Dr. Pepper, “you think Simon Stagg stole his award-winning research from a biogeneticist named Danton Black whom he fired a year ago.”

“I know he did,” Mac retorts, “and your investigation into Stagg must’ve proven that I’m right or you wouldn’t be here.”

Bruce nods, curtly. “There’s a woman in a medically induced coma who needs machines to pump her blood through her veins because Stagg literally stole the heart her husband was growing to save her life,” he murmurs, “he’s despicable.”

Mac sighs. “Stagg was trying to save lives,” she points out, “but the organs he grew are starting to
fail and the patients from his clinical trial are going to die if I don’t do something.”

“Stagg has his eye on you,” Bruce informs her, “he wants to get a metahuman under his knife and I doubt he cares whether his subjects are dead or alive. I want you to promise me you’ll be careful.”

Mac nods, a slow descent of her chin. “I don’t think I can get him to agree to publicly confess to being a thief and a fraud who cares more about appearances than people,” she says, “unless I threaten to take away what he loves the most.”

“Would that be his reputation,” Bruce asks, “or his money?”

“I don’t know,” Mac tells him with a smile, “that’s where you come in. If the world’s greatest detective can’t figure out his weakness, no one can.”

It occurs to Mac at the first bright flash of a camera in her face that this looks like a date. After all, she can’t exactly tell the world that Bruce is her great-great-great-great-grandfather. At best, people are going to think S. T. A. R. Labs and Wayne Enterprises are forming a business partnership. At worst, people are going to think they’re on a date.

Okay, she thinks, one problem at a time. Stagg put defective organs in people who needed transplants to live and he’s going to start experimenting on metahumans if I don’t stop him.

Bruce goes through the motions of shaking hands with people while Mac avoids physical contact with strangers at all costs. Iris is there covering the ceremony for the Citizen with Barry as her sidekick, and she smiles and waves when she sees Mac—who smiles and waves back.

Then, as if on cue, Simon Stagg takes the stage to accept the award. “I find it quite remarkable,” he says, “having once been a timid freshman at Central City University, to be standing before you now as the Regence Choice for Man of the Year. While I very much appreciate the award, the real honor for me is knowing that my work in organ transplantation helps give people a second chance at life. Thank you all very much for coming.”

Mac bites the inside of her cheek to stop herself from snorting just as Stagg walks over to greet Bruce. “Mr. Stagg,” she says after they do the photo op, “congratulations.”

“Thank you, Ms. Howell.” Stagg gives her a toothy, predatory smile. “It’s lovely to finally meet you. I’d love to sit down with you and speak to you at length about the way you resurrected your company from the ashes of Harrison Wells’s abject failure and turned S. T. A. R. Labs back into one of the most cutting edge research facilities in the world. I think there could be a partnership between Stagg Enterprises and S. T. A. R. Labs in our futures.”

Mac is saved from having to respond to that by Iris the intrepid reporter. “Mr. Stagg,” she cuts in, “care to comment on the rumors that you stole the research that won you this award from one of your former employees?”

“No comment,” Stagg says flatly as Mr. Java, his head of security, comes over to take him aside. Bruce waits approximately thirty seconds before he starts following them with all the subtlety of a man who spends most of his nights dressed like a bat.

“Wait,” Barry says, “is that why you’re here? Because you think Simon Stagg stole his award-winning research?”

Mac nods. “Bruce has been helping me investigate him,” she tells him softly, “the patients from his clinical trial are dying because he doesn’t know how to perfect the process that gave them new
“I’ve been planning to expose him with this article I’ve been working on for months,” Iris adds, “but I haven’t published my findings yet because Mac wants to get Stagg to admit what he did.”

“Okay,” Barry flicks his gaze from Mac to Iris and back again, “you weren’t kidding when you said a lot has changed since the night of the explosion.”

Mac is opening her mouth to respond when shots are fired, the cacophonous pops of gunshots ricocheting through the room. Iris grabs Barry’s arm as they crouch. Mac grips the handle of her cane and fluxes a paramagnetic field to attract the bullets to her so they don’t hit anything or anyone.

“How considerate,” Danton Black shouts over the clamor, “you’re all wearing your finest jewelry! Almost like you knew we were coming to rob you. Now everybody line up!”

It’s a diversion, obviously. Danton is using his clones to steal baubles from the guests while he finds and kills Stagg. Of course Bruce is with Stagg and he won’t let Danton kill him, so all Mac has to do is keep everyone here alive.

“Don’t,” Iris says as Barry squares his shoulders and steps up. “Don’t.”

“Freeze!” a campus security guard shouts as the crew of clones are about to leave with their loot. “Drop your weapons!”

After all four clones shoot at him for his trouble, Mac stops the bullets in midair as Barry speeds to pull the security guard out of the line of fire. Unfortunately he overshoots again and he ends up outside after he leaves the security guard behind in the hallway near the emergency exit.

“What are you doing?” one of the guests yells at Mac as the clones make their getaway, “go after them!”

Mac scoffs. “I can manipulate the electromagnetic spectrum to stop bullets, but I also have rheumatoid arthritis and I can’t run unless I want to incapacitate myself with pain,” she retorts, “someone able-bodied can go after them.”

Barry is that someone, but Iris finds him passed out next to a dumpster after a fainting spell. Joe, Eddie, and assorted people with the C. C. P. D. arrive on the scene to investigate the robbery in the aftermath. Mac gives her statement to Joe, who gives her disapproving looks that have more to do with Barry trying to be a hero than with her.

Caitlin, meanwhile, is livid when she finally gets Barry back to the lab for tests. “You lied to us,” she says, heels clicking angrily as she paces around the hospital bed that Barry is sitting on with his shirt open and a blood pressure cuff squeezing his upper arm. “How could you not tell us you’re experiencing dizzy spells? We’re your doctors. Your cells are in a constant state of flux. God knows what’s going on inside your body. You could be experiencing cardiopulmonary failure or a transient ischemic attack.”

Barry glances at Eobard, a nonverbal What’s that?

“Ministroke,” Eobard clarifies. “Probably not.”

“You of all people should know that in science, we share,” Caitlin bites out, “we do not keep secrets.”
Mac sighs. “Barry,” she says, “have you eaten anything today?”

Barry nods. “I had a banana for breakfast,” he tells her, “and some of the finger sandwiches at the ceremony.”

“Okay,” Mac says thoughtfully, “neither of those are a meal. I could be wrong, but…”

“Let’s figure out why this is happening to you,” Eobard interjects. If she didn’t know better, she’d think he was worried about Barry as a person. Only she knows he’s worried about losing his only way back to the future—context that taints everything, every gesture, every expression of concern.

Bruce texts her while Cisco is setting up the cosmic treadmill:

From: THE GODDAMN BATMAN

**Stagg refuses to admit to anything. I’m going home to Gotham before it gets dark, but I want you to call me before you make the next move.**

To: THE GODDAMN BATMAN

**Black is working with Stagg’s head of security**
I’m going to talk to him tonight

From: THE GODDAMN BATMAN

**Be careful. Watch your back.**

To: THE GODDAMN BATMAN

**Always**

“We’re all set,” Cisco pats the stacks of cardboard boxes with S. T. A. R. Labs logos on them, “with a little padding. Just in case.”

“Yeah.” Barry gives the treadmill a doubtful glance as Cisco goes to sit with Mac, Caitlin, and Eobard at the monitoring station in the other room. “You’re sure about this, Cisco?”

Cisco nods, an enthusiastic bob of his head. “Most treadmills have a maximum speed of twelve miles per hour,” he explains, “this one has been Cisco’d. Trust me, it can handle your speed.”

“Okay,” Barry says before he starts to run.

Caitlin watches the numbers on the screen fluctuate before they settle into a rhythm she recognizes. “Heart rate, blood pressure, nerve conduction,” she murmurs, “all normal. Brainwave function within standards limits.”

Cisco grins, a happy chortle bubbling up from his chest to fall out of his mouth. “I told you the treadmill could take it,” he says triumphantly.

Eobard glances at Mac, who’s checking her phone. Of course she knew the answer all along. “Caitlin,” he says, “look at the glucose levels.”

“Ohmigod,” Caitlin says, her eyes going comically wide as the obvious solution occurs to her. “Of course. It was so obvious.”
“Right?” Eobard shakes his head, “glucose levels. Barry, we think we know why you keep—”

Then, as if on cue, Barry faints again and his body is thrown from the treadmill into the boxes with an explosive burst of foam packing anti-static peanuts.

“—passing out,” Eobard says and fizzles out because he knows Barry can’t hear him.

“I passed out again?” Barry deduces once he regains consciousness.


Barry glances at Mac, who doesn’t look him in the eyes, but he gets it. “I’m not eating enough,” he says, “so an IV bag and I’m good to go?”

Mac snorts and flicks her gaze to the irrigation pole festooned with empty IV bags.

“Try forty,” Eobard says, “guess you were thirsty.”

“I’ve been hypoglycemic my whole life,” Mac says, “I have to eat every three hours or so to stop myself from getting irritable or being more susceptible to sensory overload than usual. I think you’re going to have to eat approximately two hundred thousand calories a day if you want to keep using your powers.”

“We’re going to need to fashion you a new diet based on your metabolic changes,” Caitlin tells him. “Also, your hypermetabolism will probably cause your fingernails and hair to grow at an accelerated rate.”

“I’ve done a few calculations,” Cisco adds, “you need to consume an amount equal to roughly eight hundred and fifty tacos. Unless we’re talking cheese and guac. Which is, like, a whole other set of equations.”

“For Mexican I recommend Tito’s on Bruckner Avenue,” Joe interjects from the entrance to the cortex, “best burrito in the city.”

“Detective West,” Eobard says as Joe steps into the room. “What brings you to S. T. A. R. Labs?”

Joe ignores him to zero in on Barry, who hangs his head guiltily before Joe even accuses him of anything because he knows he’s busted. “When I couldn’t find you at the precinct, I started doing a little research,” he says as the tension in the room kicks up a few notches, “and it turns out there’s been reports of a red streak all over the city stopping muggers, rescuing people from burning buildings—”

Eobard smiles because that tension building in between them is a weakness he can exploit. “You didn’t tell him we were working together,” he deduces more smugly than he should.

“Joe,” Barry says, “I can explain.”

“You already have a job in law enforcement, Barry,” Joe says pointedly. “I suggest you get back to it.”

Caitlin hums in agreement and holds up her hands in mock surrender when Joe turns his glare on her. “Don’t look at me,” she says, “I’m on your side.”

“Detective,” Eobard says, lying through his teeth, “we all want what’s best for Barry.”

“If you wanted what was best for Barry, you’d try to talk him out of this lunacy instead of
encouraging him going out there and risking his life,” Joe snaps back.

“You saw a man control the weather,” Barry points out, “what are the police going to do against criminals like that? Because there will be more bad metahumans like him.”

Mac exhales with enough force to flap her lips. “Clyde is mentally ill,” she says, “and there is a difference between a bad person and a person with a mental illness. Please try to remember that, especially when you’re occupying space in a building owned by a mentally ill autistic woman.”

Barry is about to apologize when Joe gets a second wind. “You’re going to do what, catch the bad metahumans?” he asks, “are you insane? You think because you can run real fast that you’re invincible? You’re not! You’re just a kid,” he gives Eobard a stern look before he adds, “my kid.”

“I’m not your kid, Joe, and you’re not my father!” Barry shouts angrily, “my father is sitting in Iron Heights because you were wrong about him, and you’re wrong about this. I may not be able to help him, but if I can save someone from a burning building or stop some armed thieves, I’m going to do it, and you can’t stop me. So don’t try.”

Joe shakes his head slowly. “I know you think you’re so smart,” he says with a sharp edge of sadness in his voice, “all of you, but you don’t know what you don’t know. I hope that you’re clever enough to figure it out before somebody gets killed.”

[316] The Flash 1x02 ("Fastest Man Alive") 14 October 2014. Stagg mentions that his work is “organ transference” in the actual dialogue in this episode. Which is a theory that people who receive organ transplants can inherit memories from the donors. Which doesn’t make any sense in the context of what they’re talking about, i.e. a process that regenerates dying tissues using stem cells to save failing organs or grow new organs to perfectly suit the person who needs a transplant. I, an information scientist, seem to know a lot more about this subject than the people who actually get paid to write this stuff and have teams of researchers to check their facts. Yikes.
Six Impossible Things (1) Any Surplus Is Immoral

Every cell  
in our bodies has renewed itself  
so many times since then, there’s  
not much left, my love,  
of the originals. We’re footprints  
becoming limestone, or think of it  
as coal becoming diamond. Less  
flexible, but more condensed;  
and no more scales or aliases,  
at least on the outside.

Margaret Atwood, “Shapechangers in Winter”

Shock Value  
Part 2  
Myth Can Make Reality More Intelligible  
Book II  
Lightning Doesn’t Strike Twice  
Chapter 32  
Six Impossible Things  
(1 of 3)

“I didn’t come all this way to be ignored. Respected, certainly. Yielded to, definitely. But never ignored.”

Helena Bertinelli  
Huntress Vol.1, No.19 (“The Last of the Streetfighters”)  
October, 1990

I  
Any Surplus Is Immoral

Danton Black came to work for Stagg Enterprises in 2006, after he got his doctorate in biogenetics. Black worked for Simon Stagg until the end of last year when he was fired. According to his employment record, the reason for that was lack of progress in his research on therapeutic cloning, but Stagg falsified the progress reports he used as grounds for termination in order to steal Black’s cloning process.

Black married a forensic pathologist named Elizabeth Granger[^17] in 2011. Elizabeth was diagnosed with dilated cardiomyopathy in her midtwenties, and she’s currently hospitalized at a private clinic because she needs an implant to keep her heart from failing. After she spent two years on the transplant list waiting for a match, Black was trying to grow Elizabeth a new heart when Stagg stole his research out from under him.

Blythe Hex—the owner of Hex’s Gun Shop—dropped the burglary charges she filed against Black
for robbing her store two nights ago. Mr. Java—former head of security for Stagg Enterprises—is being charged with conspiracy to commit her father’s murder by Sapphire Mason, née Stagg,[318] who has refused to charge Black with anything because her husband and Black are old friends and she hasn’t spoken to her father since Elizabeth took a turn for the worse.

After he confessed to stealing Black’s research on national television, Simon Stagg took his own life as penance for his crimes, but overall this story doesn’t have an unhappy ending. Danton Black is working with S. T. A. R. Labs to repair the damage Stagg did with his clinical trial, and to grow his wife a new heart.

“This was always about Elizabeth,” Black commented, “I never intended to hurt anyone but the man responsible for my wife’s deterioration. Now that he’s gone, it’s time to heal.”

From “The Metahuman Theses: Multiplex” by Iris West
First printed in the Central City Citizen on 15 October 2014

Danton Black is meeting Mr. Java in the space between two of the many warehouses on their side of the Missouri River. It’s easy enough for Mac to find Danton using her satellite: he’s been self-cloning to the point that he’s starting to give off a telltale heat signature from the energy required to replicate so rapidly.

If your euthermic body temperature rises over a hundred and four degrees, you can get brain damage, she thinks, either the dark matter wave somehow gave him the thermoregulatory ability to keep his organs from liquefying at high temperatures, or he’s got no fucks to give.

Which is how Mac ends up sitting on top of a shipping container and watching Danton wait for Mr. Java. Oh, he’s nervous enough that he keeps glancing around every few seconds; but he never thinks to look up. There’s a reason Bruce spends a lot of his time lurking on transmission towers and brooding atop skyscrapers and whatnot: people often forget that danger comes from above as well as below.

It’s always a shock—pun unintended—when something falls out of the sky and punches you in the face.

“Where’s the rest of your crew?” Mr. Java asks once he arrives.

Danton shakes his head before he takes off his ski mask. “Just me,” he says.

Mr. Java narrows his eyes at him. “What do you want, Black?”

“Your boss,” Danton answers, “dead.”

“It’s not my fault you and your team moved too slow,” Mr. Java points out. “I told you where Stagg would be, not how long he’d be there.”

“I need his full itinerary,” Danton tells him, “and security access to his office and home.”

“Screw you,” Mr. Java says flatly. “I’ve got a reputation in the security business. It’s one thing if my employer gets iced. It’s another thing if that happens in his bedroom.”

Mac snorts and covers her mouth and nose to stop the sound from ricocheting.

“You’ll do what I ask, Mr. Java,” Danton says, a threat implicit in his voice.
Mr. Java exhales a derisive noise before he sucker punches him in the face. Danton goes down like a sack of potatoes, awkwardly flopping against the pavement because he’s never been in a real fight in his life and he has no idea how to fall. “What the hell are you going to do to me without your army?” Mr. Java asks, taunting him before he straightens his suit jacket and walks away.

Danton gags and blurs, lighting up like a conflagration in Mac’s infrared sights, and instead of puking his guts out he divides. It’s like watching cells divide under a microscope: one becomes two, two becomes four, four becomes eight. Only a lot of retching sounds and seizures are involved.

*Okay, Mac thinks, that’s kind of gross.*

When he turns and sees Danton standing with seven copies of himself, Mr. Java screams. “I am an army,” Danton says in a soft, deadly voice. Mac sighs and electrocutes the clones to short-circuit them before Danton can beat Mr. Java to death. When he loses control of them, the clones disintegrate into piles of human goo.

*Okay, Mac thinks, that’s really gross.*

“Hi,” she says, fluxing the geomagnetic field before she steps off of the shipping container and floats back down onto solid ground. “I’m sorry, I have the worst timing, but I’d like to offer you a job.”

Mr. Java gurgles something unintelligible through the blood in his mouth. Which is what happens after you get kicked in the face by six clones.

Mac sighs. “I wasn’t talking to you,” she tells him. “I was talking to the biogenetics genius with the anger management issues and the half-assed revenge plot. Dr. Black,” she turns to look at the real Danton, the last man standing, “you aren’t a murderer yet. Stop acting like your wife is already dead and take my offer. I’ll give you a lab. I’ll give you funding for your research. I’ll give you anything you need to save her and I’ll get Stagg to admit what he did to you. Both of you.”

Danton looks at her sadly and shakes his head so fast she’s worried he’s trying to clone himself again. “Stagg owns my research,” he tells her, “and I can’t save Elizabeth without it. You can’t help me. No one can.”

Mac watches him walk away from her and heaves another sigh. While it’s possible to change someone’s circumstances, it’s nothing short of impossible to change the mind of someone who thinks they know what they want.

Mr. Java spits a wad of saliva and blood out before he rises and latches something around her neck. Mac gags as bright phosphenes bloom in the darkness behind her eyes and all the electrical energy in her body fizzles out. “What—” she blurs, choking on the word.

Mr. Java yanks the back door open and tries to force her into the backseat. “It’s a modified Faraday cage,” he informs her as she squirms in a futile attempt to escape, “specifically designed to incapacitate you. Mr. Stagg will be pleased.”

“No,” says a distorted husky voice, “I think you’ll find he’ll be disappointed.”

Nyssa slices through the device choking her as Sara whirls to kick Mr. Java in the head (again). Mac ends up sitting half-in and half-out of the backseat of his car gasping for air as Laurel crouches in front of her and puts a comforting hand on her knee. “Hey,” she says, “long time no see.”
Mac snorts and chokes again, her throat dry and raw. “Hi,” she rasps.

Laurel grins at her as Nyssa breaks Mr. Java’s left tibia with a satisfying crack of splitting bone. “Oracle wants to know if you’re okay,” she says after Babs tells her something over the radio.

Barbara Gordon—the first but not the only Batgirl[319]—came to Central City to get her degree in library and information science from Hudson University. There aren’t many disabled librarians in the world, so Bruce gave her Mac’s contact information in case she wanted to keep doing the hero thing. Which is how Babs ended up running mission control for the Birds of Prey.

Mac nods, even though she’s anything but. It’s hard to acknowledge that Eobard isn’t the only thing in this world that can hurt her. It’s harder to accept that after everything that’s happened to her, she’s still vulnerable; still breakable…

…I or maybe she’s just broken.

When she comes home to her house in the woods, Len is sitting on her porch swing. Which is the cherry on top of that awful day. Mac hates cherries. Whenever anyone puts a cherry on top of her milkshake, she always pulls a face and picks it off. Len, though, looks delicious in a soft black shirt under his leather jacket and dark jeans that leave nothing to the imagination because he’s sitting with his legs spread in that unabashed way people who aren’t afraid to take up space do.

Len narrows his eyes at her as the porchlight flickers on and he actually growls at the sight of the bruises darkly flourishing around her throat. “I’ll kill him,” he tells her in his calmest voice, the one that means he’s trying not to lose his cool.

Mac exhales a soft whoosh of air. While he could be assuming the gender of her attacker, it’s more likely that Sara or Lisa told him what happened to her—and normally that would bother her, but seeing him does things to her. Gooey things. Warm things. Mushy things. It’s embarrassing.

“I don’t need you to kill my enemies for me,” she retorts as she hobbles up the steps and uses her powers to unlock her front door instead of bothering to find her keys, “if I wanted him dead, he would be.”

Len cocks his head in concession. “Fair enough,” he drawls, “but I thought I’d offer my assistance. Just in case you needed me.”

Mac smiles at him over her shoulder and that’s enough to make his breath hitch. “I do,” she tells him softly and he doesn’t smile back at her because his heart constricts horribly in his chest.

Len takes her leaving the door wide open as his invitation to follow her into her home. Mac leaves her shoes by the door, hangs her sweater on the bannister, and doesn’t stop him from taking off his own boots.

“So,” he leans against the archway that leads to her kitchen as she drops her purse on the countertop, “what’s this I hear about you dating Bruce Wayne, hmm?”

Mac guffaws. “Bruce is one of my great-great-great-great-grandfathers,” she tells him. “I gave the Arrow a sample of my blood almost eight months ago to prove to him that I’m from the future. I didn’t know I was related to Bruce, but I knew William Tockman was my great-great-great-great-great-grandfather because my biological father died of MacGregor’s syndrome in the timelines where he wasn’t murdered by my ex. Bruce got ahold of the test results somehow and he came to meet me because he doesn’t have a lot of family left.”
Len frowns, the space between his eyebrows furrowing. William Tockman did time at Iron Heights during his last sentence. Len remembers that he was smart, like Mac, but the resemblance stops there. “Billy Tockman is your ancestor?” he cocks his head and gives her a look so hot that it can only be described as a smolder. “Nope,” he says, “I don’t see it.”

Mac blushes and goes to get two cans of Dr. Pepper out of the fridge. Len comes to stand next to her under the pretense that one of those cans is for him. “There are seven generations between me and Billy,” she points out shyly as she pops the tab on her soda and the fizz bubbles up from the inside. “It’s not a shock that we don’t look alike.”

Len hunches over the counter and positions himself so his shoulder brushes hers. Mac inhales sharply and takes a long sip of her soda. Len exhales with enough force to flare his nostrils, frustrated because she licked the excess off the lip of the soda can and now he’s so hard his cock is pressing uncomfortably against his zipper.

“So,” he murmurs, “what exactly do you need me for, sweetheart?”

“I need you to broker that deal with the Darbinyans,” Mac says, “get them to sell me those waterfront properties using a shell corporation that looks like it belongs to the Santinis. Araz Darbinyan is terrified of Vincent Santini, so even though their families are allies, they almost never talk to each other”—she pauses to take another sip of Dr. Pepper—“and that means his nephew Mher[320] should be easy pickings.”

Len takes a long sip from his own can of soda and tries not to let that sweetness turn bitter. Of course she meant she needs his familiarity with the criminal underworld, not that she needs him.

“Sure,” he says flatly, “I suppose that concludes our business for tonight?”

Mac puts her hand on his forearm and because it’s him, she doesn’t have to force herself to meet his eyes. “Len,” she says his name softly, desperately, “I didn’t mean—”

Len glances down at her lips and then he’s kissing her hard, building momentum until he’s pressing her against the sleek stainless steel door of her refrigerator, savoring the softness and warmth of her body. Oh, her mouth is sugary now and her soft tongue is flicking against his slowly, sweetly. Mac digs her fingertips into the nape of his neck as she kisses him back—not to make him stop, but to hold him as close as humanly possible. Len tugs her bottom lip between his teeth before he grabs her by the hips, squeezing hard enough to make her gasp as he slips one of his knees between her legs.

Mac moans into his mouth when he spreads her thighs apart. Len takes the soft noise as permission to skim one hand along her thigh and under her skirt to see if she’s wearing tights or stockings. Mac opens her eyes and tugs her bottom lip between her teeth to stifle another moan. Len holds her gaze as he slips his other hand between her thighs and smooths his palm up to feel where the lace top of her stocking meets her delicate skin. Mac whimpers at how teasingly close he comes to touching her through her panties, her legs trembling as he curls his fingers into her soft flesh hard enough to make her breath catch around a louder moan. Len smirks and slowly caresses the inside of her thigh with the rough pad of his thumb.

Of course that’s the moment her stomach growls. Mac blinks awkwardly before she bursts out laughing. Len swallows thickly as she wheezes and forces himself to step away from her. “I should go,” he murmurs, “and I’m sorry.”

“No,” Mac shakes her head slowly, “don’t be. I’m the one who can’t seem to get my shit together and talk to you about this”—she gestures awkwardly from herself to him—“like an adult. I just can’t tonight. Okay?”
Len gently strokes the bruises on her throat with one fingertip and grits his teeth around a groan when she whimpers again. Oh, riding home on his motorcycle with a hardon is going to suck. “Okay,” he says.

Mac lets him go and eats a late dinner alone in the aftermath, terrified that what they did that night was a mistake. After all, even a kiss that good isn’t worth his life.

There is a vase of iceberg roses waiting on her desk the next morning, soft white petals unfurling gently as their subtly sweet fragrance fills her office. Mac opens the card, which says: “If you do not know what you feel, then it is difficult to choose love; it is better to fall.” —L

Len’s mother loved bell hooks. Liane didn’t live to see most of her best works published, but her chapbook of poems “And There We Wept” was the last thing she read to him before she died.

Us women are often belittled for trying to resurrect these men and bring them back to life and to love, Mac thinks, quoting to herself from memory. They are in a world that would be even more alienated and violent if caring women did not do the work of teaching men who have lost touch with themselves how to love again. This labor of love is futile only when the men in question refuse to awaken, refuse growth.

When she texts Len, though, she quotes: Only love can heal the wounds of the past. However, the intensity of our woundedness often leads to a closing of the heart, making it impossible for us to give or receive the love that is given to us. [321]

“Who is sending you flowers?” Eobard asks in a harsh, low slice of a voice.

Mac yelps, startled. “Laurel,” she blurts out because she’s the first person whose name begins with L that pops into her head who isn’t Len. “I was attacked last night,” she flails the hand she isn’t using to hold her phone at the bruises around her throat, “she sent these to make me feel better.”

Eobard presses his mouth into a thin flat line. “Who attacked you?” he wants to know.

“Mr. Java,” Mac informs him, “head of security for Stagg Enterprises. Don’t worry,” she belatedly hides the card in the pocket of her skirt, “the Birds of Prey rescued me and put him in the hospital.”

“Stagg must have ordered him to abduct you,” Eobard deduces, “he must want to procure a metahuman test subject by any means necessary.”

Mac nods, a sharp descent of her chin. “Mr. Java had this,” she extracts the Faraday collar from her purse and dangles it between her fingers, “Stagg designed it specifically for me. I hacked his system and deleted the prototype specs, but I’m going to have to break into his lab and destroy the backup devices his engineers made. As for this one”—she drops it and generates an explosive charge powerful enough to obliterate it before it hits the floor—“bada-bing,” she deadpans, “bada-boom.”

Joe brings Eddie to interview Stagg and warn him that someone wants him dead. Barry, meanwhile, collects and analyzes a sample of the human goo from the scene of the attack and learns the gross substance is undifferentiated biological cells—otherwise known as stem cells. Danton attacks Stagg during the interview and it turns into a shootout between his clones and the cops. Barry speeds from the precinct to Stagg Enterprises and gets the stuffing knocked out of him by ten clones at once. Caitlin tends to his wounds while Cisco tries to clean the blood out of the suit.
“I saw Black create duplicates from his own body,” Barry informs them.

“That’s pretty ironic,” Cisco points out, “the guy specialized in cloning and now he can make Xeroxes of himself.”

Eobard glances at the picture of Danton on the closest wallscreen and nods. “Dr. Black must have been experimenting on himself when he was exposed to the dark matter wave released by the particle accelerator explosion,” he deduces.


Mac awkwardly pats his shoulder with one palm because she has no idea how to comfort people. “I believe in you,” she tells him softly.

Cisco smiles at her as Barry starts to walk out.

“Where are you going?” Caitlin asks.

“Joe was right,” Barry says, “I’m in way over my head. Yeah, I’m fast, but I’m not a warrior. I could barely fight one metahuman, let alone six.”

“Barry,” says Eobard, “I understand. Today was a setback, but any grand enterprise has them, and we can’t learn to fly without crashing a few times.”

Barry shakes his head sadly. “This wasn’t a grand enterprise, Dr. Wells,” he says. “This was a mistake.”

Joe shows up in the nick of time to shoot the clone once it starts to move and gives Barry that pep talk. Mac, meanwhile, has broken into Stagg Enterprises to destroy those prototypes. There are no specs for a modified Faraday cage beyond the collar, no preparations to imprison her in whatever lab he would’ve used to dissect her like a frog in a freshman biology class. It’s obvious that Stagg had no plans to keep her alive. There are plans for Barry, too; including a design for needles that would be attracted to kinetic energy like magnets. It’s being engineered as part of a contract Stagg has with the Department of Defense, and a prototype was sent to General Wade Eiling two days ago. Mac heaves a sigh and hobbles into the office to wait for Stagg as Barry fights an army of clones.

“Ms. Howell,” Stagg glances at her warily and goes to pour himself a brandy, “you’re working with the Streak.”

Mac shakes her head slowly and smiles viciously at him. “I think it would be more accurate to say he works for me,” she says.

“Barry,” she hears Eobard say over the radio, “you need to isolate the prime.”

“I can’t,” Barry says in a jagged voice, “it’s impossible.”

“Nothing is impossible, Barry,” Joe tells him firmly. “You taught me that. You can do this.”

“Here’s what’s going to happen,” Mac says as Shawna teleports into the office and Stagg actually shrieks at the sight of her, “my friend Peek-a-Boo here is going to take you to the Channel 52 studio in Keystone and you’re going to confess that you stole the research that won you the
Regence award. If you refuse, I’m going to release the specs for every project you have that’s patent-pending and cost you billions in revenue. I’ve already frozen your assets and drained your overseas bank accounts as compensation for these,” she points to the bruises on her neck, “but you can blame Mr. Java for that. I’m not like Dr. Black. I don’t lose focus when I get angry and I never do things by halves. So,” she uses her powers to access the security camera feed and smiles wider as Danton grabs Barry’s arm with two hands, then with four, and chooses to survive, “your money or your reputation, Mr. Stagg. It’s your choice.”

Stagg snarls at her before he offers his arm to Shawna and she teleports him across the river. Mac hobbles to where Danton and Barry are wheezing amongst shards of broken glass and pokes the former in the shoulder with her cane.

“Look,” she says as she pulls up the live broadcast on her phone to show him.

Stagg is trying to act like he had no idea the organs he put in the patients from his clinical trial were failing and he decided to confess because he found that out. Which is a big fat lie, but it doesn’t overshadow the truth. Stagg is admitting he’s a thief and a fraud on national television. Which is all that matters.

Danton gapes at her. “You,” he wheezes. “How…?”

Mac shrugs. “I’m just that good,” she deadpans.

There’s a breaking local news story airing that includes the footage of Stagg’s confession on Channel 52. Danton may have chosen not to kill himself, but that doesn’t stop Mac from putting him on suicide watch at the clinic. Only instead of trying to hurt himself, Danton goes to one of the empty underground labs and starts growing his wife a new heart.

“I tried to save him,” Barry says, “I almost didn’t.”

“Doesn’t sound like he wanted to be saved,” Eobard says gravely, “not until the last minute. Some people, when they break…they can’t be put together again.”

“Some people heal even stronger,” Barry points out.

Eobard looks at Mac, who’s sitting behind the desk and going through the specs she stole from Stagg Enterprises. “I hope so,” he murmurs.

“Well,” Cisco says around the sucker in his mouth, “at least Multiplex isn’t going to hurt anyone else.”

“Okay,” Mac says without bothering to look away from the computer screen, “that’s an awesome name.”

Caitlin gives them a warm smile as Barry nods his agreement. “I may be the one in the suit doing the running,” he says, “but when I’m out there helping people, making a difference, you’re all out there with me. I finally realized something…” he pauses to glance over at Mac as she undoes the clip in her hair and watches her snatch at the sparks that fly with one hand and snuff them out before he says: “we were all struck by that lightning.”

[317] Elizabeth Granger first appeared in Simon Dark Vol.1, No.1 (“What Simon Does”) December, 2007. Danton Black mentions that his wife’s name was Elizabeth and I chose a minor character from the comics to adapt into a version of her that doesn’t get fridged.


[320] Mher Darbinyan is a RL gangster from LA who founded the Armenian Power gang. It’s a safe bet that the showrunners named the Darbinyan crime family that appeared in *The Flash* 1x03 (“Things You Can’t Outrun”) 21 October 2014 after him.

Oliver Queen, Tommy Merlyn, Daniel Palmer, and Carter Hall were all in the same pledge class at the Ivy Town University chapter of ΑΣΦ in 2003. Oliver dropped out of college as a sophomore and moved back to Starling City, but he never lost touch with his fraternity brothers.

Anna Choi-Loring, as Dan’s best friend, was there the night Carter got drunk and fell off the roof of the frat house. That night, she saw something impossible.

Anna saw him sprout wings and fly.

From the Watchtower Archives
Recorded 16 October 2014

Ray proposed to Anna in 2010, three years after they started living together. Oh, he would’ve proposed sooner if Anna hadn’t wanted to wait until she finished law school; but it’s a moot point anyway because they’re waiting to have their wedding until marriage equality is legalized nationwide. Anna had bottom surgery over the summer between undergrad and law school, so legally she’s a woman, but the injustice of trans people being unable to legally change their gender without surgically altering their genitalia leaves such a bad taste in her mouth that she doesn’t want to get married until anyone can marry whomever they choose. Ray, being pansexual, couldn’t stomach it either. Which is why they agreed to wait, why they made that decision together.

Things have changed since they buried Dan five months ago. Ray is spending more and more of his time on a top secret project that he refuses to tell her about. It feels like she lost her best friend and the man that she loves in one fell swoop.
From: Mackenzie Howell (luceononuro@starlabs.com)

I legit purchased an extra seat on the train for my dress. I feel ridiculous.

Anna started chatting with Mac over Skype after Dan’s funeral, at which she formally introduced herself to her and Ray without the bustier and the domino mask. It’s obvious that long-distance friendships suit Mac better than close personal ones for whatever reason. Anna doesn’t poke that open wound because she figures that if Mac wants to tell her, she will. Otherwise, it’s none of her business.

From: Anna Choi-Loring (atomica@palmertechnologies.org)

is your dress in a garment bag?

Mac nods before she remembers that people can’t see what she’s doing over the phone. It’s only gotten worse now that she remembers living four lives in a future where all calls were video transmissions.

From: Mackenzie Howell (luceononuro@starlabs.com)

yes

When she looks up, Carter Hall is sitting in the seat across from the garment bag that contains her dress for that night. Mac arches her eyebrows as high as they can go and looks down at her phone before he notices her eyeballing him. Whether he remembers his past lives or not, he probably doesn’t remember any previous timelines. Of course that doesn’t stop him from recognizing her. After all, he’s from Central City and she’s been on the local news seven times in the past three weeks.

“You’re Mac Howell,” says Carter, “why are you taking the train when you can fly?”

“Well,” Mac flicks her tongue to eke out the /sound, “because helicopters are terrifying, private jets are ostentatious, and why would I waste the amount of energy it would take to fly six hundred miles when I could sit on a train and read for six hours instead?”

Which, she thinks, is probably the same reason you’re taking the train when you can fly, Hawkman.

Carter nods. “What business do you have in Starling City?” he wants to know.

“I’m attending a pledge drive at Palmer Technologies,” Mac informs him, “their in-house legal counsel is a friend of mine.”

“You know Anna?” Carter asks, his deep voice pitching marginally higher in surprise.

Mac glances down at the messages from the aforementioned Anna on her phone. “Yes I do,” she answers. “I saved her life a few months ago.”

Carter nods again, slowly. “You were at Dan’s funeral,” he mutters more to himself than her.

“You were his friend?” Mac asks him even though she already knows the answer.

“Yeah,” Carter tells her, “I was.”

“I’m sorry I couldn’t save him, too,” Mac tells him softly.
After that, something heavy settles in the space between them. It’s not uncomfortable, exactly, just the weight of loss and a quiet edge of helplessness that comes with surviving when the people you love are gone. Carter—as someone who’s living his two hundred and seventh life—would probably understand how it feels to miss people who no longer exist and never will again.

“Kendra Saunders,” Mac says.

Carter looks up from his phone. “What?”

“Your soulmate, Chay-Ara,” Mac clarifies, “in this lifetime, her name is Kendra Saunders.”

Carter doesn’t speak to her for the rest of the train ride. Which is fine by Mac, who finishes one paranormal romance novel and gets halfway through another before they arrive at the station. Mac is hobbled to the exit and struggling to hold onto her cane when Carter snatches the garment bag up out of her hands and tucks it over his forearm.

“I need to talk to Anna,” he tells her gruffly, “is she meeting you here?”

Mac nods and folds herself onto a bench to wait until Anna shows up. “I almost got abducted and vivisected by a mad scientist day before yesterday,” she murmurs. “I took the train because I feel safer surrounded by metal and power than I feel anywhere else but home…and staying home today wasn’t an option.”

Carter sits at the opposite end of the bench and puts the garment bag in between them. “My father died a few months ago,” he says, “and losing him on top of what happened to Dan that night got me thinking about how I could help. I just don’t know where to start.”

Mac shrugs. “There’s no right way to become a hero,” she tells him softly, “all heroes have to do is consistently show up where they’re needed. Don’t think big. Just start with something small.”

Anna shows up just as a soft drizzle begins to fall, tiny splotches of rain speckling the pale red fabric of her blouse. “Carter?” she says incredulously. “Since when do you know Mac?”

“I barely know her,” Carter informs her, “we met on the train six hours ago. How could you tell her about the night I emerged at the frat house?”

Anna folds her arms and makes an indignant noise. “I never told anyone about what happened that night,” she retorts, “not even Ray.”

“Only two people saw me emerge,” Carter reminds her, “and Dan’s dead. How else could she know about me?”

“Um,” Mac says, “I know about you because I’m from the future.”

Anna turns to look at her so fast she almost gives herself whiplash. “Wait,” she blurts, “what?”

“I’m a time traveler,” Mac clarifies once she’s sitting in the passenger seat of Anna’s Fiat coupe. Carter is giving her a skeptical look in the rearview mirror while Anna keeps her eyes on the road. “I’m not here to play out an undoing plot by stopping an apocalyptic event or preventing some future dictator from being born or anything. I got metahumans legal personhood over a century before we would’ve achieved that in the future, so now I’m just living my life in the present.”

“You’re serious,” Carter says dubiously.
“You’ve died and been reborn over two hundred times,” Mac points out. “You, of all people, must know that nothing is impossible.”

Anna—who grew up with a father who’s been trying to expand on the Kaluza-Klein five-dimensional theory[^326] and prove the existence of graviphotons since 1979—has never been a skeptic. Mac somehow knew where and when she would be the night of the siege, and time travel would explain that better than any other possibility. “So the future you’re from doesn’t exist anymore,” she deduces, “and that’s why you’re still here in the present.”

Mac nods, a sharp descent of her chin. “Exactly.”

Anna exhales in a quiet gust as she wraps her mind around what the possibility of time travel would mean to her fiancé. Ray would want to save his parents, his brother, to boldly go where none has gone before. *I can’t tell him,* she thinks, *I might lose him if I do.*

Of course, that’s assuming she hasn’t lost him already.

Felicity has been working at a store called Tech Village ever since Team Arrow went bankrupt. Ray approached her a few days ago with a job offer—one that she rejected—but he hasn’t given up, and he can be persistent to a fault. Which is why Felicity is yelling at him when Mac, Anna, and Carter arrive at the building that was once Queen Consolidated and is now Palmer Technologies.

“I get it,” Felicity tells him, the space between her eyebrows furrowing angrily as her voice starts to shrill on certain words, “loud and clear! You are rich. You are impulsive. You are, frankly, the creepiest form of stalker that I have ever had to deal with—and believe me when I tell you that is saying a lot—and what are you doing to our old offices?”

“Hi.” Ray glances over her head to smile at Anna, who smiles back. “You like it? I’m just trying to liven up the place a bit. I’m hosting an event tonight”—he leads them to the room where the aforementioned event will be held and signs for several cases of champagne—“a pledge drive of sorts. Gotta make an impression, right? Now,” he gives Felicity what he hopes is his most charming smile, “what can I do for you?”

“You can stop,” Felicity tells him. “You can stop texting me and calling me and e-mailing me, because I spam them anyway—”

Ray chuckles. “Oh,” he says with the warmth from his laughter seeping into his voice, “is spam a verb now?”

“—because I am never, ever going to work for you!” Felicity insists.

“Actually,” Ray says, “you already do.”

Felicity huffs. “Only because you bought the store that I work at!”

“No, I didn’t.” Ray checks his phone to find a text message from Syd that he speed-reads before he shifts his focus back to the irate IT girl who’s glaring at him. “I bought the holding company that owns and operates all twenty thousand Tech Village stores, but I guess either way, yes, I am your boss now. So you can work for me here in a big office with a big salary. Or you can work for me there in that awful uniform.”

“Or,” Felicity retorts, “I can quit. Which is what I just did.”
“You know,” Ray says, “most girls would be flattered that I spent one-point-two billion dollars to hire them, even if I do have a fairly genius plan for rebranding the stores.”

“Well,” Felicity snaps back, “in case you haven’t noticed, I am not most girls, and I don’t need this. Or you. Or any of this.”

“Um,” Mac holds up one finger and tugs her bottom lip between her teeth when Felicity whirls on her, “I asked Ray to hire you.”

“You did what?” Felicity blurts awkwardly.

Mac nods, slowly. “I knew that your job at Kord Industries fell through, so I asked Ray to give you a job with benefits and an obscene salary. I had no idea his approach to wooing new hires was being a creepy stalker.”

Ray puts one hand on his heart in a nonverbal You wound me. Anna snorts and rolls her eyes at him before she goes to give him a kiss hello. Ray cups her face with the hand he’d pressed over his heart and kisses her more deeply than she’d intended. Not that she minds.

Felicity is flummoxed enough that she nopes over to the elevator and leaves the building to reconsider the offer to work for Palmer Technologies while Ray is otherwise occupied with Anna. Mac clears her throat awkwardly when their tongues get involved.

Ray breaks the kiss to grin sheepishly. “Sorry,” he says even though it’s obvious he doesn’t mean it. “Got carried away.”

Syd arrives on another train (one that didn’t leave Central City at fuck off o’clock in the morning) in a vintage pinstriped suit, a black dress shirt, white socks with black sheep on them, low-rise Converse, and no tie. Palmer Technologies is his brother’s startup, but he feels out of place in the building and he chugs a flute of champagne to take the edge off before he makes his entrance.

Mac is dressed in black too: she’s wearing a velvet dress with a full skirt that stops just below her knees and a neckline that’s almost uncharacteristically low. Syd vividly remembers what she looks like in her lacy lingerie, but somehow it didn’t occur to him until this moment that Mac is pretty. Of course she’s not thin enough to conform to any modern standards of beauty, but she has adorable freckles and perfect tits and amazing eyes—and most importantly, he doesn’t feel inferior when he talks to her.

Syd grabs two more flutes of champagne before he joins her at her table. “So what’s a girl like you doing in a place like this?” he says, trying to act smooth and failing miserably.

Mac snorts and glances at the glass he puts in front of her like an offering. “I don’t drink,” she says, “antidepressants don’t mix with alcohol.”

“Oh.” Syd doesn’t know how to respond to that, so instead of trying to change the subject he downs his second glass of champagne as his twin brother takes the stage.

“Ladies and gentleman,” Anna says, “Dr. Raymond Palmer.”

“Thank you.” Ray gives his fiancée a crooked grin before he turns to his guests. “Thank you all for coming out tonight. Given all that has befallen this city, it’s easy for us to lose hope, to hide in our castles and be thankful that our ledgers are in the black. Well, we—the city’s most affluent businessmen and women—hold its future in our hands, and tonight I am making a pledge. I will give half of my net worth to the benefit of our home, and this”—he holds up a wrinkled dollar bill
to show everyone—“will be my salary for the year. I invite you all to join me in this investment. Not just with your money, but with your ingenuity, and most importantly, your time.”

Syd makes a valiant effort not to sneer at how infuriatingly perfect his twin is and looks at Mac to see what she thinks of that speech, only to find her smiling at the screen of her phone.

“Starling City is my home,” Ray says, “but it’s yours too. So help make Star City our future.”

Mac finds Ray later and pulls him aside because they haven’t gotten to talk yet. “I’m leaving to catch the last train,” she says, “but I have something to tell you before I go.”

Ray cocks his head curiously. “Okay,” he tells her, “shoot.”

Mac forces herself to look him in the eyes to show him that she means business. “If you want a partner in your work, your mission, and your life,” she says, “you have to remember that you are not alone.”

Ray flicks his gaze to Anna, who’s at a nearby table talking to his cousin Ted. “Yeah,” he swallows thickly, “that’s good advice.”

Mac nods. “I know,” she says.

If only she could take it.

[322] Alpha Sigma Phi is a real fraternity that was founded at Yale University and it has 147 total affiliated groups all over the country. I chose them because of their house motto, which is *causa latet vis est notissima* (“the cause is hidden, the effect is known”).

[323] Sara calls Oliver “Mr. Ivy League dropout” in *Arrow* 1x01 (“Pilot”) 10 October 2013. Ivy Town University is probably a member of the Ivy League on Earth-1.

[324] Laurel mentions that Ray asked Jean to move in with him during one of the flashbacks to 2007 in *Arrow* 1x21 (“The Undertaking”) 1 May 2013. This was retconned in season two, because the version of Jean Loring who exists in show canon is old enough that she could be his mother. I extrapolated a massive headcanon about Oliver, Tommy, Laurel, Dan, Anna, and Carter all being friends in college and Anna going to law school with Laurel and Joanna from there.

[325] These laws vary from state to state. Here’s what we’re dealing with in the setting of this story: Connecticut, where Ray’s hometown of Ivy Town is located in the comics, requires (a) a birth certificate request form, (b) a court order to legally change the name of the trans person, and (c) a notarized affidavit from a medical professional stating that a trans person undergone any form of clinical treatment required for transitioning. Ohio, where I’ve decided Starling City is located, basically says trans people can only legally change their gender in that state if they throw enough money around. Which isn’t always an option. Missouri, where Central City is located in both the comics and on the show, requires that trans people undergo both a legal name change and sexual reassignment surgery before they can legally change their gender. While bottom surgery for AMAB people who identify as female is a vaginoplasty (a procedure that gives trans women a functional sensitive vagina), bottom surgery for AFAB people is typically either a metoidoplasty (enlarging the clitoris with hormones and sometimes implanting an erectile prosthesis for aesthetic purposes) or a phalloplasty (a complete reconstruction of a penis that requires implanting an erectile prosthesis). Of course some trans people don’t ever undergo any kind of surgical alteration, either because it’s too expensive because they don’t want to. If you’re trans, YMMV. If you aren’t, then it’s none of your business.

Don’t let the capes or silly costumes fool you. Most vigilantes are what we are because we’re traumatized.

Bruce watched his parents bleed out in a dirty alley when he was ten years old. Clark lost his home planet as a baby and grew up a stranger in a strange land, part of our world but apart from us, too. Oliver survived five years where nothing good happened. Sara was forced to unmake and remake herself in order to survive and now she’s trying to figure out how to live. Ray blames himself for not being able to protect the people that he loves, so he’s building an exosuit out of dwarf star alloy to make sure that he never feels so helpless again. Barry—who hasn’t started calling himself the Flash yet—lost his mother and spent fifteen years listening to people telling him that he was wrong about his father being innocent. Our trauma doesn’t define us, but it does drive us to do the work of saving the world.

Don’t let the heroics fool you, either—at the end of the day, this is how we save ourselves.

From the Watchtower Archives
Recorded 21 October 2014

Lisa invites Mac to the movies out of the blue. It’s the opening week of the Rita Farr Story,[327] a movie that’s based on the life of one of Lisa’s favorite old Hollywood actresses—second only to Audrey Hepburn—so she doesn’t have any reason to suspect that Lisa has pulled another bait and switch on her until she hobbles into the theater. There, she sees Len sitting with a large popcorn on his lap and a soft drink in the cupholders on either side of him—one with ice for himself and one without for her. When she sits in the empty seat beside him, Mac notices that he mixed something in with the popcorn.

“Are those Cookie Dough Bites?” she asks, even though she already knows the answer.
Len hums low in his throat and that sound is enough to make her blush. “Your favorite,” he murmurs.

Mac shovels a handful of popcorn and candy into her mouth to stop herself from kissing him (again). While she chews, she puts her drink in the cupholder to her left and moves the empty armrest until nothing is occupying the space between them. “Thank you,” she tells him softly just as the lights dim and the trailers begin.

“You,” he says in a low voice that makes her whole body tingle from the crown of her head all the way down to her toes, “are so very welcome.”

It’s impossible to concentrate on the movie with him next to her. Len smoothly puts one of his arms around her during the opening title sequence, and he keeps stroking his thumb in slow circles over the curve of her shoulder. It would be electrifying even if she wasn’t full of lightning. Which she is, but that isn’t the point—the point is that being this close to him makes her feel heated and shivery all at once. There’s a sweet ache pulsing below her belly and if she were to spread her thighs apart and put his hand between her legs, she knows he would make her come harder than she ever could by herself. It goes on and on until all she’s thinking about is how much she wants him inside of her.

When the credits roll, she jolts out of a particularly lurid fantasy and blushes impossibly brighter. Len has spent the last several minutes staring intently at her face instead of paying attention to the movie, and he smirks as her flush creeps from her cheeks to her clavicle.

“Penny for your thoughts, sweetheart,” he drawls.

Mac exhales a soft whoosh of air before she uses her cane to get back on her feet and abruptly hobbles away. Len stops her on her way out of the theater with a hand on her shoulder and folds his arms after she turns to face him.

“Oh, okay,” he says, “what’s the problem? I’ve been exceptionally patient with you. I would’ve understood if you didn’t want to sit with me, but you did. I would’ve understood if you didn’t want me touching you, but you’re the one who moved the armrest and you let me put my arm around you. I…” he grits his teeth because the words he wants to say to her keep getting stuck in his throat. “I’m not interested in whatever game you’re playing. This isn’t a game for me.”

Len never really understood the need to pair up with someone for longer than it took to get that someone in bed, but now all he ever thinks about is being with Mac. If he’s being honest with himself, his most frequent and most private dream isn’t any of his favorite X-rated fantasies about her. It’s her inviting him into her home and asking him to stay. If he’s being honest with himself, he loves her.

Mac heaves a sigh, the garbled edge of her frustration snarling out from under her tongue. “I’m not playing anything,” she informs him. “This isn’t a game for me, either. I know the man who destroyed me and ruined my life is here in our city, and even though he’s nowhere near us right now, I’m terrified of him finding us and killing you because I…” Here she swallows thickly and bites down on the inside of her cheek to stop herself from shedding any tears. Eobard didn’t exactly come out of their breakup unscathed. After all, he’s literally been stuck the past for almost fifteen years, and he’s been living in the skin of another person for far too long—but those are consequences of choices that he made. Mac didn’t choose to become the version of herself that she is today, didn’t choose to have her life unraveled by a chronic narcissist who couldn’t take no for an answer. “I’ve lost everyone that I’ve ever loved,” she tells his shoes because she can’t look him in the eyes, “please don’t make me lose you, too.”
Len exhales a raw sound before he cups her face in both hands and kisses her desperately, trying to show her how he feels because he can’t say the words out loud. Mac whimpers against his mouth and kisses him back for a few seconds before she pulls away. Len smooths one of his hands over the convolution at the crook of her neck and down to the soft curvature of her waist to hold her where he wants her. Only it turns out he doesn’t have to, because she wants to stay where she is: here, in his arms. With her lips swollen and tingling from the delicious pressure of the kisses that he stole from her.

“You can’t keep doing that,” Mac tells him, trying for indignant and failing.

“You said he wasn’t anywhere near us,” Len points out.

Mac shakes her head slowly. “I can sense him,” she clarifies, “and he’s miles away.”

Len caresses her flushed cheek with his thumb and leans in until his nose is almost touching hers. “Stop me if he shows up,” he whispers lowly, the heat of his breath on her lips enough to make her knees go weak before he kisses her again.

Iris, Caroline, and Barry are at the same theater seeing the latest *Night of the Living Dead* remake. It’s a tradition of theirs to see every bad horror movie in theaters and make a spectacle of that. Caroline hasn’t been watching a lot of horror movies lately, since the person she’s been at the movies with the most since lightning struck is Cisco and he likes romantic comedies. It’s good to fall back into old habits, but part of her wishes that Cisco were here with her—especially with the weird undercurrent of tension between Iris and Barry now that he’s lying to her about his powers and she’s getting serious with his secret boyfriend.

*Put succinctly,* Caroline thinks, *Ugh.*

“Regular movie scale, that was a seven or an eight,” says Barry.

Caroline scoffs. “Zombie movie scale, it was like a four, tops.”

Iris arches her eyebrows at the twins with a paper receptacle in one hand and an unapologetically large handful of popcorn in the other. “There’s a zombie movie scale?” she asks incredulously.

Barry nods so fast he almost discombobulates himself. “Did you know that zombies exist in nature?” he informs her excitedly. “There’s a species of fungi that infects ants, causing them to attack plants that can release spores, which in turn infect new hosts—”

Caroline puts a hand on his shoulder and gives him a look that says *slow down, scarlet speedster* without saying anything at all. Barry stops flailing his hands in wild gesticulations as his shoulders slump with shame.

“I’m going full nerd again, aren’t I?” he deduces.

“Yeah,” she tells him.

“Yes,” Iris agrees. “It’s okay, though. You are still the cutest nerd that I know.”

Caroline watches them stare at each other, their eyes meeting for a few seconds too long. It’s subtle, but something between Iris and Barry has changed since he woke up. *I wonder when they’re going to notice,* Caroline thinks, *but I doubt it’ll happen anytime soon.*

“Anyway,” Iris says, “I’m a lot more interested in the amazing as of late.”
Caroline side-eyes her twin. “You mean because of the Streak?” she asks.

“Yeah,” Iris says around a mouthful of leftover popcorn, “he’s out there. People are talking about him.”

“How do you even know it’s a he?” Barry wants to know.

“Maybe it’s a she,” Caroline points out.

“It’s a man,” Iris insists. “You know I am really intuitive about this kind of stuff. Someone even posted a picture after they were yanked from their car during an accident,” she brings up the picture on her phone and holds the device out toward Caroline. “It’s a red blur leaving the scene.”

Caroline cocks her head at the picture and sighs. Joe doesn’t want Iris to know about what Barry can do, even though she’s spent the past six months investigating metahumans and telling their stories in her column.

“Here,” Iris turns to show the picture to Barry, “what do you see?”

Barry heaves a sigh of his own when he sees a picture of Eddie instead of a blurry snap of himself at superspeed. “I see your boyfriend is calling,” he tells her.

“Oh!” Iris smiles and it lights up her whole face. “I should probably get this. I’m crashing at his place tonight, and he’s supposed to leave a key for me somewhere.”

Barry doesn’t pout until she turns around to take the call. Caroline snorts.

“Hey, babe. What’s up?” Iris says, her smile audible in her voice. “Not much, just hanging out with Caroline and Barry. You off yet?”

When his phone buzzes a few seconds later, Barry answers with a dejected “Hello?”

“Code 237 on Wade Boulevard,” Cisco says on the other end of the line.

Barry raises his eyebrows incredulously. “Public indecency?”


Barry raises his eyebrows as high as they can go. “Dog leash violation?”

Caitlin huffs so loudly that Caroline can hear her. “Bad man,” she clarifies. “With a gun. In a getaway car. Go.”

Barry speeds away while Caroline looks around to avoid eavesdropping on Iris’s conversation with her boyfriend, and sees a familiar MINI Cooper in a pretty shade of robin’s egg blue. What’s interesting about it isn’t the color, though—it’s the fact that a man is pressing Mac up against the passenger side door and kissing her like he means it.

Fact: Mac lost her husband over a year ago in some unspecified but tragic accident that she doesn’t like to talk about. Caroline, of all people, understands that.

Fact: Mac probably hasn’t told any of them about her mystery guy because she wants something for herself. Caroline understands this, too.

Fact: Mac deserves to have sex with something that doesn’t need batteries to get her off.
Caroline smiles. *Get it, girl,* she thinks.

Iris is hanging up when Barry speeds back, stomping out a small fire he started with the friction applied to the soles of his shoes. “Eddie says hi,” Iris tells him.

“Nice of him,” Barry says, trying not to sound petulant before he changes the subject. “You wanna grab a bite? I’m feeling a little famished.”

“How can you be famished after the Mongolian barbecue we had before the movie and the extra large popcorn you had at the movie?” Iris frowns at him dubiously. “How are you not fat?”

“I’ve been jogging,” Barry informs her.

Caroline snorts. “Okay,” she says, “it’s five dollar grab bag night at the Chinese takeout place around the corner and I feel like crab rangoon. Let’s do this.”

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[327] Rita Farr first appeared in *My Greatest Adventure* Vol. 1, No. 80 (“The Doom Patrol”) June, 1963. There were two easter eggs in the opening scene of *The Flash* 1x03 (“Things You Can’t Outrun”) 21 October 2014, and the *Rita Farr Story* playing at the theatre where Iris and Barry saw a zombie movie was one of them. Rita was an original member of the Doom Patrol in the comics. Also, she was Beast Boy’s foster mom. THE MORE YOU KNOW.

[328] George Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) has so many permutations that I’m not going to waste my time listing them all, but my opinion on remakes is that there’s nothing wrong with retelling a story if you’re using the concept of a remake to tell a story that wouldn’t otherwise be told. (Which you might’ve guessed, since I’ve spent the better part of a year rewriting the Arrowverse.) *Night of the Living Dead* (2014) was released on 24 October 2014, but for the sake of continuity I’m going to say it was released a week earlier on Earth-1.
The Unmasqued World (1) Sacrificing Yourself for a Bad Cause Is Not a Moral Act

Only lovers and criminals speak in code.
   All doctors are lovers.
   All police and military
   are sanctioned criminals.

Every signal is public: The traffic light.
The siren. The military. The police. The doctors. The kiss. This is lover’s code.
Every code is private: The ransom note. The combination lock.
That glance. That kiss.

Daphne Gottlieb, “Whiskey Tango Romeo”

Shock Value
Part 2
Myth Can Make Reality More Intelligible
Book II
Lightning Doesn’t Strike Twice
Chapter 35
The Unmasqued World
(1 of 3)

“It’s not unlike a heist. It requires a lot of planning. Waiting. Patience. Then it’s game time, and you’ve got to go all in, or you’re finished.”

Selina Kyle
Catwoman Vol.4, No.10 (“And All That Is Left Is for Me”) August, 2012

I
Sacrificing Yourself for a Bad Cause Is Not a Moral Act

Kyle Nimbus was a killer, but the crime he was sentenced to death for was a murder he didn’t commit. What got him on death row wasn’t a hit gone wrong or a bad coverup. It was his affair with Mher Darbinyan, the only nephew of Araz Darbinyan and heir to the Darbinyan crime family.

Mher had planned to break off his engagement to a notorious mob princess and leave Central City to start a new life together with Nimbus. Araz decided that scandal would be bad for business. Nimbus was expendable, so they framed him and persuaded the opposing counsel in his case to seek the death penalty. Only then something impossible happened on the night of his execution: the S. T. A. R. Labs particle accelerator exploded, giving him the power to turn himself into poison gas and the means to get revenge on the family that betrayed him.

Kyle Nimbus didn’t just become a metahuman. Kyle Nimbus became the Mist.
Joe is helping Barry and Caroline go over the evidence from the night of their mother’s murder to see if they can find whoever is responsible until Eddie comes to tell him that multiple homicides were called in. Araz Darbinyan called a meeting to discuss the money that was being stolen from their family by someone on the inside. Kyle Nimbus decided to use that opportunity to take revenge on the people who left him to rot on death row. Barry deduces that the perp is a metahuman from the pattern of the attacks, one that makes no sense unless the gas that killed the Armenian mobsters had a mind of its own.

Mac is going over a report from her field operative who orchestrated the inside job that the Darbinyans were so concerned about when Barry arrives with Joe to inform them of a new metahuman threat.

“Fascinating,” Eobard says, “a metahuman that can manipulate poison gas.”

“Is it just poisonous gas, or can he control all aerated substances?” Cisco wonders.

“And how does he formulate the connection?” Caitlin adds. “Is it physiological or psychological?”

“I’m guessing he creates a mental nexus that allows him to control gaseous substances,” Mac says, minimizing the report as Caitlin and Eobard join her behind the desk to see if they can create a program to track Nimbus base on his power set.

“You mean connect with gases on a molecular level?” Cisco asks before he makes his way over to the desk and looks over her shoulder at the screen.

Mac nods and glances down at her phone to find a dozen text messages waiting for her. “Yeah.”

Cisco grins. “That is ridiculously cool,” he says.

Barry shoots Joe an apologetic look. “They get really excited about this stuff,” he mumbles.

It’s obvious to anyone who’s paying attention that while Joe is being supportive of Barry’s efforts to become a superhero, the hardboiled detective isn’t exactly on board with the whole masked vigilantism thing. “Well,” he says flatly, “the only thing I’m excited about is putting criminals behind bars.”

“It’s a good thing Iron Heights is equipped to hold metahuman criminals,” Mac points out. [329]

Joe nods, succinctly. “Yeah,” he says, “not that I’m not thankful for your foresight, Ms. Howell, but would you mind telling me why you’d want to give us the power to lock people like you up?”

Mac glances up from the screen of her phone and forces herself to look him in the eyes. “Well,” she says, flicking her tongue against her teeth to enunciate the l sound, “because the alternative would’ve been colluding with you to turn the pipeline under this lab into a makeshift cell block and imprisoning the metahuman criminals we stop illegally in our basement for however long it would take to rehabilitate them. Which we aren’t at all equipped for, since the company only has three fulltime employees besides Dr. Wells and myself, and none of them are trained in rehabilitation techniques or criminal psychology. It would’ve been a crapshoot at best and gross negligence at worst.”

Cisco nods and takes a bite out of the strand of licorice in his mouth. “Ain’t nobody got time for
Caitlin goes to the precinct with Barry to help him identify the poison gas because the evidence he collected is part of the ongoing investigation of the Darbinyan massacre, and so they can’t do the analysis at S. T. A. R. Labs. Caroline is sorting the photographs she developed for nine separate ongoing cases into manila envelopes for the lead detectives on each of those investigations when Barry speeds into the room to belatedly do the fiber analysis for the Orloff case.

Fact: Pyotr Orloff was a biogeneticist who came to Central from the Puleski Institute in Siberia to give a series of guest lectures at Hudson University.

Fact: Dr. Orloff was murdered by someone who left almost no evidence behind, so the fiber analysis Barry should’ve finished the night before is probably going to lead the cops to a dead end.

Fact: Caroline is going to have to redo three of her photographic evidence files—including the file for the Orloff case—because those envelopes were open on her desk when her brother sped into the crime lab and sent her snapshots ricocheting through their workspace at hyperspeed.

Ugh, Caroline thinks as she looks up and notices that the entire world is moving in slow motion. Barry is moving at what looks like normal speed to her skewed perception, but everyone else in the crime lab might as well be standing still.

Caroline frowns, the space between her eyebrows furrowing, and shrugs with one shoulder before she snatches her scattered photographs out of thin air.

Barry arches his eyebrows at her in a nonverbal wait, since when can you move faster than the speed of sound?

Caroline shrugs again in a nonverbal since now, I guess.

Fact: Caroline is connected to the strange otherworldly energy that’s using him as a conduit just much as Barry is, but she can’t seem to use that energy to run superfast. What she can do is shape that energy into forcefields and see Barry move in the blink of an eye.

Fact: Whatever is happening to her twin is happening to her, too. Only it’s not quite happening in the same way.

Fact: Caroline has been avoiding S. T. A. R. Labs since her brother woke up because she doesn’t want to run around being a hero.

Caroline, Barry, and Caitlin discover that Nimbus left strands of his DNA inside the lungs of his victims. Meanwhile: Mac goes to the mall and steps into the elevator where Nimbus has cornered the judge who sentenced him to rot on death row.

Welp, Mac thinks just before she inhales the poison gas, I didn’t see that coming.

Barry arrives at the mall to find her in the elevator with her cane keeping the sliding doors open while she coughs up bright white sparks and black phlegm. When she looks up and sees him, her eyes are whited out and her whole body is glowing with violently blue ultraviolet light. “Mac,” he says in shock, “you’re using your powers to purge the poison gas, aren’t you?”

Mac nods. “I can heal myself,” she tells him hoarsely, “actually, I can do pretty much anything if I have enough power. Now go,” she spits out a wad of noxious saliva and flails one hand awkwardly
Barry nods before he speeds through the emergency exit to confront Nimbus. Ten minutes later, he brings a lungful of toxic gas back to S. T. A. R. Labs. Caitlin had to stop by the mall to pick up Mac, so she arrives just in time to perform a pulmonary biopsy on him. Barry passes out from the shock of running back to the lab at superspeed while his body was trying to heal itself and then attempting to regrow part of his lung while a needle was still in his chest wall.

Mac flops into her chair and wheezes. “Cisco,” she rasps, “do you have any Jolly Ranchers? I need to get the taste of this gas out of my mouth.”

Cisco tosses her a lemon-flavored one while they wait for Barry to wake up all over again. Luckily, it doesn’t take him ten months this time. When he opens his eyes, Cisco is grinning down at him. “Yes,” he intones triumphantly, “the Streak lives.”

“You’d be dead if your cells didn’t regenerate so quickly,” Caitlin informs him.

“Yeah,” Barry says, “my chest feels like the one time I had a cigarette.” Caitlin arches her eyebrows at him. “Yeah,” he smiles groggily at her side-eye, “teen me lived for danger.”

“This isn’t funny,” Caitlin says. “You could’ve…”

“I didn’t,” Barry tells her softly.

Mac sucks on her Jolly Rancher as tension blooms quietly in the space between them. Eobard clears his throat from behind the desk. “Now that we have a sample,” he says, “we can get to work analyzing it. Figure out the makeup of the poison. Maybe get a clue as to his human identity…”

 “…or at least a way to stop him from turning into a mist,” Cisco holds up one finger as he exclaims, “the Mist! Okay, that’s his name, end of discussion.”

Caroline goes to get coffee for Joe and returns to the crime lab to find Barry on the verge of a rant. There’s a specific hunch to his thin shoulders, a rigid edge to his posture. Which can’t be good.

“It’s too late,” he says, “I should’ve been faster.”

Joe shakes his head. “Focus on the job,” he says, “don’t think about that right now.”

Barry heaves a sigh. “You don’t want to know what I’m thinking about,” he says. Joe gives him a pointed look that he can feel even though he’s facing the rear window. Barry heaves another sigh before he says, “Joe, my dad has spent fourteen years in a six-by-eight foot cell for a crime he didn’t commit. I couldn’t save my mom, but I could save him.”

Joe flicks his gaze to Caroline, who’s standing in the doorway with two to-go cups of coffee going cold, and exhales with enough force to flare his nostrils. “Didn’t I promise you that we would get your father out of prison together?” he says to both of them.

Caroline nods, sharply. Joe exhales with his whole body, some of the tension oozing its way out of him. Caroline lets one corner of her mouth curl up into a half-smile.

“I don’t need your help,” Barry points out through clenched teeth, “I could be in and out of there with him before anybody even sees me.”

Caroline snorts. “Okay,” she cocks her head after her twin jolts and whirls to look at her. “Then
what? Barry, you’d be making him a fugitive, so he would be on the run until we can clear his
name, and he’s not as fast as you are.”

Barry presses his mouth into a thin flat line, but he doesn’t say anything because he knows his
sister is right.

“I have been a cop for almost as long as you two have been alive,” Joe says, breaking the silence,“so you should know that putting on a suit does not make everybody safe. For every person you
save, there’s gonna be somebody you can’t, and the hardest thing you’re gonna have to face isn’t
some monster out there with powers. It’s gonna be that feeling of uselessness when you can’t do
anything, or the guilt that weighs on you when you make a mistake. Some things you can’t fight.
Some things you just have to live with.”

Mac finds Caitlin alone the next morning, sitting in the testing area to keep the cosmic treadmill
company, and folds herself onto the floor beside her. “I was married,” she says, “before I moved to
Central City.”

Caitlin doesn’t miss the past tense. “I’m sorry,” she murmurs without looking up from where her
fingers are interlaced in the space between her knees.

Mac shakes her head. “I’m not looking for sympathy,” she clarifies, “just telling you that I know
how it feels. Sometimes you go a day, a week, without thinking about what you’ve lost. Sometimes
it feels so fresh and raw you don’t know how you’re ever going to get past that pain.”

Caitlin nods, slowly. “After he died,” she says, “people kept trying to console me by telling me
that Ronnie was a hero. I hated them because I couldn’t say that I didn’t want him to be a hero,”
she bites down on her bottom lip when it wobbles and exhales sharply before she whispers, “I
wanted him to be my husband.”

“I love you more than anything,” the other Len had told her before he died. “Never thought I
deserved that kind of love, that kind of life. Never wanted it until I loved you. I wish we had more
time.”

“I used to think my love for my husband was everything,” Mac tells her, “only now I know it’s not.
When you lose everything, what’s left? I had to ask myself that question over and over until I
realized the answer was…me.”

Caitlin turns to look at Mac over her shoulder. “I know you’ve been tracking Firestorm,” she says.
“I need to know if you’ve found anything.”

“Firestorm was in Pittsburgh for a few months,” Mac informs her, “at some point he figured out a
way to control his radioactivity, so he’s gotten more difficult to track, but he’s back in Central City
now. I’m going to find him,” she glances up and sees Barry standing in the doorway, “and we’ll
find a way to get your father out of jail.”

“How?” Barry wants to know.

“I told you,” Mac deadpans, “with enough power”—she pauses to muffle a yawn in one of her
sweater paws—“I can do pretty much anything.”

Joe almost suffocates to death when Nimbus tries to kill him while he’s visiting Henry at Iron
Heights. Barry defeats the Mist by running him into the ground on a dark road and bringing him to
the C. C. P. D., where they arrest him for massacring the Darbinyan crime family and murdering a
judge. After that, things cool down for a week.

Until the day Len finally takes his place in history as Captain Cold.

[329] I actually intended to include the scene that begins this chapter in the previous installment, but since the major plot point of this episode (i.e. Cisco suggesting they repurpose the pipeline into a makeshift prison for metahumans and Caitlin subsequently dealing with her grief) doesn’t happen in the sprawling AU that I’ve created, I decided to begin this chapter by dragging the concept of the pipeline. Which is terribad, imo.

I know in the glistening cold serenity of the outside world, we are just two brief blips of wet electricity, just part of a random, plummeting fall that is the slow fire of my life, the nexus of error that is my thought, love pulsing out its permanent signal: stay, stay.

Dean Young, “Age of Discovery”

Shock Value
Part 2
Myth Can Make Reality More Intelligible
Book II
Lightning Doesn’t Strike Twice
Chapter 36
The Unmasqued World
(2 of 3)

II
Crime Against Property Is Relatively Unimportant

What is love?

There’s no singular answer to that question, because no two loves are alike—not even a love between two people who were married in a retconned timeline that one of those people doesn’t remember.

I don’t know what this version of Len would say if I asked him that question, but I know exactly what my answer would be. It’s that, for me, love is selfless. It’s caring more about that special person (or people) than yourself. I don’t think that definition of love is limited to romantic entanglement, either. It applies to friends, to family; to anyone who truly, deeply matters to you.

What’s key is learning how to love yourself more than anyone who hurt you when they were supposed to love you back.

From the Watchtower Archives
Recorded 28 October 2014

It was so easy for Mac to forget that other people aren’t perpetually exhausted at all times before Barry became part of her daily life. Only now she has to share her space with her abuser, two people whom she considers dear friends but can’t ever be totally honest with unless she wants to risk their lives, and a chipper speedster whose approach to heroism is all about instant gratification. Which sets her teeth on edge and threatens to erode the short fuse of her temper at any given
moment.

What they’ve been doing—fighting crimes that are being called in over police scanners and tiplines, following leads in ongoing C. C. P. D. investigations, and solving the unsolved cases perpetrated by metahuman criminals that piled up while Barry was comatose—is reactionary, not unlike most law enforcement. Which isn’t necessarily a bad approach, but it’s small time stuff. Mac prefers to think big.

Caroline, meanwhile, can’t stop zooming in and taking pictures of Cisco. Unfortunately, her brother keeps zipping around the cortex and ruining her shots in the process.

“This isn’t even remotely anatomically correct,” Caitlin protests as she fails to remove one of the ailments from Cavity Sam and winces at the blare of the buzzer.

“That’s not the point, Dr. Snow,” Barry informs her smugly and deftly removes the Water on the Knee before he speeds back to his side of the ping-pong table.

Caitlin huffs. “Then what is the point?” she asks.

“Having fun,” Barry says.

“Yes,” Eobard interjects, “and to continue your ongoing training by pushing your ability to multitask.”

Barry zips to the chessboard to move one of his rooks from G-2 to G-3. “I’m waiting on you, Dr. Wells,” he quips and speeds back to where Caitlin is trying to remove the Brain Freeze and failing miserably.

Mac finishes the final budget for their next fiscal year and hobbles over to look at the board. Eobard glances up and gives her a tentative smile. Once upon a time, they would play chess. Eobard was such a sore loser that Rose would always let him win.

_I won’t be making that mistake again_, Mac thinks.

As she hobbles back towards the desk, she picks up a stray radio frequency. “A hundred and eighty-two seconds, gentlemen,” Len drawls, and just hearing his voice is enough to make her cheeks flush blotchy pink.

“Two-eleven,” one of the guys working for Blackhawk Security yells. “Two-eleven! We are being robbed!”

“Hey, cool it,” Len says sharply, the order implicit in his tone. “A hundred and fifty-eight seconds to go.”

“Checkmate,” Eobard says with such an air of superiority that Mac grinds her teeth as she flops into her chair.

“Wait,” Barry speeds over to look at the board. “Checkmate?”

“Checkmate,” Eobard says again, impossibly more egotistically than before. “I guess we still have a few things left to learn, don’t we, Mr. Allen?”

Mac exhales a soft whoosh of air before she slumps to plop her elbows on the edge of the desk and muffles a yawn in both palms. At least Eobard is too focused on Barry to notice how embarrassingly turned on she just got from hearing Len speak even though he’s miles away and he
wasn’t talking to her.

Cisco lets the ping-pong ball bounce onto the floor because he gets distracted when their police scanner goes off. “Barry,” he says, “armed robbery at Fourth Avenue and Collins Street.”

Barry nods and goes to put on the suit before he speeds away to save the day. Caroline shuts her eyes because she can see what her brother is doing when he moves at superspeed.

Fact: Barry is wearing the joke boxers she bought him as a congratulatory gift for waking up from his coma, the black ones festooned with yellow lightning bolts.

Fact: If she had to see one of the guys in the cortex in his underwear, she wouldn’t want it to be her brother.

Mac doesn’t remember much about her time on Earth-33 anymore. She only knows a few things. Her adoptive parents were good ones. She never knew her biological mother and her biological father died before she got to know him as a person instead of the opaque rose-colored idea a child sometimes has of what their parents are. Her life had stagnated until she’d felt trapped in the space between who she’d been and who she wanted to become. She chose the previous version of Len over the dozens of people in that world who loved her. She’d choose the version of Len that she loves now if she had to make the same choice again.

Trouble is, the only foreknowledge she has now are the things she learned from history books as Rose and everything she remembered to write down.

It won’t be enough.

It never was, she thinks, and never will be.\[331\]

Jenn got a more lucrative job in National City, so they only have one forensic photographer based out of the main precinct at the moment. Which is how Caroline ends up going to work on her day off to photograph the scene of the armed robbery that Barry went to stop. Iris is waiting to bribe Joe into forgiving her for not telling him about her secret boyfriend with coffee.

Caroline snorts. Iris turns and pins her with a stare. “Don’t,” she says. “I’ve heard your pitch before. I know my dad shouldn’t have the final say on who I date—which he doesn’t—but I want him to like Eddie. There’s nothing wrong with wanting his approval.”

“Oh, okay,” Caroline says, “but history shows that you care a lot more about Joe’s approval than any of the guys you’ve dated.”

Fact: Iris brought a guy home exactly once. Nathan Newbury,\[332\] her date to their senior prom. Joe took one look at him, and it was over. Didn’t matter that she’d had a crush on him since they were sophomores. Didn’t matter that he was the guy with whom she’d made her sexual debut. Didn’t matter that they’d applied to some of the same colleges in the hopes of seeing where their relationship could go after high school. Joe disapproved, and that was the end of that.

Fact: Iris’s only relationship that didn’t end with Joe’s disapproval was with a second-generation Korean-American girl named Valerie Vale\[333\] that she’d dated while they were interning at the Gotham Gazette, and they’d had an expiration date from the beginning.

Fact: Iris has been waiting for something for a very long time. Whether that something is Eddie, or
Barry, or something else, no one should get to decide who or what she wants except Iris herself.

“This is different,” Iris tells her softly. “Eddie is different.”

“Okay,” Caroline says again, using what she hopes is a sincere voice, not a sarcastic tone.

Then, as if on cue, Barry and Joe turn the corner in the midst of what looks like a hushed scolding. (Caroline doesn’t miss those.) Iris smiles, wide and warm, and holds up her bribe. “Coffee break,” she says. “Thought I’d bring Central City’s finest java to Central City’s finest.”

Barry smiles back and grabs the espresso in the closest right corner of the drink holder she brought.

“Thanks,” Joe says flatly without taking his Americano, “I’m off caffeine.”

Caroline snatches the Americano and takes a sip as they both fall into step beside Barry, who’s headed back upstairs to the crime lab. Iris sighs and says, “my dad’s been mad at me ever since I told him about me and Eddie.”

“No,” Barry retorts, “he’s mad at you because you didn’t tell him sooner.”

Iris gives him a look that says excuse you? while Caroline takes another sip of pilfered coffee. “First,” she says archly, “that sounds like you’re taking his side. Second, you know how he does the whole ‘I’m not talking to you, but I have a whole bagful of judgmental looks I’m going to try out on you later’ thing?”

“Yeah,” Barry says, “I’ve been on the receiving end of those a few times.”

Caroline hums her agreement, even though he realized that his disappointed silent treatment shtick doesn’t work on her over a decade ago. Joe is her father—one of them, at least—but she’s an adult and he doesn’t get to passive-aggressively dad at her until she does whatever he thinks she should do.

“Speaking of communications,” Iris continues, “or lack thereof, I got sick of waiting for Central City Picture News to give me a fulltime job as a reporter and I started a blog.”

“What’s it about, your brownie obsession?” Barry asks. “Because you probably shouldn’t broadcast that.”

Iris rolls her eyes at him, more fond than anything else. “No,” she tells him. “Something important. Something that Central City needs to know about: the Streak.”

Caroline covers her mouth with one hand to muffle the snort of laughter that ensues as Barry slows to a halt.

“Cisco is right,” Iris says excitedly, “he’s out there. Rumor has it he stopped that armored car robbery earlier. Barry, I was hoping I could take a look at the file, and—”

“I’m not at liberty to discuss an ongoing investigation with you,” Barry says as he walks past her so she won’t recognize his blatantly obvious “I’ve got a secret” face.

Caroline scoffs. “Since when, Mr. Blabbermouth?”

Barry heaves a sigh. “Take it from someone who’s been investigating the impossible since I was eleven,” he hedges, “blogging about this is only going to bring the crazies to your front door.”

Iris shakes her head. “Nope,” she says, “my blog is anonymous.”
“Well,” Barry retorts, “anonymous or not, it’s not safe.”

Caroline rolls her eyes at him with no fondness to speak of. “Iris has been investigating the impossible since you took the longest nap ever,” she points out, “she knows what she’s doing.”

Barry flicks his gaze to Iris and back to his sister. “Carrie,” he says, “she doesn’t know what’s out there.”

Caroline cocks her head and holds his gaze until he looks away. Joe doesn’t want Iris to know about what Barry can do. Caroline hasn’t told her because it isn’t her secret to tell, but that doesn’t mean she likes keeping her best friend out of the loop. “Maybe she should find out,” she mutters.

There’s a bespectacled woman in a white blazer over a bright pink dress with her blonde hair pulled back in a ponytail waiting for them in the crime lab. “Hi,” she blurts, “Felicity Smoak.”

Iris shakes her hand and gives her a smile that’s nothing short of sublime. “Iris West,” she says.

“Barry Allen,” Barry says without thinking and flails awkwardly in the aftermath, “but you both already know me. Felicity is—”

“—the girl that you met in Starling City,” Iris says, “the IT girl, right? Caroline told me that you worked on one of Barry’s unexplainable cases.”

Felicity nods. “Which you know was definitely explainable, since you covered the siege and saw the supersoldiers for yourself when you were in Starling that night. So,” she spins in a slow circle and points at the skylight above them, “the lightning came through here?”

Barry nods. Caroline swallows thickly and forces herself to look up through shards of sunlight refracting through the glass at the cloudless blue sky. “Yeah,” she mumbles, “it did.”

Len knows that speedsters exist before one foils his attempt to steal the Kahndaq Dynasty Diamond, but the implications of their existence hits him all over again when he sees the image of that red blur on the screen of his laptop. Metaphysical extradimensional entities that can’t interact with the physical world without a human conduit. Metahumans who can run faster than the speed of sound and rewrite almost two centuries of history on a whim.

Mac isn’t safe as long as this speedster is here in Central City. There’s only one thing he can do about that.

*How do I kill someone who’s faster than a bullet?* he thinks. *I have to find a way to slow him down.*

There’s no one to stop Barry from telling Felicity his secret, especially since she found out by eavesdropping on his conversation with Oliver a few weeks ago. After he proves that Converse high-tops can’t withstand the friction of superspeed, he takes her back to S. T. A. R. Labs.

“This is where my team monitors the police bands for criminal activity,” he explains. “We can track anything that’s happening in the city. Check this out. We’ve got our own satellite.”

“I know,” Felicity says, “Mac gave me the access codes so I wouldn’t need to waste my time hacking into it.”

Cisco stops chomping on a piece of licorice and side-eyes her. “Rude.”
Caitlin walks to the other side of the desk and puts an anxious smile on. “It’s so wonderful to see you again, Felicity…” she flicks her gaze away from the blonde to Barry and shoots him a pointed look, “…I’m just wondering how much of our operation she needs to know about.”

Felicity winks at her. “I’m really good at keeping secrets—”

“Yeah,” Barry adds, “Felicity works with the Arrow.”

“—and you, apparently, are not,” she says and fizzles out on the consonant.

“Now it’s all making sense,” Cisco says, brandishing his licorice whip on his way around the triple desk, “you know who the Arrow is. Wait,” he narrows his eyes at Barry, who balks, “do you know who the Arrow is?”

Barry makes an unconvincing sound instead of answering that question and closes his mouth before he shakes his head.

“Let’s just say that my team has a similar setup,” Felicity says, “but with more pointy objects.”

“Welcome, Ms. Smoak,” Eobard says from the ominously lit hallway that leads to the cortex.

“Dr. Wells,” Felicity says in awe, “the Dr. Wells?”

“Please,” he gives her his best approximation of a charming smile, “call me Harrison, Felicity.”

“Oh,” Felicity blurts, “you know who I am?”

Eobard nods and wheels himself into the room. “Ranked second in the National Informative Technology Competition at age nineteen. Graduated from MIT with a master’s degree in cyber security and computer sciences. Yes, I know who you are. I keep an eye out for promising talent in scientific fields—it’s what brought me Cisco and Caitlin—and I foresaw great things from you.”

Mac makes a garbled noise as she hobbles into the cortex. Eobard looks at her and his shoulders slump slightly when he looks away. Caitlin is the only person who knows him well enough to notice the change in his posture and the effect his business partner seems to have on him. Mac yawns, oblivious to the speculative look the bioengineer is giving her.

“Speaking of great things, Felicity,” Barry says, breaking the ice, “want to see something cool?”

Mac hobbles into her office to grab her lunch out of the minifridge and heats up a bowl of farfalle with tomato pesto to eat while she watches Barry run at superspeed on the cosmic treadmill.

“How fast can he run?” Felicity wants to know.

“Barry hasn’t reached his top speed yet,” Eobard says, “theoretically speaking.”

“So is he really okay?” Felicity asks.

“Yes,” Caitlin nods, “his heart rate is within the normal range, for Barry.”

“No,” Felicity says, “I mean…the lightning bolt changed him. Do any of you really know how much?”

Mac stuffs a spoonful of pasta in her mouth to stop herself from mentioning that she’s from the future in front of Eobard.
“We know a fair amount,” Cisco insists.

“If everything about him is sped up, is he going to age faster?” Felicity wonders. “What would happen if he ran too fast? I mean, would he just be running and then—poof!—he’s dust, in a red costume?”

“Felicity,” Eobard says, “everything we do here at S. T. A. R. Labs is to protect Barry Allen. Trust us, he’s in good hands here.”

Mac exhales a frustrated noise around her spoon that could only be construed as a warning. Eobard still thinks he gets to be in charge here, and she would be smart to let him keep thinking that, but part of her is snarling and gnashing her teeth.

“Want to see how fast I can run backwards?” Barry shouts, his words blurring together before the force of his speed catapults him into the wall.

“Don’t worry,” Caitlin tells Felicity, “he heals quickly, too.”

Mac is hiding from Eobard in her office to avoid saying anything he might make her regret later when her phone buzzes. “Hello?”

“You’re a librarian, hmm?” Len says in his smoothest voice.

Mac nods before she remembers that he can’t see her. “I’m an information scientist,” she clarifies.

Len smiles, the corners of his mouth unfurling softly. “Good,” he drawls, “because I need information, sweetheart.”

“Ohay,” Mac says. “What do you want to know?”

Len is tempted to ask her an inappropriate question, but it wouldn’t be any fun to do it over the phone because he can’t see her blush. “What’s the opposite of speed?” he asks.

Mac exhales sharply. “Cold,” she answers, sealing his fate.

Basil Nurblin has been stealing from S. T. A. R. Labs for a few months now, accumulating proprietary technologies and selling them to supplement the income from his day job as a janitor. Len only leaves the poor man alive to spread the word: anyone who steals from the woman he loves answers to him.

Lisa comes to meet her brother for lunch and finds him sitting on his couch surrounded by everything Nurblin stole from Mac. “You’ve had a busy morning,” she deadpans, eyeing the photon blaster on his coffee table. “You know we could get millions for just one of these.”

“I don’t care about the money,” Len tells her, and he never thought he’d say that. “I care about Mac.”

Lisa arches one dark eyebrow at him. “You love her,” she says.

Len doesn’t say anything, but he doesn’t deny it. Which says it all.

Lisa folds herself onto his couch and sits at the opposite end with her legs spread, her elbows perched on the tops of her thighs, her fingers interlaced in the negative space between her knees. “You know she’s a technopath,” she points out. “If she didn’t want him to steal this stuff, Mac
would’ve stopped him.”

Of course he knows, because he knows her. Mac wouldn’t’ve let Nurblin out of the building with these weapons unless she wanted someone to use them. If she didn’t want him to get his hands on a weapon that can kill speedsters, she wouldn’t’ve given him the information that he’d asked for. Lisa knows it, too.

Len starts to take the cold gun apart as comfortable silence blooms in between him and his sister. “Hey,” he says after he puts the trigger mechanism down and looks over his shoulder at her, “I love you, Sis.”

Lisa actually gapes at him; her eyes going wide, her mouth hanging open in shock.

Len feels too vulnerable to smile, even though it feels like he should. “Haven’t said that to anyone since before you were born,” he murmurs. “I said it to our father once and he choked me so hard I couldn’t talk above a whisper for days. I wanted you to be the first person to hear it from me. Well,” he cracks a rueful smile, “the first person who deserves it.”

Of course Lisa has always known that her brother loves her. If she tears up at hearing him say the words to her for the first time, that’s between her and the gods she doesn’t believe in.


Len’s smile unfurls into a smirk. “Trainwreck,” he retorts.


[332] Nathan Newbury first appeared in The Flash Vol. 1, No. 344 (“Betrayal”) April, 1985. Iris’s parents from the thirtieth century used futuristic technology to transfer her consciousness into Newbury’s body in order to prove the Flash was innocent of the murder of the Reverse-Flash.

[333] Valerie Vale first appeared in Gotham 3x01 (“Better to Reign in Hell…”) 19 September 2016. Obviously this doesn’t take place in the same universe as Gotham, since the version of Bruce who appears in this story is a grown ass man who dresses up like a bat and not an awkward teenager who hasn’t put on a cape and cowl yet, but I loved Valerie and I wanted Iris to date her. Hence, the mention of her in this chapter.
Bad Intentions Can Yield Good Results

I am time-cracked
occasionally, and time-shaken always,
and saying your name feels like a ritual
for a god I haven’t found yet. It is important
to understand what hurt me and disregard
what left me the same. It is important to remember
that I am not the same.

Mallory Pearson, “A Window That Sees Through Two Houses”

Shock Value
Part 2
Myth Can Make Reality More Intelligible
Book II
Lightning Doesn’t Strike Twice
Chapter 37
The Unmasqued World
(3 of 3)

Bad Intentions Can Yield Good Results

After he finally stops kissing her outside the Vogue—the theater where the Rita Farr Story was playing the night they couldn’t stop thinking about each other long enough to pay attention to the movie—Mac untangles herself from Len before she gets back into her MINI Cooper and drives away. When she parks in front of her house in the woods, she doesn’t get out of the car; she extracts her phone from her purse and calls Lisa.

“What is wrong with you?” Mac demands as soon as Lisa picks up the phone.

“Hello to you too,” Lisa deadpans, “did you have a good third date?”

Mac frowns. “Wait,” she blurts, “how do you know how many dates we’ve had?”

Lisa scoffs. “Bitch, please. Lenny’s my brother. We talk.”

“How do you know how many dates we’ve had?” Mac asks incredulously.

“I’ve thought a lot about this,” Lisa tells her in a soft voice she’s using to hide an edge of vulnerability, “about the tragic mutual pining thing you’ve been doing with my brother since you changed the past. We were sisters in the future you retconned. We were family,” she exhales a frustrated noise before she lets herself ask: “Why don’t you want to be a Snart anymore?”

What goes unspoken, but not unsaid, is that Len isn’t the only Snart who loves Mac. Lisa, for all that she’s been in a happy and healthy polyamorous relationship for eight months now, is still uncomfortable with saying I love you to the people who take up permanent space in her heart.
“Why do you think I hired you?” Mac asks her. “Lisa, I didn’t even want to meet this version of Len at first because I was overwhelmed by all the divergences in my head—and now I’m worried our relationship might be too one-sided to work because I remember the alternate timeline where we were married and he doesn’t—but I still have all the same feelings for him that I had before.”

Lisa huffs. “What does that have to do with me?” she wants to know.

Mac cracks a smile even though she knows Lisa can’t see it. “I hired you for the same reason,” she tells her softly, “because I’m always going to think of you as my sister.”

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One Week Later

Syd is looking for Dr. Light’s photon blaster to send it out to Dr. Hoshi at the Keystone lab when he notices an empty storage locker. One that’s supposed to have a case inside that contains a weapon that he helped Cisco design after they spent an afternoon smoking weed and theorizing about what Barry might be capable of if he woke up. Of course Syd didn’t think Cisco would actually be able to build a compact cryoengine capable of achieving absolute zero. It’s not even a real temperature! It was created as a theoretical absolute to explain where the zero-point would fall on the Kelvin scale! It’s not possible to shoot a gun that can focus a beam of thermodynamic energy that somehow lowers the enthalpy and entropy of matter to minimum value!

Cisco did the impossible when he built the cold gun, and now the cold gun is gone.

“How long has it been missing?” Eobard asks sharply.

“I don’t know,” Cisco whispers, still in shock.

“I’m going to ask you again, Cisco,” Eobard snarls and Mac has to force herself not to flinch with her whole body, “but when I do, I expect a more specific answer than ‘I don’t know.’ How long has this weapon been gone?”

“Um,” Cisco falters, “a day, maybe two.”

“One of the janitors didn’t show up this morning,” Syd adds, “he was probably the one who stole it.”

Cisco slumps and shakes his head slowly. “I didn’t think,” he mumbles.

“No, you didn’t think,” Eobard retorts with a harsh edge in his voice that feels like a slap in the face to Cisco, “because if you had, you would have discussed with me your desire to build something that could, in theory, hurt anyone, in particular Barry Allen!”

“I’m sorry,” Cisco says in a quiet, broken voice, “if you just let me explain—”

Eobard makes a derisive noise that emerges from his throat through his nostrils before he opens his mouth. “No,” he says, “you know how I feel about weapons, Cisco: they do not belong in S. T. A. R. Labs. Now, you’re going to figure out a way to locate this gun, and you’re—”

“Okay,” Mac cuts in sharply, “enough. Cisco isn’t the first person in this lab to hope for the best and plan for the worst. What’s done is done. Cisco,” she turns and puts a tentative hand on his shoulder, “it’s not your fault.”

Eobard considers her choice of words before he refuses to consider the possibility that she is
responsible for this—that she could be so cold. “Then whose?” he wants to know.

Mac shrugs, tilting her earlobe into it. “Well,” she deadpans, “whoever stole the cold gun. Obviously.”

“This thing you built,” Caitlin murmurs to Cisco as Mac hobbles back to the elevator. “What can it do?”

“Bad stuff,” Cisco says.

When she stops halfway up the gilded staircase and sees Len walk into the theater, Mac wastes an embarrassing amount of time appreciating how well he wears a suit. Then he tries to shoot Joe and hits Barry instead. It slows him down, as expected; but he can still run fast enough to blur and generate electricity.

Len tilts his head back and smiles because he sees her in shades of blue through his goggles. “Time for a test run,” he says, his voice resonating through the negative space in the lobby. “Let’s see how fast you are.”

If her notes are right, only the usher in the nearby auditorium is going to die today without her intervention. Barry is huffing and puffing, his face drenched in sweat from exertion and pain. Len turns to aim at the usher only to find Mac standing between him and his target.

What do you think you’re doing? Len asks her with a look.

Mac arches her eyebrows at him in a nonverbal I won’t let you kill anyone who doesn’t deserve to die.

Len exhales in a quick huff before he lowers his weapon. Barry has already sped into the auditorium—where he collapses onto the stage, exhausted, as his nemesis makes a clean getaway.

Joe tries and fails to chase Len down while Mac drives Barry to S. T. A. R. Labs. Caroline is stuck at the precinct because no other forensic photographers are available, but her twin is off the hook because there are two investigators and one assistant in the crime lab that day.

Barry hisses even though he can’t feel the patch of frostbitten skin to the right of his navel. “It’s still numb,” he says.

“It’s presenting like third degree frostbite,” Caitlin informs him.

“I thought he had hyperhealing,” Felicity objects.

“It’s been slowed,” Caitlin clarifies before she turns back to Barry. “If your cells weren’t regenerating at the rate they are, your blood vessels would have frozen solid and your nerve damage would have been permanent,” she pauses to exhale a rapid sigh and adds, “you’re lucky to be alive.”

“Snart wasn’t another metahuman,” Barry says, pacing with purpose to snatch his jacket off a chair by the desk and shrug it over his shoulders, “he had some kind of gun. It froze things and slowed me down enough that I wasn’t in time to save someone. If Mac hadn’t been there…”

“According to his record,” Felicity interjects as she brings up the file on Len in the C. C. P. D. database, “Snart didn’t even bother to finish high school. How did he build a handheld high-tech
snow machine?"

Mac bites down on the inside of her cheek, hard. Len dropped out because Lewis got drunk one afternoon while he was at school and left the backdoor open, and by the time he got home two-year-old Lisa had almost drowned in their kiddie pool. It was because he cared more about his sister than getting a high school diploma, not because he couldn’t be bothered.

“S. T. A. R. Labs built the cold gun,” Eobard says, breaking the silence.

Cisco shakes his head. “Dr. Wells, Mac, and Caitlin had nothing to do with this,” he says. “I built the cold gun.”

Barry goes slack through his whole body at that, his shock evident in the gape of his mouth; the furrow of his brow. “Why?” he wants to know.

“Because speed and cold are opposites,” Cisco explains, wringing his hands in jitters while he talks. “Temperature is measured by how quickly the atoms of something are oscillating—the faster they are, the hotter it is. When things are cold, they’re slower on the atomic level. When there’s no movement at all, it’s called—”

“—absolute zero,” Barry says numbly.

Cisco nods, hanging his head in guilt. “Yeah,” he mumbles. “I designed a compact cryoengine to achieve absolute zero. I built it to stop you. I didn’t know who you were, Barry,” his voice pitches higher, pleading. “I mean, what if you turned out to be some psycho, like Mardon or Nimbus?”

“But I didn’t,” Barry points out in a voice that snaps at Cisco like the familiar sting of a rubber band against his wrist, “did I?”

“We built the entire structure you’re standing in to do good,” Caitlin says, “and it blew up. I think, in the wake of that, you can understand why Cisco wanted to be prepared for the worst.”

“I can understand that,” Barry retorts, “but what I can’t understand is why you didn’t tell me what you did. I thought you trusted me. I thought we were friends.”

Cisco bites his bottom lip before he steps up. “We are, Barry.”

“We’ve only known you since you woke up three weeks ago,” Mac reminds him, “that’s not even a month. We trust you, but that doesn’t mean we have to feel comfortable telling you every sundry piece of information about ourselves.”

Barry frowns, the furrow between his eyebrows scrunching angrily. “If you would’ve just told me about this,” he says, “I could have been prepared, but instead a man almost died tonight.”

“Okay,” Mac says, eking the oh sound out into an ooh, “but you don’t get to hold the possibility of a man dying over Cisco’s head because I saved the day. So get over yourself, Barry. It’s not all about you.”

Mac, being who she is, had the foresight to plan a fake business trip to Starling so she would have an excuse to be on the train Len is planning to derail. Cisco figures out a way to track the cold gun using the microcomputer that powers its engine after she leaves for the station. When he sees her sitting in her aisle seat reading an urban fantasy novel, Len stops cold for a long few seconds before he snatches her duffle bag out of the seat beside her and slings it over his shoulder.
“Let’s go, sweetheart,” he says, and only she knows him well enough to hear the worry in his voice. Len hates it when things don’t go according to plan, and being conflicted about his exit strategy because of her wasn’t part of his plan.

Mac uses her cane to get back on her feet before she lets him grab her upper arm to pull her down the aisle. After all, out of the thirteen passengers on this train, she’s the only one he can’t—and won’t—hurt. Which, of course, makes her the ideal hostage in this situation. Len turns to look at her with his eyes narrowed behind his goggles. Mac stuffs the hand she isn’t using to hold onto her cane into the pocket of her sweater to stop herself from touching his face, caressing the stubble on his chin, mapping the angle of his jawline.

Barry speeds onto the train so fast he shatters one of the windows and kills the mood. “There’s nowhere to run,” he says.

Len smirks down at him. “I didn’t notice how young you were before,” he quips, “your mom know you’re out past your bedtime?”

Barry snorts, trying to hide his visceral reaction to the mention of his mother. “If you wanted to get away,” he retorts, “you should’ve taken something faster than a train.”

“That’s if I wanted to get away,” Len points out smoothly. Barry glances at Mac before he wilts, outsmarted and outgunned. “I’ve seen your weakness at the armored car, then at the theater. See, while you’re busy saving everybody, I’ll be saving myself.”

Barry doesn’t get a chance to respond to that because Len aims the cold gun at the floor and shoots. Mac winces as the bogies screech in protest of being frozen over and starts to absorb the kinetic energy to slow the trajectory of the inevitable crash. Len jerks the nearest set of sliding doors open and grins at Barry, who’s at the opposite end of the train car.

“Good luck with that!” he shouts over the cacophony of the passengers screaming before he wraps an arm around Mac’s waist and jumps out of the train with her.

Mac’s ensuing indignant squawk gets knocked out of her as they hit the ground and the train careens off the tracks. Len takes most of the impact of their landing and he ends up lying on top of her. Mac’s eyes are whited out and he has to force himself to stop looking at her face to see that she’s using her powers to slowly lower the train cars that had begun to whirl haphazardly through the air back down to earth. Len takes advantage of their position and curls his fingers into her hair. Mac jolts and squirms under him before her eyes fade back to their ordinary gray.

Len strokes his thumb over the soft shell of her ear and smirks at how flushed she is, how sensitive to his touch. “Hi there,” he drawls.

“Oh,” Mac huffs and shoves at his shoulder hard enough to make him reluctantly get off her, “don’t try to flirt with me right now. I’m mad at you.”

“What did I do?” Len wants to know. After all, he didn’t kill the janitor or the usher or anybody except that one member of his crew who wanted out—and that was because the people who want out of his crew have this annoying habit of coming back to kill him later if they get out alive. Like Simmons, who still owes him the payout from the Opal City job. Like Scudder, who almost took him out the night the particle accelerator exploded.

Mac groans and makes a garbled sound. Eobard, Cisco, Caitlin, Barry, and Joe are all smart enough to deduce that she could’ve stopped Len herself. If that happens, it’s only a matter of time before they start wondering why she chose not to.
If they figure her out before she has a chance to explain her side of the story, they won’t trust her anymore.

Mac exhales a soft whoosh of air. “I’m here to protect the people you endangered so you could get your hands on a big sparkly rock,” she informs him. Which isn’t a lie, but it’s a small part of a larger truth she can’t tell him about yet. “I didn’t think you’d pretend to take me hostage and jump out of a moving train with me!”

“Well,” Len snarks back, “I wasn’t going to derail a train with the woman I love on board, was I?”

Mac gives him such a shocked expression that it can only be described as gobsmacked. After she told the previous version of Leonard Snart that she loved him for the first time, he left her for two months and then came back to tell her that he felt the same way. What’s changed? she wonders. What makes this version of Len so different than who he was before?

“I didn’t mean to say that,” Len tells her.

Or maybe he’s not as different as she thought. “Okay,” Mac says flatly, “so you didn’t mean it?”

Len grits his teeth around a frustrated noise and tugs his goggles down around his neck. “I didn’t mean to say it tonight,” he clarifies. “I wanted it to be more romantic, but fine, I said it, cat’s out of the bag. I love you, sweetheart. I can keep saying it until you believe me. I’m not going anywhere unless it’s with you.”

Mac uses her powers to check on Barry, who’s getting the passengers out of harm’s way by speeding them all back inside the station, before she kisses Len quick and dirty. “I love you, too,” she tells him softly in the aftermath, “but you need to get out of here and I can’t go with you.”

“I’m not leaving until I get what I came for,” Len says intently, “that speedster. I want him dead.”

Mac shakes her head slowly and uses her cane to get back on her feet. “Len,” she sighs his name, “you can’t win against him.”

Len stands in one smooth movement and puts his goggles back on, but doesn’t bother to pull his hood up. “Watch me,” he deadpans.

Mac used all her energy to keep the train intact and its passengers alive, so teleportation isn’t a possibility at the moment. Which is why she doesn’t get to Barry in time to stop Len from shooting him. It’s not a fatal shot, but the ice is thick enough to keep the frostbitten speedster immobilized and in pain while Len holds him at gunpoint.

“Thank you,” Len says.

Barry hisses as the cold starts to seep through the fabric of the suit. “For what?” he asks.

“You forced me to up my game,” Len answers, “not only with this gun…” he glances at Mac as she side-eyes a chunk of dry ice and hobbles around it before he shifts his focus back to the enemy, “…but with how I think about the job. It’s been educational.”

“Drop it,” Cisco says.

Len turns his head and looks over his shoulder to see that Cisco is aiming a glowing nozzle attached to a clunky whirring contraption that two women are carrying at him—he doesn’t recognize the blonde, but he’s seen the redhead and the guy holding the nozzle before. Caitlin
Snow and Francisco Ramon, two of S. T. A. R. Labs’ three fulltime employees and Mac’s dear friends.

“This is a prototype cold gun,” Cisco informs him, “four times the size, four times the power.”

“I was wondering who you were talking to,” Len snarks back. “I hoped you weren’t asking your boss to stop using her mobility device.”

“Hey,” Cisco says in a flat voice he’s using to hide his fear, “unless you want a taste of your own medicine, I’d back the hell up.”

“Your hands are shaking,” Len murmurs. “You’ve never killed anyone.”

Cisco flicks his gaze to Barry, who’s still quasi-frozen in the dirt. “There’s a first time for everything, Captain Cold,” he retorts. Len cocks his head and grins at the nickname. Cisco doesn’t let the surge of delight that someone appreciates his mad codenaming skills weaken his resolve. “I will shoot you,” he says.

Len exhales with enough force to flare his nostrils and wipes the grin off his face before he withdraws. “You win, kid…” he drawls as Mac lets out a breath she didn’t realize she was holding, “…I’ll see you around.”

“Hey,” Cisco shouts, “leave the diamond.”

Len snorts. “Don’t push your luck,” he deadpans and gives Mac a lingering smolder of a glance over his shoulder before he walks away.
When the illusion is shattered,  
and you are proven mortal and not  
daydream; I am left with a puzzle  
where I have taken all the right pieces  
and put them in the wrong order.  
I am reminded, all at once, that you  
are not the fairytale I built around us.

Ashe Vernon, “When the Illusion Is Shattered”

“There hide behind walls of our own making…built from the bricks of our past. They get so high you can’t see what’s on the other side. Even for a man who can fly. It casts a shadow over our lives. But all you need is one little crack to let the light in.”

Lois Lane  
Trinity Vol.2, No.6 (“Better Together, Finale: At the Mercy”)  
March, 2017

I

Going with the Flow Is Soothing But Risky

There’s a new rogue in town. Leonard Snart, the professional thief rumored to have stolen the Maximillian Emerald from the Central City Museum five years ago, acquired a freeze ray in order to steal the Kahndaq Dynasty Diamond last night. While he’s not a metahuman, Snart is the definition of armed and dangerous: he’s wanted in twelve states and forty-two countries,[334] he’s been charged with dozens of counts of grand larceny, he’s been suspected of multiple homicides, and in 2005 he was sentenced to four years in jail for armed robbery, a sentence he served at Iron Heights.[335]

Snart derailed a train in order to escape the detectives from the Central City Police Department who were on his tail. While none of the passengers were harmed due to the combined efforts of the Streak and Mackenzie Howell, our Lady of the Lightning, the criminal now known as Captain Cold is still at large.

From “Absolute Zero” by Iris West  
Printed in the Central City Citizen on 29 October 2014
Until he becomes one of Barry’s sidekicks, it doesn’t occur to Cisco that he could’ve been affected by the particle accelerator explosion. After all, he’s been so busy thinking about everyone else. About Caitlin, who’d lost the love of her life. About Dr. Wells, who’d become the most hated man in Central City. About Mac, who came in out of nowhere, totally restructured the company in the space of a month, and became one of his best friends in less than a year. About Iris, who’d visit Barry every day because she needed to talk to her best friend, even though he couldn’t talk back. About Caroline, who’s the only person he feels like doesn’t have to walk on eggshells around, because he can tell her anything.

When he gives Caitlin a DNA sample, Caroline is the only person he talks to about it beforehand. When the test results prove that he has an active metagene, he doesn’t know how to feel. Only now it’s been two weeks of nothing—no superpowers and no Caroline, because she’s been doing the work of two forensic photographers and she’s too busy to put more effort into their friendship than answering his texts and sending him pictures of flat-faced cats to cheer him up.

Cisco doesn’t want to bother Mac because she’s been doing the work of a CFO, a COO, a general manager, a human resources manager, a production manager, head of operations and head of acquisitions. Mac is one of his best friends, but she has enough on her plate without him freaking out about powers he doesn’t even have (yet). Caitlin would just try to talk him down, and Dr. Wells is still giving him the cold shoulder—pun intended. Which is why he can’t experiment on himself at S. T. A. R. Labs.

Although Cisco thinks as he watches the firefighters extinguish the blaze he started when the carpet in his living room caught on fire, in hindsight, experimenting on myself in my apartment definitely wasn’t my best idea.\[336\]

“Oh, we’re gonna rock down to Electric Avenue,” his phone croons, “and we’re gonna take it higher…”\[337\]

Cisco exhales a heavy sigh of relief before he answers the phone. “Hey, Mac. How’d you know?”

“You were testing your protoplasmic conductivity,” Mac says with a loud yawn. “You caused an electrical surge powerful enough to black out an entire city block. You thought I wouldn’t feel that?”

Cisco shakes his head even though he knows she can’t see what he’s doing and claws the hand he isn’t using to hold the phone through his hair. “I guess I wasn’t thinking,” he tells her softly, “I just wanted to figure out what I could do before anybody found out that I’m a metahuman.”

Mac snorts. “Cisco,” she says, “I’m from the future, remember? If you want to know what your powers are, you could just ask me.”

Cisco facepalms. “I can’t believe I never thought of that,” he mutters. “Wait, you knew I might have powers?”

Mac nods even though she knows he can’t see what she’s doing and exhales a soft whoosh of air. “Keyword: might,” she says, “like I said, the particle accelerator was supposed to explode in 2020. Caroline didn’t exist before my friends—other time remnants who protect the course of history fulltime—and I changed the past to save the future. I didn’t know if your metagene was active in this timeline or not. I didn’t want to freak you out over nothing.”

“You still could’ve told me,” Cisco points out. “Maybe this wouldn’t’ve happened.”
“Cisco,” Mac says in a soft, exhausted voice, “if there’s one thing I’ve learned from being a time traveler, it’s that people can change, but I can’t change them. I can give people chances, but I can’t make—or remake—their choices for them. You have to make the choice. You had to want to know. You have to ask me the question.”

“Okay.” Cisco inhales deeply and squares his shoulders. “What are my powers? What can I do?”

“You’re capable of generating, absorbing, and perceiving all sorts of vibrations,” Mac informs him. “You can see through the vibrations of the universe, into other worlds. You can make stable interdimensional and intradimensional wormholes, or create seismic blasts for combat purposes. You’re vibrokinetic.”

Cisco pauses to consider the implications of that—the multiverse is real, he could travel to other worlds, the multiverse is real, he’s basically a walking vibrator, the multiverse is real—and grins.

“So,” he says, “if I ever actually get these powers, my codename would be Vibe.”

Mac hums her agreement and he can hear the warmth of her smile in the sound. “I called my lawyer to make sure your landlord won’t press charges,” she says before she hangs up, “bye, Vibe.”

There are two women waiting at the police station for him when he arrives to give his statement about what caused the fire in his apartment to the cops. ADA Dinah Laurel Lance, who’s here because Mac called her, and Caroline, who looks pissed. Cisco winces and opens his mouth to apologize for something that wasn’t his fault, but then she throws herself at him with enough force to make him fall on his ass with her arms around his shoulders and her face buried in the crook of his neck.

Cisco doesn’t stop to think, he wraps his arms around her and hugs her back as hard as humanly possible. Caroline is tempted to bite where his neck meets his shoulder, a petulant impulse that reeks of intimacy. Cisco blushes when he realizes that she’s pressing herself against him—her soft breasts against his chest, the sweet faint smell of vanilla in her strawberry blonde hair, her slim fingers clutching at the fabric of his hoodie.

Caroline pulls away first and cups his face in both hands. Cisco glances down at her lips and gulps. Caroline cocks her head and narrows her eyes at him behind her glasses. “Don’t ever scare me like that again,” she tells him softly. “Okay?”

Cisco nods and swallows thickly.

Caroline extricates herself from him before she reaches out to take his hands and pull him to his feet. “Good,” she says in the prim, aloof tone she uses whenever she’s overwhelmed.

Cisco is smiling when he turns to greet Laurel. “Hey,” he says. “Thanks for coming. You didn’t have to.”

Laurel smiles back, showing her teeth. “It’s no problem,” she says, “you helped me once, so now I’m here to help you.”

“Wait.” Cisco frowns, the space between his eyebrows furrowing. “When did I help you?”

Laurel smiles wider and leans in until only he and Caroline can hear her whisper conspiratorially: “When you helped the Black Canary.”

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Two Days Later
There’s a masked ball thrown every Halloween night in Central City. It’s a charity event with dancing in one room and a silent auction in another. Apparently the proceeds are always put towards a different good cause each year. Last year, it was for the Naydel Library. This year, it’s the Children’s Place.

Mac doesn’t want anything that’s on the auction block, and she’s wearing three inch heels—the highest her arthritic ankle will allow—so dancing isn’t an option for her. Which is a waste, because her dress is gorgeous. It’s translucent black silk chiffon with an overlay of frothy black lace on the corseted bodice. When she turns, the skirt flares out into a widening gyre. It matches the delicate black lace of her mask. Which is perched on top of her head, because she can’t see without her glasses and she’s not taking them off for the aesthetic of the masquerade.

Eobard keeps looking at her from behind his mask while he sips his champagne. It’s making her want to crawl into her bed and stay under the covers until the monster goes away.

*I came, I saw,* she thinks, *I got Dr. McGee to agree to a partnership between S. T. A. R. Labs and Mercury Labs. I could go home and read the rest of that new Molly Harper book—*

When her phone buzzes, she extracts it from the shallow depths of her tiny black clutch purse to see who’s texting her and her eyes widen at the message.

From: COLD AS ICE

**You look great in that dress. You’d look gorgeous with it on the floor of my apartment.**

Mac glances at Eobard, whose attention is elsewhere, and texts Len back. It’s obvious he’s here somewhere—at least four of the moguls at this party are former clients of his, one of them could’ve gotten him an invitation—but they can’t be seen together, not with Eobard here.

To: COLD AS ICE

**my place is closer**
**meet me in an hour**
**we need to talk**

Mac texts Len again when she stops at a red light: **the spare key under that owl on the porch is yours if you want it.** When she parks her MINI Cooper in front of her house in the woods, his motorcycle is outside and he’s not sitting on her porch swing. Mac hobbles up the front steps and locks the door behind her more out of habit than anything else before she shucks her heavy coat.

Len is leaning back against the wall by the entrance to her sitting room with his arms folded over his chest, he’s wearing the black-on-black three-piece suit that he must’ve worn to the masquerade, and he’s looking at her with such intensity that her whole body tingles. “Hey,” he says with an incongruously soft smile.

Mac hangs her clutch purse on one of the hooks by the door and smiles after she sees his jacket hanging next to her umbrella. “Hi,” she says almost shyly.

Oh, he doesn’t mean to close the distance between them and kiss her, but she trusts him enough to give him a key to her place and she’s too cute for him to resist. Len smooths one of his hands over her waist to the small of her back and tilts her face up with the other. Then he slants their mouths together and gives her a slow, lingering kiss. Mac wraps her arms around his neck and arches up
against him to kiss him back. Len makes a smug noise low in his throat and savors the way she
whimpers into his mouth at the first stroke of his tongue. When he deepens the kiss, she clutches at
his shoulder with one hand and flicks her tongue against his to make a spark. Len pulls back to nip
tesaningly at her bottom lip before he breaks the kiss and presses their foreheads together while he
catches his breath. Then he kisses her again so thoroughly that she feels it everywhere.

After she wobbles in her heels and pain blares through her ankle, Mac breaks the kiss to hobble
into the sitting room and kicks the infernal shoes off before she flops onto the couch. Len goes to
sit in the chair across from her on the other side of the coffee table. “Okay,” he murmurs, “you said
you wanted to talk. Let’s talk.”

Mac tucks her ankle underneath the bend of her other knee and meets his eyes. “I love you,” she
says, “but us being in love doesn’t change anything. I’m still putting you in danger just by being
with you. I’m not going to tell you to stay away from me—”

“Good,” Len tells her flatly, “because I don’t want to. I know the risks, and I still want you,
sweetheart.”

Mac holds up one hand to shut him up. Len cocks his head and arches his eyebrows at her as if to
say fine, continue. “I know you lay low between jobs,” she says, “I think we should do that. No
going anywhere in the same car. No arriving or leaving within thirty minutes of each other. No
touching or kissing in public.”

“Well,” Len drawls, “we aren’t in public now.”

Mac holds up her hand again. “There’s one more thing,” she tells him softly, “I was married,
before.”

“I know,” Len mutters petulantly, because the idea of her being married to another man is the last
thing he wants to think about right now, “and you’ll always love your dead husband—”

“No,” Mac huffs and bites the bullet, “you were my dead husband. Len, in the other timeline, I was
married to the previous version of you.”

[334] There are a hundred and ninety-six countries in the world, if you count Taiwan (which isn’t officially recognized as
a country by the United States but is recognized by the Republic of China). So forty-two isn’t actually that
many, tbh.

[335] Prison Break (2005-2009) was on the air for four years, the years Len spent in prison in this fic. See what I did
there?

[336] This is what Cisco canonically does after he learns that he has powers, at some point in the space betweenThe
Flash 1x23 (“Fast Enough”) 19 May 2015 and The Flash 2x01 (“The Man Who Saved Central City”) 6 October 2015. I
figure it would’ve happened sooner in this AU, and here we are. (x)

I realized that we all think we might be terrible people. But we only reveal this before asking someone to love us. It is a kind of undressing.

Miranda July, “The First Bad Man”

“I wasn’t going to tell you any of this yet,” Mac blurts out. “I didn’t want to scare you off, but then you said you loved me first.”

“I take it I didn’t say it first before,” Len murmurs, still not sure how to feel about this.

Mac shakes her head slowly. “I said it first,” she tells him softly, “and then you left.”

“Did someone hurt you?” he’d asked her in his dreams.

“Yes,” she’d answered, “but that’s not why I’m not having sex with you. I’m not casual, Len. I thought I could try being casual for you, but it’s not working. I’m only sexually attracted to people that I’m emotionally invested in. I love you. I’m not having sex with you because I don’t expect you to say it back or reciprocate at all.”

Then he’d left. That can’t be a coincidence. Len averts his gaze and looks down at his hands, intertwining his fingers while he considers the implications. If this is true, his dreams are real. If this is true, they aren’t dreams at all—they’re memories, his memories of being with her, of loving her. It shouldn’t be possible, but neither should time travel or parallel universes or extradimensional entities or anything else he’s accepted as facts of life since she appeared. What’s impossible isn’t any of that. It’s the idea of living a life where the woman he loves isn’t real.
“I don’t know what’s changed,” Mac says, babbling now, “you’re not the man that I married, but when I’m with you, I don’t miss him, because I don’t love him anymore. I love you—this version of you—and I hope you still feel the same way about me now that you know all my secrets.”

Len looks at her face, his heart constricting horribly in his chest at how anxious she is, how she’s biting her bottom lip until it’s swollen red. Although, he thinks as one corner of his mouth unfurls smugly, that could be from the kisses I gave her. “I meant what I said,” he tells her, quoting from his dreams…from his memory. “I can live without you, but I don’t want to.”


“I dreamed about it,” Len informs her, “twenty-three years ago, and I’ve dreamt about it a dozen times since then. I’ve been dreaming about you for twenty-six years, sweetheart. I know all of your secrets, and now you know all of mine. I’m not the man that you married, and you’re not my dream girl. Things have changed, but that’s good.”

Mac lets out a breath she didn’t realize she’d been holding. Len hunches to untie his shoes and takes them off before he stands in one smooth movement. Mac watches him undo his cufflinks and leave them on the coffee table. When he shucks his vest, he catches her watching him undo the buttons and smirks. Mac tilts her head up as he comes to stand in front of the couch and looks into his eyes. Len holds her gaze and gets on his knees so he’s not looking down on her.

“I don’t love the woman you were before,” Len clarifies in the soft voice that means he’s being serious. “I love the woman that you are now, here, in this timeline…” he cups her face with both hands and leans in until he’s tantalizingly close to kissing her again before he asks, “…now will you please just let me?”

Mac kisses him instead of answering his question with any more words. Len tangles the fingers of one hand in the midnight blue of her hair and pulls hard enough to make her gasp sweetly into his mouth before he kisses her chin, her neck; biting the pulse thundering in her throat and sucking hard enough to leave a mark. Mac digs her fingertips into the nape of his neck and nibbles on his earlobe. Len frowns in confusion with his lips pressed to her collarbone at the slip and soft pop of his shirt buttons coming undone before he deduces that she’s using her powers to undress him instead of her hands. Mac undoes his belt the same way—by undoing it and paramagnetizing the buckle to the wall—while he finds the zipper on the side of her dress and deftly pulls it down.

Len peels the straps of her dress over her shoulders and groans at the sight of her naked from the waist up before he palms her breasts, relishing the solid—real—weight of them in his hands. Mac whimpers as she abruptly becomes very aware of how hard her nipples are. Len hums low in his throat to express his appreciation and kisses the tops of her breasts. Mac clutches at the back of his head and moans at the rough drag of his stubble rubbing against her delicate skin. Len squeezes her with his hands and scrapes his teeth over her soft, trembling flesh meticulously until her breasts are flushed and hypersensitive.

Mac bites her lip and exhales a high noise when he pinches her nipples gently between his thumbs and forefingers and rubs the hard little nubs experimentally. Len takes his time playing with her nipples to learn what she likes, what makes her moan, what makes her whole body shake with need. After all, no matter how many times he’s done this with her in his dreams—in his memories of that other timeline—he hasn’t actually gotten to touch her like this until tonight. There’s still a learning curve, pun unintended.

Len takes one of her nipples into his mouth and sucks. Mac whines after he pulls back to blow a puff of cold air over her nipple, the slick of his saliva on her skin making the sensation more
intense. Len moves his mouth to her other nipple and gives it the same treatment, swirling his tongue all around her areola and adding a hint of teeth to see how she takes it.

Mac exhales a soft, breathy laugh. It’s one of the best sounds he’s ever heard. “You’re too good at that,” she says. “You’re going to spoil me.”

“That’s the plan,” Len deadpans. It comes out more sweet than smooth or even snarky, but he doesn’t care. It’s the truth.

Mac hunches to kiss his forehead, his temple, his hairline, the crown of his head—a flurry of soft kisses like snowflakes falling on a brightly lit winter morning. “I love you,” she tells him softly.

Len nuzzles her cleavage before he pulls back to look up into her eyes. “I want to take all of her, I want to give her everything. “I love you, too,” he tells her in a raw voice that’s equal parts quiet and sincere.

When she abruptly stands up, Len worries he might’ve said or done something wrong for a hot second. Then she shimmies out of her dress and he gets an eyeful of her in a garter belt, sheer black thigh-high stockings, and see-through black lace panties that don’t leave much to the imagination. Which is fine with him—more than fine—because he’s been imagining this moment since he was sixteen, and now all he wants is to see everything.

Len kisses her belly in the space between her garter belt and the bow on top of her panties and sucks in a sharp breath at the scent of her arousal. Oh, the smell of her alone is mouthwatering. When he finally gets to taste her, it’s going to be legendary.

Mac puts her hands on his shoulders for balance as she steps out of her dress. “Okay,” she says, eking the oh sound out into a soft ooh, “you need to take me to bed. Like, yesterday.”

Len stands and smooths his cold palms over her hips in the same motion. Mac presses her palms flat against his chest and smiles at the fluttering thud of his heartbeat under her hands. Then she goes on tiptoe to kiss his throat, the sharp jut of his Adam’s apple, his clavicle, the space between his neck and shoulder. Len groans and buries his face in her hair as she touches him intently, thumbing his flat nipples and lingering on the flexure of the hard muscles under the skin of his shoulders, chest, and stomach. Mac skims her fingertips over his scars—the jagged broken circle from a beer bottle that Lewis shoved into the meat of his shoulder when his back was turned, the memory of a serrated blade ripping in below the bottom of his ribcage. There’s a tattoo of a delicate vine around his left bicep, a name in Hebrew on the inside of his forearm, and a quote from one of Van Gogh’s letters to his brother inked on top of his ribs: I myself won’t turn from what I’ve thought from the start; and this is why I say for my part, if I’m no good now, I won’t be any good later either—but if later, then now too.[338]

“I don’t actually know where your bedroom is, sweetheart,” Len murmurs. “Let’s change that, hmm?”

Mac nods and shyly adjusts her glasses before she grabs her cane and shows him where to take her. Len is too focused on her to pay much attention to anything else in the room. There are blackout curtains hanging over the windows and bookshelves on every wall, but none of that matters right now. What matters is the way she licks her lips as he undoes his fly and drops his pants.

“Okay,” Mac says breathlessly from where she sits on the edge of her mattress. “How do you want to do this?”

Len moves to get on his knees in front of her again. Then he smooths his hands up over the curves
of her calves and into the hollows behind her knees before he spreads her legs, his calloused fingertips stroking the tops of her thighs until her whole body is trembling with anticipation.

“Well,” he drawls, “first I’m going to take off your panties,” he holds her gaze while he slips one hand between her thighs and cups her gently, “then,” he bites down on the consonant and rubs his thumb in slow circles over the damp crotch of her underwear, “I’m going to take my time eating you out. I’ve been thinking about this for so long…” he elongates the word until it holds the weight of all that waiting and wanting, “…and now I plan to enjoy it.”

Mac glances down and tugs her bottom lip between her teeth. Oh, he’s so hard the head of him is peeking out from the waistband of his black silk boxer briefs—and he looks delicious. “How about I blow you now so you can take your time eating me out during your refractory period?” she suggests.

Len cocks his head to look at her and his pupils are so dilated that only a thin sliver of the blue surrounding them is visible. “Okay,” he murmurs, “you make a compelling argument.”

After he stands up smoothly and tangles one hand into the mess of her ruined updo, Mac tilts her head back and looks at him like she’s waiting for permission. Oh, she liked it when he gave her explicit instructions in his dreams—in his memories of that other timeline.

Let’s see if she still does, Len thinks. “Suck my cock, sweetheart,” he orders.

Mac exhales a soft noise and shivers ecstatically before she tugs his underwear down his thighs. Len kicks them off once they’re around his ankles. When she thumbs at his hipbones, he aches for more of her touch.

Len only likes physical contact under two specific circumstances: fighting people he wants to hurt in a more personal way than putting a bullet in them, and touching people he trusts. There’s been a lot more of the former than the latter in his experience.

Angie is good at giving head because she’s a professional, but she’s also a lesbian and she’s not a fan of dicks that are attached to cis guys. Her technique? Flawless. Her enthusiasm? Nonexistent.

Brad forced him, end of story. What happened with his former cellmate isn’t something Len thinks about if he can help it.\[339\]

Laura was his sub, but she was more turned on by having her face fucked until she choked than actually doing anything to or for him. As the dominant one in the D/s equation, he kept trying to give her what she wanted until it felt too one-sided and he had to cut her loose. Laura got off on consensual abuse; Len didn’t want to be abusive.\[340\] It didn’t work out between them because he couldn’t give her what she needed. It was as simple as that.

Mick had no gag reflex, and that was great, but he got twitchy about the power dynamics at play in what they were doing. It took a few years for him to acknowledge that he liked sucking cock and getting fucked in the ass. Then everything went wrong on the last job they pulled, and their business arrangement that had become an unspoken but deeply personal thing was over. Mick hasn’t made a move since they rekindled their partnership over a week ago. Maybe he’s working up to it, but it doesn’t matter, because things have changed. Mac is real. There’s nothing and no one else he wants more. Still, he doesn’t regret most of his past. After all, those experiences brought him here—to the woman of his dreams.

Len watches her wrap one hand around the base of his cock and moans softly as she gives him a gentle squeeze. Mac elegantly flicks her tongue over the slit on the head of him while she fondles his balls with her other hand. Len clenches his teeth to stifle a sharp hiss at the obscene noise she
exhales through her nose at the taste of his precome. Mac curls her tongue along the ridge of the head and licks at him in delicate, teasing swipes as her hand strokes his length up and down from base to tip.

When she takes the head of his cock between her lips and sucks him loud and wet and so tight, his body sings electric and it feels so mindblowingly good that his eyes actually roll back in his head. Len grits his teeth around a low, persistent moan and tries not to thrust himself all the way into her sweet, wet mouth. Mac pulls back and ducks her head to nose at his balls. Then she inhales deeply and moans at how strongly he smells, at the way his throbbing cock twitches in her hand while she daintily licks his heavy sac with the flat of her tongue. After that, she finds a rhythm—bobbing her head up and down on him as she takes more and more of his cock down her throat, all while she strokes him at the base with hard and soft twists of her wrist. When she takes him into her mouth and holds him at the back of her throat to suck and swallow around him, he makes an inarticulate noise that unfurls from somewhere deep in his chest and fists both of his hands in her hair.

Len spreads his legs as she teases past his balls to skim her fingertips along his perineum. Mac rubs sloppy circles around his asshole before she slips two fingers inside him. It’s been a while and she’s not using any kind of lubricant to make this easy on him, but he’s had much thicker things than her small fingers up his ass and he’d missed the sensation of being stretched there, of being fucked. Len grits his teeth around a garbled, guttural sound at the tension that jolts through his stomach and thighs, the surge of his orgasm building at the base of his cock.

When her fingertips search and curl inside him to stroke at his prostate, he comes so hard his knees give out. Len collapses into her lap instead of falling on his ass, too far gone to hear her muffled giggling but close enough to feel the flickers of her laughter under the skin of her flabby belly. Mac loosely wraps her arms around his shoulders and strokes his hair while he catches his breath. Len exhales in a loud whoosh that flares his nostrils and splays his hands over her hips to give her a squeeze before he unceremoniously yanks her panties off.

“Oh…my turn.”

Mac flops onto her back while Len takes his time kissing and nipping at her inner thighs. When he uses the rough pads of his thumbs to spread her open and puts his mouth on her, her whole body jerks at the sensation of his lower lip against her labia, the first slow flick of his tongue swirling around her clit. Len keeps his hands on her hips to hold her where he wants her, licking and sucking and tasting her until her entire world narrows down to the slick, glossy feeling of him devouring her with his perfect mouth—greedily lipping at her folds, stroking his tongue in firm swipes along her slit, gently sucking on her clit. It eventually occurs to her that Len isn’t trying to make her come. If she knows him at all, he’s going to tease her thoroughly first. There’s electricity buzzing inside of her, lightning waiting to strike, and power surges under her skin every time she gets close.

Len stops and looks at her so intimately that she almost comes from the white hot intensity of his gaze alone. “You’re so wet,” he murmurs, “so ready for me, hmm?”

Mac squirms back until she’s spread out on top of her duvet with him kneeling over her. “Yes,” she whispers. “Please.”

There’s sweat beading like sleek translucent pearls on her skin and lurid red marks that he made all over her flushed chest. Len smirks and smoothes his hands from her inner thighs over her hips, curling his fingers into her soft flesh hard enough to make her moan softly. “Please what?” he drawls. “Say it. I want to hear you beg for me, sweetheart.”

Mac is too frustrated to play this game. “Please make me come,” she begs. “I don’t care how.
Len rubs the blunt head of his cock between her swollen folds and bumps her clit. Mac whimpers as bright phosphenes flare behind her eyelids and pleasure coils at the base of her spine. When he scoops her up into his arms and slowly thrusts inside of her, her orgasm hits her like a thunderclap. It’s so intense that she trembles in his arms while he tangles the fingers of one hand in her hair and buries his face in the crook of her neck. Len nuzzles her throat and starts to move slowly, his thrusts meticulous and unhurried, savoring the sensation of her tight and wet and pulsing around him.

Mac wraps her arms around his neck and cradles the back of his head to kiss him slick and deep and dirty. Len tugs on her hair and licks into her mouth, gently thumbing her clit while he strokes her soft tongue with his. After he kept her on the edge of coming like that for over an hour, that’s all it takes to make her unspool again; one orgasm blooming into another and then a third as the head of him bumps her cervix and rubs against the deepest part of her that he can reach. Len smooths one hand up from the small of her back to press his cold palm into the hollow between her shoulder blades and holds her flush against him while he smooths the other from the curve of her waist and over her hip to grab her ass. Mac moans into his mouth and moves her hips to meet his thrusts, to give as good as she gets. Len breaks the kiss to groan and press his forehead against hers. Oh, he’s so close to coming again it’s almost embarrassing—and that would be a point of pride, except he’s made her come four times and she’s so oversensitized that drawing this out to prove he can last longer would be a dick move, pun intended.

“Say my name, sweetheart,” he orders.

Mac nuzzles his nose with hers. “Len,” she gasps.

When the heavy push and pull of his thick cock moving in and out of her and the friction of his pubic bone against her clit makes her come again, her fifth orgasm drags him over the edge. Len buries another guttural noise in her hair as she squeezes him until he’s soft inside of her, until she’s the center of his universe. Mac ruins the romantic moment by squirming over to get the box of tissues on her bedside shelf and clean up his mess. Len huffs softly while she peels back the blankets and settles on his side to give her space, but he splays one of his cold hands over her belly once they’re under the covers together. Mac puts one of her hands on his face tentatively, like she’s worried he might not want her to touch him. Len closes his eyes and exhales a soft noise before he leans into the warmth of her palm, her fingers, and kisses the heel of her hand softly.

“I love you so much,” he says, and he means it with all of his heart.

“I love you, too,” she tells him.

Then something occurs to him. I was so caught up that I didn’t even think to use a condom, Len thinks, staring down at his hand on her belly with wide eyes and overarching eyebrows. Crap. “Mac,” he says out loud, biting down around the consonant, trying to keep his cool, “you’re still on the pill, hmm?”

Mac nods, a slow descent of her chin. “I’ve been on the pill for hormonal migraines since I was a teenager,” she clarifies with a yawn, “but don’t worry. It’s not like you can get me pregnant unless I actively stop my powers from killing your sperm anyway. I’m more concerned about your STI status. I should’ve asked you about that before we did this.”

“I’m clean,” Len tells her softly. “I wouldn’t’ve done anything to you if I wasn’t.”

Mac nods again, a quick bob of her head. “I trust you,” she says firmly, like it’s the most natural
Len swallows thickly. “Good,” he mumbles, still not so great at this whole touchy-feely thing, “the feeling’s mutual. So…” he ekes the *oh* sound out in a futile attempt at nonchalance, “…what are we doing here?”

“I thought we were going to sleep together,” Mac says. “Unless you don’t want to sleep here. I know my bed is kind of small.”

“No,” Len bites down around the word because he’s not comfortable with how insecure he’s feeling, “what are we doing here? Mac, I’ve never done…” he averts his gaze and huffs, “…this… before. I am all in. I know that I love you, but I have no idea what we are or where we go from here.”

Mac props herself up with one elbow and looks him in the eyes. “Well,” she elongates the *l* sound into another loud yawn that she muffles in one palm, “at this point, the only reason I’m not your girlfriend is because you haven’t asked me to be. Unless that’s not what you want.”

It occurs to him that he’s never had a girlfriend before—or a boyfriend, for that matter. Len is almost forty-two years old, but he’s never officially been in a relationship with anyone. It’s hard to separate the idea of love—of romance, of permanence—from the idea of *her*. Maybe because she’s the only one he’s ever wanted that from. After all, he only thought love didn’t exist because he thought *she* didn’t exist.

Len smooths the hand on her belly into the curve of her waist and smiles at her. “Mac,” he says in his smoothest voice, laying it on thick, “will you be my girlfriend?”

Mac splays one of her warm hands over his heart and kisses him, soft and sweet and slow. “Yes,” she whispers so he feels the heat of her words on his lips, “now will you go the fuck to sleep?”[341]


Mac yawns and takes her glasses off. After she twists in his arms to put them on her bedside shelf, Len takes the opportunity to spoon her from behind and tilt her chin up so he can kiss her over her shoulder. Mac sighs happily and snuggles back against his chest. “G’night,” she mumbles before she falls asleep.

Len loves the cold because it clears his head. When it’s warm—and in Missourian summers, the humidity can get thick enough that he feels suffocated, trapped—he can’t think, can’t do anything but turn the air conditioner on full blast and sit in his apartment with a cold beer and a good book. When it’s cold, he feels sharper, more focused; it’s where his strength comes from. While he’d never say it out loud, the cold makes him feel brave.

Although he has to admit that being here in Mac’s bed with the smell of their sex and the warmth from her body still clinging to the sheets is also great, and will suffice.[342]

“Things haven’t cooled down after the Kahndaq heist yet,” he tells her as she emerges from her ensuite bathroom in a black and brown striped thermal shirt over a clean pair of panties and hobbles over to flop back into bed with him. “I should probably stay in today, and since that means I’m stuck here, you should probably stay in with me.”

Mac snorts. “I can’t go anywhere today anyway. There’s no way to hide all of *these,*” she glances down at the love bites on her neck and chest before she side-eyes him. “I’m sure that was part of
your plan.”

“Yeah,” Len drawls, “sorry not sorry.”

Mac closes her eyes to fulgurkinetically find her phone. It’s still in her purse on the hook by the door and, of course, the battery is almost dead. *Welp*, she thinks. “I’m going to get my phone,” she informs him, “I’m not mad at you or trying to get away from you. I want you to know that I love you, and you don’t have to manipulate me into spending the day together. I would’ve done that anyway.”

Len feels the soft twinge of guilt seep out of his gut and grins to himself. It occurs to him that he doesn’t have to manipulate her, that she isn’t playing games with him or trying to push him away. Mac isn’t his dream girl—she’s his girlfriend. *This changes things*, he thinks. *Again.*

When she returns, the sound of footsteps accompanied by her cane muffled by the plush carpet in the hallway, he can’t stop himself from grinning wider. Doesn’t want to.

Mac holds the phone between her shoulder and her ear as she crawls back under the covers. “Hi, Dr. Wells,” she says. “I’m not coming in today. Let me talk to Caitlin.”

Eobard doesn’t suspect anything because he knows she’s immunocompromised, so he assumes she’s got the flu or some other nasty viral infection and hands the phone to Caitlin.

“*Iris and I figured out where Firestorm is,*” she says before Caitlin has a chance to ask what’s wrong with her so she doesn’t have to lie, “he’s been living under a highway ramp that’s near Professor Stein’s house.”

Caitlin inhales sharply and Mac doesn’t have to see her face doing to know she’s pressing her lips into a thin line. “Clarissa—his wife—still lives there,” she says.

Mac nods, slowly. “Lily—their daughter—just graduated from MIT with a Ph.D. in nanotechnology. I’ve offered her a job helping Cisco make our power dampening tech smaller…” she glances at Len, who’s watching her intently, “…she starts on Monday. I thought you should know.”[^343]

While she knows intellectually that she’s not alone, Caitlin has never been very good at opening up without poking and prodding as a precursor to getting her to talk about her problems. Lily is going through the same thing she is. Maybe she won’t feel so isolated with someone like her around.

“Yes,” she says, “of course. Thank you for telling me.”

Mac stays on the line until Caitlin hangs up the phone. It takes her a few minutes of just breathing to gather her strength. There’s no shame in that.

After she puts her phone on her bedside shelf and plugs it in to let it recharge, Len cups her face in one hand and steals a quick kiss. “Let’s make waffles,” he suggests. “I haven’t had homemade waffles since I was a kid.”

Mac feels so completely happy that she panics for a split second, before she tells herself that Eobard isn’t going to zoom in and ruin everything. Len narrows his eyes at the look of pure terror on her face and tries not to take her fear personally because he’s perceptive enough to know it’s not about him. Mac looks away to recollect herself while Len hesitantly strokes her cheek with his thumb, back and forth like a pendulum—slow and sure. When she looks back up and meets his eyes, Mac gives him a shy unbroken smile.

[338] I totally blame Len having this tattoo on you, Andy. YOU KNOW WHY. (x)

[339] Brad Brickley appeared posthumously in The Flash: Fastest Man Alive Vol. 1, No. 10 ("Full Throttle, Part 2: Cold Case") May, 2007. Len killed Brad in the comics by decapitating him, and I extrapolating his reasons for killing him in such a violent way (as opposed to shooting him either with the cold gun or with a lead bullet) until I got here.

[340] While most people in the BDSM community are self-aware adults who have every right to indulge in their kinks as long as everything they’re doing is Safe, Sane, and Consensual, an abuse survivor like Len might be uncomfortable with those kinks and with the abuse that sometimes emerges in the community itself. I’m not going to gloss over the lingering effects of his childhood trauma to make him into an aggressively domineering alpha male. That’s not my jam.

[341] Adam Mansbach, Go the Fuck to Sleep (2011). (x)


[343] Lily Stein first appeared in Legends of Tomorrow 2x07 (“Invasion! Part 3”) 1 December 2016. I decided to give her more of a role in this fic, because given its history with female characters, I doubt show canon is going to use her for anything besides making her father have feelings. How unfortunate.
Len folds himself onto one of the stools by the granite island in the center of Mac’s kitchen and glances around the room. After all, he’s only been in her kitchen once before, and he wasn’t exactly paying attention to the décor. Most of the appliances are sleek stainless steel, expensive and efficient, while the countertops are black granite with flecks of silver minerals, like a starry night set in stone. There’s a set of metallic bowls in multiple sizes on the island full of different kinds of fruit and vegetables: apples, oranges, lemons, bananas, onions, shallots, cloves of garlic, potatoes, and cherry tomatoes in various hues. It would be picture-perfect, except Mac is messy.

There’s a pile of crumpled aluminum foil obscuring a significant portion of the countertop, dirty dishes and used tupperware festooned everywhere but in the dishwasher, and a stick of butter just sitting out—still in its wrapper, at least—for no apparent reason.

“Too busy cleaning up other people’s messes to avoid making your own, sweetheart?” he teases, more fond than mocking.

“Too lazy,” Mac mumbles, blushing and eking the y sound out awkwardly as she props her cane against the wall by the refrigerator.

Len props his elbows on the surface of the island and interlaces his fingers as she noisily stuffs the foil down into the garbage bag under the sink, gritting his teeth at the abrasive crinkling sounds until they subside. “You’re cute,” he tells her softly. Like he means it.

Len smirks and texts Lisa to ask her to bring a change of clothes for him, since he doesn’t want to sit around in formalwear all day. After she cleans the garbage off the countertops, Mac starts to load the dishwasher. Len doesn’t offer his assistance because he didn’t make the mess and he’s more interested in watching her move around the kitchen with a haphazard, flailing sort of grace. Like she could move soundlessly and gracefully, but she just doesn’t bother. Len can’t take his eyes off her.

“So,” he says as Mac ladles precise scoops of batter into her waffle maker, “Lisa won’t tell me anything about your operation beyond the context for what you asked me to do. Was that her idea, or yours?”

“I didn’t ask her to shut you out,” Mac informs him, “but I haven’t let you in because I think you’d hate it. It’s not exciting, like a heist or being on the run from the cops or whatever gives you an adrenaline rush. It’s a lot of monitoring surveillance footage and assembling evidence packets and just… waiting for something to happen. Lisa hates it. I know, because she keeps complaining about how she thought taking down a mafia empire was going to be glamorous and fun—and the only reason she hasn’t quit is because I pay her obscenely and she believes in what I’m doing, in that order.”

Len snorts. “So what exactly are you doing?” he wants to know.

Mac shrugs. “Santini has always operated through fronts and shell corporations. It’s how he launders his money, how he legitimizes his fortune. There are warehouses on the waterfront that he uses to run drugs and guns and girls and whatever else, but since he owns that part of the city, no one can get admissible evidence against him. Santini owns at least half a dozen shipping companies, and none of them are in his name, but one of them was in Mher Darbinyan’s, because Santini wanted to ensure Araz Darbinyan’s loyalty—”

“And setting his heir up to take the fall if anyone ever tried to take Santini down was one way to go,” Len deduces.

Mac smiles at him. “Exactly,” she says. “I bought one of the shipping companies that Santini used to own, but he still thinks it’s owned by one of his shell corporations. I had you broker that deal with the Darbinyans because he’s going to find out that he doesn’t own those properties anymore, and when he does, he’s going to think you hustled him for revenge.”

“Santini tried to recruit my dad when they were cellmates at Iron Heights,” Len cuts in sharply, “he tried to make a deal he didn’t have the authority to make because his father was running the city back then instead of him, he refused to give us the cash for my mom’s dialysis like he promised he would, and I got to watch her die.”

“I know,” Mac says, “and I’m counting on Santini remembering that. It’s going to keep him from noticing that not only do I own the warehouses on the waterfront, I also own the fancy hotel where his ‘friends in high places’”—she crooks her fingers like quotation marks around the words—“go to get their incentives, if those incentives are female and/or underage sex workers.”

“So the deal I made for you was a distraction,” Len says.

Mac shakes her head slowly. “No,” she says. “It was integral. Thanks to you, I was able to set up a surveillance network at the waterfront. It’s only a matter of time before I get footage of Santini doing something illegal, something irrefutable. Until then, I’m going to start taking out members of his organization one by one.”
“Until he has nothing left,” Len murmurs in his coldest, deadliest voice.

Mac nods, a sharp descent of her chin. “Santini’s son marries a woman who does horrible things to metahumans in the future,” she tells him softly, “but that’s not the only reason I’m doing this.”

Len gives her a crooked smile, one that doesn’t show his teeth. It would’ve been a lot simpler to hire someone to take out Santini’s son—hell, he would’ve done the deed himself if she’d asked—but she’s not just trying to change the future, she’s trying to live in the present. “You’re doing it for me,” he says, trying to keep the smugness out of his voice and failing spectacularly, “because you love me.”

Mac nods again, slowly. “Felix Santini could’ve saved your mother’s life,” she points out, “he chose not to. I could’ve chosen not to completely destroy his legacy, but…he hurt you.”

There’s a ferocious sort of pleasure in knowing what she’s capable of, the havoc she’s willing to wreak to destroy one of his enemies. Sure, she’s got her own reasons, but he’s one of them—a significant one. After all, this whole time while she was pushing him away she was planning to take Santini down, putting all her energy into expressing her feelings for him that way because she was scared that being with him would get him killed.

Mac is cute and very sweet, all floral print and caring too much, but she can be vicious too. It gives him chills, in a good way.

“Oh, sweetheart…” Len drawls, “…just when I thought I couldn’t love you more than I already do, you tell me how brilliant your plans are.”

Mac smiles and puts a cutting board in front of him along with a small, thin knife and a plastic clamshell full of strawberries. “I love you, too,” she tells him before she adds: “chop these in half. Please.”

When he’s done and a pile of precisely sliced strawberries have accumulated in one corner of the cutting board, she puts a plate of waffles in front of him before she snatches one of the berries and takes a bite. Len watches her finish the fruit and suck the juice off of her fingertips with a soft noise that’s not quite a moan, but close enough to make his cock twitch. “Okay,” he says, “that was borderline pornographic.”

Mac blinks at him, her eyes going wide. “Sorry,” she says, more out of habit than anything else. “I love strawberries.”

“Nah, don’t be,” Len says, “the noise you made just reminded me of what you were doing to me with your pretty mouth last night, that’s all.”

Mac blushes redder than the strawberries at the heat in his eyes. “I love doing that, too,” she tells him quietly, “giving head, I mean. It makes me feel powerful.”

Len tries not to wonder if the ex who killed her family is also the one who taught her to give such great head, because the idea of her with anyone else—especially someone who hurt her—makes his blood boil with a potent mixture of jealousy and rage. “If I told you to get down on your knees and suck my cock again,” he says in his smoothest voice, “right here, right now, would you?”

Mac tugs her bottom lip between her teeth and ducks her head in a quick nod. “I would,” she says, “but your sister’s here.”

Lisa doesn’t bother to knock because Mac fulgurkinetically unlocks the door and lets her in. Len doesn’t bother to get up because he’s eating breakfast. When she gets to the kitchen, she drops the
overnight bag that she packed for him onto the floor and steals half of his waffle.

“I’m making one for you,” Mac informs her.

Lisa shrugs and sits on a stool next to her brother. “It’s more fun to steal,” she retorts. “So,” she glances at Mac, “you told him that you were married in the other timeline…” she flicks her gaze to Len as she swipes one of the strawberries, “…you told her that she’s been in your spank bank since you were a teenager, and you two finally jumped each other’s bones. Congratulations.”

Len chuckles. “Mac and I are dating,” he informs her smugly, “she’s my girlfriend now. Officially.”

Lisa smiles at Mac with an implicit threat in the curve of her lips. “I love you like a sister,” she says, “but if you hurt my brother, I’ll beat you to death with a shovel.”[345]

Mac snorts. “I love you, too,” she says.

Lisa smiles at her without the poisonous edge before she raids the fridge to find a can of whipped cream, and tops her waffle with dollops of that along with strawberries. Len is more traditional—butter and syrup meticulously poured into the individual squares. Mac lets the butter melt before she spoons powdered sugar over her waffle and cuts it into bite-sized pieces.

“So,” Lisa says, breaking the comfortable silence, “Vanch is getting greedy.”

Mac frowns. “Again?” she huffs. “Jeepers, that man doesn’t learn.”

“Vanch?” Len narrows his eyes at the name, “as in Cyrus Vanch, the murderer?”

Mac turns to look him in the eyes. “I love how you say that like we’re not killers too,” she tells him pointedly.

Len cocks his head in concession. “That’s true,” he says, “but no one here has killed the number of people that he has. I’ve killed maybe ten people in the past two decades, give or take, you’ve only killed twice, and Lisa…well…” he glances at his sister, “you’re the only one here who actually likes killing, but you still know better than to go around dropping bodies all the time. Cyrus Vanch was convicted of fifty-two murders, and those were just the ones the cops knew about. Guys like him are dangerous, sweetheart.”

“Again,” Mac retorts, “you say that like we’re not. Unless he has a transducer or a Faraday cage, he can’t touch me—and he has no way of knowing what my weaknesses are because he’s never met me face to face.”

“Why is that?” Len snarks back. “Oh, right. It’s because he’s dangerous.”

“No,” Mac says. “It’s because I’m not intimidating. I’m fat, I’m five-foot-two, and I look more like a librarian than a criminal mastermind. Guys like Vanch don’t take me seriously. Which is where Lisa comes in,” she turns to look at her with a smile that doesn’t show her teeth, “because you’re smart enough to run my operation and you’ve got that whole femme fatale thing going on. Vanch went up against the Arrow two years ago, and he lost because he underestimated his target—like he probably underestimates you. I’m guessing he thinks we don’t know about his side business?”

Lisa shakes her head before she flips her hair back over one shoulder. “I didn’t know if you knew,” she huffs, “you’ve haven’t been as involved lately. Vanch has decided I’m Medusa, and he keeps asking to meet the woman behind everything, thinks he’s calling my bluff. I set up a meeting today because some of the others are starting to believe him.”
Mac heaves a sigh. “So taking Vanch out won’t solve the problem,” she says, “people are starting to doubt me. That gives us two options.”

“What are they?” Len wants to know.

“I can either let them keep thinking Medusa is smoke and mirrors,” Mac tells him, “or I can show them exactly who they’re dealing with.”

After he changes into his boots and long black coat over dark jeans and a long-sleeved black thermal shirt, Len waits for Lisa to leave on her motorcycle before he stops Mac with a hand on her upper arm. “I don’t know how I feel about you being a criminal mastermind,” he tells her softly, “you could get hurt.”

Mac looks up and meets his blue eyes with a storm brewing in hers. “If you want to be with me,” she says, “you need to understand that I have to change the future and being Medusa is part of that. I love you, but…” she adjusts her glasses, thumbing the frames nervously, “…you can’t stop me.”

Len puts one hand on the back of her neck and pulls her flush against him with the other. Then he slants their mouths together to kiss her so hard and so hot that she feels it from the crown of her head to the tips of her toes. “I love you, too,” he says, “and I’m not trying to stop you, sweetheart. I’m going with you.”

Mac sticks to her guns on the No Going Anywhere in the Same Car rule, but that’s just fine with him, because arriving separately means he gets to watch her make her entrance and throw everyone else off their game.

There are thirteen people waiting for them in one of the warehouses on the waterfront. Bea da Costa, whom he recognizes from her billboard, although she looks more otherworldly now with noxiously green hair and a gleam in her dark brown eyes. Tora Olafsdotter, whose Romanifolket tribe inherited their magical abilities from Skaði—the jötunn goddess of winter in Norse mythology. Shawna Baez, the teleporter who works at the clinic that Mac owns, and Brie Larvan, the melissophilic roboticist whose research Mac is funding. Amanda Chen, the paraplegic woman who got the ability to astral project into other people’s bodies from the particle accelerator explosion.

Katie Barlow, who’s about the same age as Louise and who’s in this for two reasons. Firstly, because she got the power of tactile hypersuasion from the particle accelerator and she can make people do whatever she wants just by touching them. Secondly, because the policeman who raped her when she was only thirteen got custody of their six-year-old daughter thanks to Santini and the corrupt judge who ruled the verdict in their case.\[346\]

Lia Briggs, Angie’s girlfriend the divorcée, and Lilith Clay, her twin sister—a pair of psychokinetic demigoddesses. Kyle Nimbus—the Mist—who’s in this for the money; and Kyle Reston, the Ace of Clubs from the Royal Flush Gang, who’s in this because Mac kept his nineteen-year-old brother from going back to Iron Heights in the aftermath of the explosion that broke them out. Billy Tockman and a bespectacled woman who can only be his sister, Beverly. There are similarities to Mac in the shape of her face, the set of her jaw. Len smiles at those subtleties until he sees Cyrus Vanch.

Vanch is tall and lanky with blue eyes, pale blond hair, and a mouth that curls pompously without any effort on his part. There’s arrogance in the way he holds himself, squaring his shoulders and puffing up his chest full of hot air. Vanch also has at least two guns on his person, and Len has half
a mind to shoot him even though he knows that Mac is, for all intents and purposes, bulletproof.

Len is a killer, but he doesn’t feel anything when he kills people. Nothing good. Nothing bad, either. Sometimes killing is just the only option; a necessary evil. Maybe that makes him a bad guy, but he’d be worse if he got off on it like Vanch does...like his father did.

“Leonard Snart?” Tockman says his name incredulously. “I haven’t seen you in almost six years. What on earth brings you here? This doesn’t exactly seem like your usual sort of criminal enterprise.”

“You’ll see,” Len murmurs.

Mac parks in front of the warehouse and uses her powers to start the motorized engine that opens the mechanized coiling door. When she hobbles inside, the sound of her cane against the cement floor ricochets through the room.

“Hi,” she says. “I’m Mackenzie Howell, but some of you might know me...” she pauses to fulgurkinetically shut the door behind her and for dramatic effect, “...as Medusa.”

Vanch reaches for the gun under his jacket. Len stops idly tapping his fingertips against the barrel of the cold gun to draw it from the holster on his thigh—but it’s not necessary, because all three of the guns Vanch was carrying turn on him in midair.

Mac smiles and generates an electromagnetic pulse that knocks Vanch into the wall behind him. “Okay,” she says flatly, “now that I have your attention and your guns, I want you to understand something: this long game op isn’t the only thing I’ve got going on in my life. I’m immunocompromised and I’m living with chronic pain. I also run three multibillion dollar research laboratories, and as of last night, I have a serious boyfriend. What I don’t have is the time or the spoons for your insubordination...” she fluxes the electric field that was holding Vanch up against the wall so he flops onto the floor with a loud oof, “…and that makes you expendable. Got it?”

“G...” Vanch winces as she electrocutes him just enough to make him wet his pants. “Got it.”

“Welp,” Bea deadpans, “that’s lunch. Mac, is Tuesday still girls’ night?”

Mac nods, slowly. “Lisa wants to try another new fusion place,” she informs her, “a dessert bar downtown.”

“It has margarita donuts,” Lisa explains, “and cheesecake jello shots. Who doesn’t love cheesecake jello shots?”

“Cool,” Tora says as Bea takes her hand and intertwines their fingers, flame and frost, “we’re meeting Guy at that barbeque place. Kamma-de-lákjot, Lisa, Mackenzie, everyone. See you next Tuesday.”

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Len stops by his apartment to grab a few things, and to see if the C. C. P. D. has found it yet. Which they haven’t. Which in turn means the alias he used to lease the place hasn’t been compromised. Which is good. There isn’t much he wouldn’t be able to leave behind, if he’s being honest—everything that matters to him is elsewhere. This is just a place to keep his clothes, to sleep and lay low between jobs. After spending the night with Mac, it’s never been more clear to him that he’s only ever felt at home with her.

When he walks back through the front door to her place, over the moon because he can just let himself in with the key she gave him, Mac is sitting on her couch with an urban fantasy novel.
“Hi,” she says, squinting at him so her face squishes in a way that’s almost too cute before she puts her glasses back on.

Len folds himself onto the couch next to her. “Hi there,” he says in a deep, incongruously soft voice.

Mac leaves her book on the coffee table before she puts one hand on his shoulder and kisses him softly. Len cups her face in one of his cold palms, caressing her cheek with his thumb and stroking the nape of her neck while he kisses her back so passionately that she actually forgets how to breathe.

When she breaks the kiss, Mac is flushed bright red. “Welcome home,” she tells him shyly.

Len swallows thickly as she nuzzles his nose with hers. “Yeah,” he says, “I’m home.”

[344] If you’re still confused about Mac’s plan for taking down Santini, it goes like this: Step One—taking out several criminals as Medusa to make Santini think she’s not coming after him specifically. Step Two—acquiring the waterfront properties to make any evidence against him that she gathers admissible in court. Step Three—gaining ownership of the hotel to collect more evidence, specifically against people who’d try to get a case against Santini thrown out (i.e. corrupt officials, including the police commissioner). Step Four—building a court case and Laurel prosecuting him eventually to show people the justice system isn’t broken. There are more than four steps, though. Stay tuned.


I hope it doesn’t make you uncomfortable,  
all this unasked-for blazing; 
every time I think I’m finally being cool,  
I blunder radiance.  
I transform everything  
everyone has hidden  
so carefully in the shadows  
into vulgar electric accessories,  
into loud neon chest signs  
that say VULNERABLE! or ASHAMED! or AFRAID!

It would be better to leave all that subtext alone,  
I know. But we are who we are.

Mindy Nettifee, “Radioactive Date”

Shock Value  
Part 2  
*Myst Can Make Reality More Intelligible*  
*Book II*  
*Lightning Doesn’t Strike Twice*  
*Chapter 41*  
Myths Are Public Dreams  
(1 of 3)

“You make the choices you make because you believe in them. They might not make sense. They might end you early, but they’re yours.”

Lois Lane  
*Superman: Unchained* Vol.1, No.7 (“Out of Time”)  
July, 2014

I

Offer Very Little Information About Yourself

*I’ve made friends with a lot of people I knew in the previous timeline, but that doesn’t mean I don’t miss the previous versions of those people. It’s odd to remember what someone could’ve been, to miss a possibility that has since become impossible.*

*Shawna is still Shawna, but she’s not crazy in love with some abusive guy. Sara is still Sara, but now she doesn’t need to come back from the dead or become the White Canary. Which is good, because the White Canary shouldn’t be a blonde white girl anyway, but I digress. Bea is still Bea, but she was trained in combat by her father—a member of the League of Assassins—before she came to Central City in this timeline. Anna is still Anna, but she’s not a demigoddess or a woman in a refrigerator; she’s a corporate lawyer with a genius fiancée who’s building two exosuits out of*
dwarf star alloy, one for him and one for her.

I told Oliver time travel wasn’t a way to unmake your mistakes. It’s just a way to make new ones. I still hope I’ve changed things for the better, and that I’ve changed them for good.

From the Watchtower Archives
Recorded 11 November 2014

Caitlin, Cisco, and Iris started going out for drinks one night about a month after they relocated the comatose Barry to S. T. A. R. Labs. Cisco invited Caroline, Iris invited Eddie, Caitlin invited Mac, who invited Syd, and it became a weekly thing. Barry is struck by the fact that most of these people are his friends as well as hers. When they were kids, he wasn’t exactly the popular one. Caroline was one of the mean girls; Iris was friends with all kind of people. Barry, meanwhile, was that weird kid who infodumped about science and got stuffed into his locker at least once a week. Things are different now. There are metahumans, and he’s one of them. There are monsters, and he can fight them. There is more to fight for than he ever thought he’d have.

“How often do you think about why your friends came into your life?” Barry wonders out loud. “Was it random, by design, or maybe a little of both?”

Syd shrugs. “I have no idea,” he says before he downs his second shot of tequila.

“Yeah,” Barry says, “but regardless of the reason, some friends you just know are going to be by your side for a while…” he smiles at Caitlin and Cisco, but his smile wilts when he flicks his gaze to Eddie, “…others, you’re not so sure. Then there’s that one friend who, well, you hope someday they become something more…” he glances at Iris to find her smiling at him and smiles back, “…but friend will have to do for now, and that’s okay. I guess.”

Mac snorts and takes a long slurp of soda through her straw as she side-eyes him. “Iris’s friendship isn’t a consolation prize,” she points out, “and the only difference between you and Eddie that matters in this context is that Eddie actually asked her out.”

Barry winces. Mac is brutal sometimes, but she’s not wrong.

Caroline snorts into her clenched fist to hide a giggle as Iris comes over to their corner table and takes her first shot of the night. “How about we make a toast?” she suggests.

Iris nods in agreement and raises her shot glass. “To friends,” she glances at Mac with a grin before she clarifies, “old and new.”

Barry clicks his shot glass against hers and downs his shot, frowning as Iris walks back to the dartboard and to Eddie.

“I’m going to destroy you,” Iris informs her boyfriend with a grin that’s much flirtier than the one she gave Mac.

Eddie smiles, smitten. “Don’t get cocky, West,” he flirts back.

Barry is still frowning when he brings a tray of shots over to where Caitlin and Cisco are sitting, at another table closer to the game of darts Iris and Eddie are playing. “Guys?” he says. “I have a problem.”

“Yeah,” Cisco narrows his eyes at Eddie and puts his beer on his coaster, “we all do when guys like him exist.”
“Yeah,” Caitlin echoes wistfully, “he’s so hot.”

Cisco arches his eyebrows at her incredulously.

“Um,” Caitlin ekes the *mmm* sound out awkwardly, “I mean genetically speaking, because I’m a geneticist, of course.”

Barry rolls his eyes so hard his head bobbles. “I’m not talking about Eddie. I’m talking about *this*,” he informs her before he downs six shots of tequila. “I can’t feel anything,” he adds forlornly.

“Yeah,” Cisco tells him with a snicker that spreads into a grin, “that’s usually what happens when you drink too much.”

“No,” Barry shakes his head, “the alcohol is not affecting me. I mean I literally feel nothing.”

“It’s your hypermetabolism,” Caitlin deduces. “I need a sample.”

Cisco flails, flapping his hands excitedly. “I’ll get more shots,” he says.

“I swear,” Caitlin mutters as she fumbles around in the depths of her purse, “I had a Vacutainer in here.”

“Wait,” Barry side-eyes her, “you carry a blood collection kit in your purse?”

“Well,” Caitlin says, “you have your hobbies, I have mine.”

Caroline goes to the ladies’ room while Barry downs more shots, leaving Mac alone with Syd. Silence blooms in the space between them while Mac sips her soda and checks her phone. There’s a text message from Len, a picture of his feet in her fuzzy hot pink socks.

From: COLD AS ICE

**I got cold and borrowed these. Hope you don’t mind.**

Len loves the cold, but he has poor circulation and he tends to dress warm—and knowing him, he’s wearing all black except for those fuzzy socks. Mac smiles down at her phone as she texts him back. Syd glances at her sidelong and opens his mouth to say something, but he decides he needs more shots instead. Caroline bypasses him as she goes to see why her brother is drinking tequila like water.

“Still nothing?” Cisco asks Barry.

Barry heaves a sigh. “I can’t get drunk,” he says mournfully. “I’m only twenty-five, and my drinking days are already over.”

Caroline gives his shoulder a sympathetic pat. “It’s not like you were ever much of a drinker,” she points out, “remember when you passed out after I made you drink a Zombie Cocktail?”[^47]

“There were four kinds of Bacardí rum in that drink,” Barry reminds her indignantly, “and some kind of brandy. I’m lucky I didn’t die of alcohol poisoning.”

Caroline shrugs. “You should’ve just had what I was having,” she retorts, “a Naked Lady.”[^48]

“What?” Cisco says, elongating the *a* sound exponentially.

Caroline turns and gives him what she likes to think is her best smile. “It’s a drink,” she informs
him in a husky voice that’s all innuendo, “sweet and sour, with apricot brandy, lemon juice, sweet rouge vermouth, pomegranate grenadine syrup…and the rum, of course. I could make one for you sometime.”

“Only if you make it with one of those little umbrellas,” Cisco says.

Caroline nods. “Whatever you want,” she tells him in a voice that makes it clear she’s not just talking about cocktails.

Caitlin sips her gin and tonic as she watches them smiling at each other. Caroline offered to let Cisco stay at her place so he wouldn’t have to move back into his parents’ house after he set fire to his apartment, because she knows he doesn’t have the best relationship with his family. Cisco is blushing so hard his ears are turning red, so they probably haven’t even kissed yet. It still looks like his crush on her might not be so one-sided, after all.

Then, as if on cue, the custom app that Cisco designed to monitor the police bands and piggyback their alerts goes off just as Eddie gets a phone call. “There was a bombing on Eighth and Pass,” he says as he turns and gives Iris a quick kiss goodbye. “I’ve got to go, babe.”

Iris shrugs her jacket back on and slings her purse over her shoulder. “I’ve got an early shift at Jitters,” she explains. “Barry, we’ll catch up tomorrow?”

Barry nods as Caitlin stretches and yawns too loudly. “It’s getting late anyway,” he says, “so…”

Caroline sighs as her brother speeds out of the bar and back to S. T. A. R. Labs to suit up. “I’m not paying everyone’s tab,” she deadpans.

Mac exhales a soft whoosh of air. “Cisco,” she says, “patch your phone through to Barry’s com and run mission control from here. Shawna has patients and I promised to stop using her as a human courier because that’s not her job.”

Cisco nods, his hair flopping over his shoulders while he rushes to create the uplink.

“Guys,” Barry shouts once the connection goes through. “There’s a window washer, and he’s gonna fall.”

“Well,” Cisco puts the phone on speaker as they relocate to the corner table to keep anyone from overhearing too much, “don’t try to catch him. You don’t have superstrength.”

“Well,” Barry says, “is there, like, a bed store around here? What if I get a bunch of mattresses and stack them?”

“Barry,” Caitlin huffs, “this isn’t a roadrunner cartoon.”

“How fast would he need to go to run up the side of a building?” Caroline wonders.

Cisco glances at her before he grabs a napkin. Mac hands him a rollerball pen from her purse and he mouths thank you at her before he asks Barry, “How far up do you need to go?”

“I don’t know,” Barry says, “fifty meters, give or take.”

Cisco starts doing calculations. Mac accesses the traffic camera feeds and remotely moves one of them to see what’s going on. There’s no time for math, she thinks. “Just run as fast as you can,” she says out loud, “but you need to maintain your velocity on your way down.”
“Or what?” Barry wants to know.

Caitlin bites her lip and bites the bullet. “Splat,” she tells him.

“Great,” Barry retorts before he blurs into motion.

Iris emerges from the cab she took to the scene of the bombing just in time to see bright flashes of lightning. When he stops, she’s right in front of him with her dark eyes wide, her mouth gaping open in shock…until she smiles at him. Beams, actually.

Barry panics and vibrates his face to keep her from recognizing him before he speeds away.

Mac comes home to find Len on her couch reading one of her Adrienne Rich essay collections. When he sees her, he gives her a soft smile that doesn’t show his teeth and puts the anthology on the coffee table as she hobbles over and flops onto the couch by his feet.

Len smiles wider as she crawls on top of him to pillow her head on his chest. “Hey,” he murmurs, gently curling the fingers of one hand into her hair and stroking the curve of her back with the other. “What happened, hmm?”

There was a bombing downtown perpetrated by a desperate metahuman, and whenever she hangs out with her friends, she feels like she’s lying to them. Oh, her affection for them is real, but she’s not being herself around them. If they had any idea who she is—who she loves, what she’s done, what she knows—they’d never forgive her. It’s not going to end well.

“I just missed you,” Mac tells him softly. It’s not a lie, just a small part of the whole truth.

Len kisses the crown of her head. Oh, he’s perceptive enough to know she’s got something else on her mind, but he’s patient enough to wait until she’s ready to talk to him about it. After all, he’s not going anywhere—not without her. “I missed you too, sweetheart,” he says, “and I need to ask you something.”

Mac tilts her head up and splays one of her hands flat against his chest through the fabric of his shirt as she looks him in the eyes. “What?” she wants to know.

“I got a call from my landlord today,” Len explains, trying to sound nonchalant, “and he wanted to know whether I was planning to renew my lease. I told him I had to think about it.”

Mac holds up one hand to keep him from talking while her eyes white out.

“I’m checking to see if the C. C. P. D. is using your landlord to lure you into a trap,” she informs him. There’s a file on the Kahndaq heist in the C. C. P. D. database. It’s still an ongoing investigation, but they don’t have any leads on where Len would run or any information on the woman who hired him to steal the diamond in the first place. Mac knows it was Sarah Primm, née Khem-Adam, the last known descendant of the royal family of Kahndaq. British soldiers had taken it during World War I, and it ended up being part of a private collection that was acquired by the Central City Museum. Len didn’t steal the diamond for her out of the goodness of his heart, but technically she didn’t hire him to steal it—she hired him to steal it back. “I know you told me they hadn’t found your apartment when you went to get your stuff, but that was over a week ago.”
Len grins down at her, wide and warm. “I thought of that,” he tells her softly, “and I had my tech guy hack into the C. C. P. D. mainframe while you were at work, but I love that you care enough to check again for me.”

Mac flushes hot with equal parts embarrassment and pleasure. It’s a weird combination, in a stomach-churning way. “What did you want to ask me?” she wants to know.

Len strokes the rough pad of his thumb over the shell of her ear and smirks when she shivers, her fingers clutching at his shirt as a soft noise blooms in her throat. “What do you think, sweetheart?” he asks. “Should I renew my lease, or not?”

“I think we’ve only been dating for less than two weeks,” Mac answers, “and I don’t want to pressure you into making a commitment you’re not ready for.”

Len grits his teeth around a frustrated noise and abruptly moves out from under her before he walks out of the room. Mac flops onto her side and uses her elbow to prop herself up, peering at him over the back of the couch and watching him disappear into the bedroom they share. Then it’s all sounds—the hinges creaking in protest when he opens the closet door too forcefully, the metallic slide of him yanking at a zipper, the plop of his duffle bag on the floor once he finds what he was looking for—until he walks back to stand in front of her with one of his fist clenched around something.

Mac gapes when he unfurls his fingers and opens the black velvet box he’s holding to show her a ring. Sapphire. Three carats at least. Antique platinum setting interposed with small diamonds. It’s beautiful. It’s also making her heart beat too fast, the precursor to a panic attack. “What,” she says incredulously.

“I told you I’m all in,” Len drawls. “What did you think I meant by that?”

“I don’t know!” Mac squawks, her voice pitching awkwardly higher. “Len, you asked me to be your girlfriend, but I don’t know what that means to you. I think we should talk about that before you… she tugs her bottom lip between her teeth and inhales deeply through her nose, “…before you propose. After ten days of dating. Jeepers.”

Len chuckles, a low sound that kindles a tight heat below her belly. “I’m not proposing to you right now, sweetheart,” he clarifies. “I know it’s too soon for that and I don’t want to pressure you, either. I just wanted to show you that I’m serious about this, because it’s not just ten days of dating, it’s the year we were married in that other timeline and twenty-five years I spent waiting to finally meet you and the year we spent mutually pining for each other on top of that. I want to be with you for the rest of my life. I love you, Mac. I’ve never been more sure of anyone or anything.”

Mac takes the box out of his hand and closes it before she sets it on the coffee table—tabling it literally and figurally. “I love you, too,” she tells him softly. “I loved you for two years when I lived in another world and I thought you weren’t real. I loved you when we met in that other timeline. I loved you that day in the bookstore when you asked me to have coffee with you, and I have loved you every day since then. I just want you to be sure this is what you want, that here with me is where you want to be.”

“I am,” Len says with slow vehemence, “and it is.”

Mac doesn’t have a chance to say anything else because he cups her face in both hands and kisses her deeply. Len moves to kneel on the couch with her and presses her back against the cushions with his whole body while he flicks his tongue between her lips, his kiss so intense and passionate that she’s gasping by the time he breaks the kiss to nip at her chin; her jaw; her neck.
“Tell me you want me,” he whispers into her ear. “I need to hear it.”

Mac smooths one hand up from his shoulder and strokes the nape of his neck with soft, gentle slips of her fingertips. “I want you,” she whispers back.

Len takes his shirt off in one smooth movement, pausing to savor the way she blushes and bites her bottom lip when she looks at his bare chest before he tugs her dress up over her head. Mac whimpers when he slips one of his hands into her panties and flushes brighter when he smirks and holds her gaze as he teasingly rubs the plump lips of her labia with two fingers. Len groans low in his throat at how wet she is for him and holds her gaze as he slowly curls the same two fingers inside her.

“Yes…” he hisses as Mac moans and jerks her hips against his hand at the first rough swirl of his thumb over her clit, “…this is exactly where I want to be.”

[347] (x)
[348] (x)
[350] There were multiple battles fought in the Sinai and Palestine Campaign during WWI, and since Kahndaq is supposedly located somewhere in the northern part of the Sinai Peninsula, it’s possible this happened on Earth-1. Just saying.
[351] (x)
Myths Are Public Dreams (2) Ignoring Enemies Is the Best Way to Fight

Today there has been so much talk of things exploding into other things, so much that we all become curious, that we all run outside into the hot streets and hug. Romance is a grotto of eager stones anticipating light, or a girl whose teeth you can always see. With more sparkle and pop is the only way to live.

Wendy Xu, “And Then It Was Less Bleak Because We Said So”

Shock Value
Part 2
Myth Can Make Reality More Intelligible
Book II
Lightning Doesn’t Strike Twice
Chapter 42
Myths Are Public Dreams
(2 of 3)

EOD Sergeant Elizabeth “Bette” Sans Souci was deployed for a third tour to Afghanistan in 2010 that was cut short by a roadside bomb. When the particle accelerator exploded, she was undergoing surgery to remove the shrapnel from her body. Major General Wade Eiling held her prisoner at the military base in Keystone City for almost a year after that while he and an army doctor named Harold Hadley performed illegal experiments on the sergeant against her will.

Sgt. Sans Souci had an active metagene that gave her a type of tactile fragokinesis—the ability to make things explode by touching them—that she couldn’t control. Yesterday, when General Eiling attempted to take her back into his custody, shots were fired. Sgt. Sans Souci almost detonated like a human bomb after the Streak brought her to Russell Island to keep her from blowing up Central City. If not for the intervention of Mackenzie Howell—who used her fulgurkinetic abilities to absorb the explosive charge generated by the sergeant—and Caroline Allen—who used her ergokinetic abilities to create a forcefield that contained the explosion—this incident would’ve been catastrophic.

General Eiling was more interested in taking Sgt. Sans Souci apart than in helping her find a way to put herself back together. It doesn’t matter that he was following orders, or that he believed he was doing what he did for the sake of this country. There’s no authority in this world that gives anyone the right to treat others like they are anything less than human.

From “The Metahuman Theses: Plastique” by Iris West
Printed in the Central City Citizen on 11 November 2014
When the C. C. P. D. investigates the bombing in the morning, Barry postulates that the floor blew itself up. Eddie, meanwhile, notices that a file is missing from the building’s archive. Barry speeds through the room to find what’s there—or, more accurately, what’s not there—before he returns to the precinct to find Caroline watching Joe stare down a two-star Major General.

“Hey,” he says awkwardly, shifting from one foot to the other and adjusting his grip on the box of evidence he collected. “What’s going on?”

“General Eiling,” Joe cocks his head at the man in the uniform, “is relieving us from the bombing case. Give these men everything that’s relevant.”

Barry nods, a quick bob of his head. “Sure thing,” he says. Caroline is the only one who sees him use his speed to swipe the file out of the box after he hands it over.

“You and a few civilians from S. T. A. R. Labs might want to look into that,” Joe suggests.

Barry nods again, slowly. “I think we might,” he says.

When he arrives at S. T. A. R. Labs, Barry meets Dr. Lily Stein—a thin brunette who got her cheerful fortitude and her blue eyes from her mother, and her hyperfocused brilliance honed at the expense of personal relationships from her father. Lily introduces herself to him with an infectious smile before she leaves for lunch, a look disappointment flickering her face too fast for anyone but a speedster to notice after she asks Caitlin if she wants to join her and the bioengineer declines. Mac side-eyes Caitlin from behind one of the desktop computers. “Cait,” she says after Lily has left the cortex, “you know she just tried to ask you out, right?”

Caitlin’s eyes go wide in shock—pun unintended—as her cheeks flush a pale shade of pink. Barry clears his throat pointedly. “Guys,” he says, “can we get on this case?”

“Oh!” Caitlin blurts, her voice too loud. “Yes, of course.”

“So,” Cisco ekes the oh sound out awkwardly, “a VA file number is all the info you have on the bomber?”

“C. C. P. D. has been ordered off the case,” Barry explains.

“Well, who has the power to do that?” Caitlin wonders.

Barry shrugs. “Some general,” he informs her, “his name was Eiling, I think.”

“General Wade Eiling,” says Eobard as he wheels out of the room where the cosmic treadmill lives. It’s a statement, not a question.

“You know him?” Barry asks.

“Yeah.” Eobard nods, a sharp descent of his chin. “I know him.”

“General Wade Eiling had a contract with S. T. A. R. Labs to develop enhanced genetic therapies for soldiers in 2005,” Mac elaborates, “that contract is the reason we don’t do business with the government.”

Eobard’s mouth quirks into a smile. It’s been too long since she called them a we—over a century, in fact. “I was interested in the potential medical benefits for civilians,” he clarifies, “but General Eiling wanted to develop mind-reading capabilities for interrogation purposes. I stopped the study
when I saw his techniques up close, but our split was less than amicable.”

“Eiling took all the evidence I collected on the bombing,” Barry says, “everything but the folder.”

“Well,” Cisco grins, “lucky for us, the VA finally joined the new millennium and digitized their records. There’s a lot of redacted info, but our girl’s name is Bette Sans Souci, an EOD specialist for the army.”

“EOD?” Caitlin asks.


At the same time, Cisco just says: “bombs.” Caitlin nods, still blushing.

“Okay,” Barry interjects, “is there an address?”

Mac nods. “Bette was married,” she says, “her ex-husband—whom she couldn’t legally marry in this state because he’s trans and he didn’t want to get bottom surgery, so his ‘official’ gender doesn’t match his gender identity—is still her emergency contact.”

“Cameron Scott,” Cisco tells Barry, “he lives over in Englewood.”

Barry speeds to Englewood to find Bette leaving her ex’s apartment. Bette is tall and sturdy with flaming hair and warm brown eyes, and she’s dressed to kill in a purple t-shirt, jeans, a black leather jacket, and combat boots. When he says her name, she flinches and tries to get away from him.

“I need you to come with me,” Barry informs her.

“Don’t touch me!” Bette shouts, her voice shrill and desperate.

Barry, of course, grabs her wrist despite her protests and yanks with enough force that her hand collides with the emblem on the front of his suit.

“Get whatever you’re wearing off you,” Bette tells him urgently. “Hurry.”

Barry runs to the mouth of the alleyway where he cornered her and strips at superspeed just in time to watch the suit explode in tatters of heatproof—but not explosion-proof—fabric. Bette is long gone when he turns around. Barry cuts his losses and speeds back to S. T. A. R. Labs to get a change of clothes.

Cisco arches his eyebrows at him as he emerges from one of the supply closets in a pair of sweatpants and nothing else. Barry heaves a sigh at the look on his face. “Don’t ask,” he says after he pulls a gray t-shirt with a blue S. T. A. R. Labs logo on it over his head.

“I’m gonna ask,” Cisco retorts. “Where’s my suit?”

“It’s…” Barry hesitates before he says, “gone.”

“What do you mean, it’s gone?” Cisco asks flatly. “What did you do with my suit?”

“It blew up, dude,” Barry clarifies. “I managed to get out of it before it went kaboom.”

“So,” Cisco says incredulously, “my suit…went kaboom?”
Barry nods. “Yeah,” he says, “fun fact about Bette Sans Souci. She’s not carrying bombs. She touched the emblem on the suit and turned it into a bomb. She’s a metahuman.”

“With the ability to cause spontaneous combustion upon tactile contact,” Eobard specifies as he wheels into the cortex.

“It’s a variant of fragokinesis,” Mac says, “the ability to create and/or manipulate explosions.”

“She blew up my suit,” Cisco mutters.

“You have, like, three more,” Caitlin points out.

“I have two,” Cisco retorts, “and I loved that one.”

Barry folds his arms before he heaves another sigh. “I don’t think she meant to hurt me,” he says.

“Well,” Eobard says, “her being a metahuman explains General Eiling’s interest in her.”

“It also explains why he stole the case from us,” Joe adds as he walks into the cortex, “he didn’t want anyone to know what she could do.”

Eobard acknowledges him with a nod. “Detective.”

“Doctor,” Joe says, perfunctory without the pleasantry. “So…” he exhales with enough force to flare his nostrils, still trying to wrap his mind around the idea of a metahuman with the kind of power they’re talking about, “…human bomb. Must be Tuesday in Central City.”

“Yes,” Eobard says, tension lingering in the cadence of his voice, “and General Eiling’s not one to give up a potential asset without a fight.”

“We have to find her before he does,” Barry says, stating the obvious.

Joe takes Barry aside to talk about Iris. It sets Mac’s teeth on edge to hear fragments of their conversation, the gist of which is that the men in Iris’s life get to decide what information to give her and what she doesn’t need to know without any input from her whatsoever. It’s hypocritical of her to be so annoyed given the extent of the knowledge that she’s hiding from these people, but at this point Mac knows the intrepid reporter well enough that she knows keeping Iris out of the loop is a terribad idea. When he speeds to Jitters to try and talk her out of writing about the Streak on her blog, Iris calls Barry on his bullshit.

“What is wrong with you?” she wants to know. “This is important to me. Why can’t you be more supportive?”

“I’m just…” Barry huffs, “…you haven’t put your name on it. How serious can you be about an anonymous blog?”

“Oh…” Iris snaps, “…you haven’t put your name on it. How serious can you be about an anonymous blog?”

“Okay,” Iris snaps, “you know what? Our entire lives, you couldn’t scream loudly enough that the impossible existed, and now it’s actually happening in Central City, I have proof of it, and you don’t want to know about it? That doesn’t make sense, Barry. So when you’re ready to tell me what’s really going on with you, then we can talk.”

Barry doesn’t have a chance to keep her from walking away because Cisco calls to tell him they hacked the army surveillance team monitoring Bette for Eiling. Dr. Harold Hadley,[354] the military surgeon who patched her up and then helped the general experiment on her, is stationed at the stateside Center for Inflicted Wounds in Keystone. Barry speeds the sergeant out of the
building just before a flash bomb explodes in bright, cacophonous slivers of light.

Lily and Cisco pull an all-nighter to finish the prototype they’ve been working on: a sleek-looking power damper bracelet. Bette struggles with the clasp and flinches when Mac comes to help her. Mac gently wraps her right hand around Bette’s left wrist and holds her gaze as she presses her left hand against hers, palm to palm. Bette stares at her in shock, pun unintended.

“It’s okay,” Mac tells her softly, “even without the bracelet, you can’t hurt me. I’m explosion-proof.”

Bette exhales a quiet broken sound and squeezes her hand, hard. Mac squeezes back and lets Bette hold on for a minute or two before she untangles their fingers. Then she fastens the clasp for her and disables the tracker embedded in her upper arm before she hobbles over to flop into her chair behind the desk. Cisco brings up their rendering of the particle accelerator explosion on one of the wallscreens to show Bette what happened that night.

“As the detonation dispersed throughout Central and Keystone, a number of people were exposed to unquantifiable energy,” Eobard explains, “and one of those people was you.”

“We think the dark matter must’ve combined with the bomb particulate inside your body,” Caitlin informs her solemnly.

Bette frowns. “I thought Eiling did this to me,” she says.

Eobard shakes his head slowly. “Eiling is not smart enough to create someone like you,” he says, and only Mac knows him well enough to hear the faint edge of smugness in his voice, “but he is clever enough to see your value.”

Bette glances over her shoulder at Mac. “Do you know of any others who were changed?” she asks.

Mac nods and generates a wad of lightning in her palm. “I didn’t get my powers from the dark matter wave. I got them in the aftermath of a near-death experience I had twenty-two years ago,” she clarifies, “but I did lose my hair the morning after the particle accelerator exploded. When it started to grow back, it was blue.”

“Ms. Howell is one of a kind,” Eobard says, his voice betraying a level of intimacy that makes her nauseous in the worst way.

Mac bites down on the inside of her cheek hard enough to draw blood and forces herself to focus on Bette. “I can tell you that while the shrapnel inside you influenced how your powers are expressing themselves, you’ve always had a dormant metagene,” she says, her hand curling into a fist as she absorbs the electrical energy she generated back inside her body, “but we need to run some tests to see what we’re working with. If that’s okay.”

Bette nods, sharp and concise. Mac holds out her hand and paramagnetizes the tracker out of her arm. Bette winces slightly at the sharp tug of pain and glances down at the ruined sleeve of her jacket.

“What is that?” Caitlin wants to know.

“It’s a tracker,” Mac informs her. “I disabled it a few minutes ago, but it had time to ping our location. I suggest you stitch her up and take whatever samples you need before the general gets here.”
Cisco scrambles into the monitoring room while Caitlin takes samples from Bette and stitches up her gunshot wound. Bette refuses to let Caitlin administer an anesthetic, but she has a high pain tolerance after everything that Eiling did and had done to her. Cisco analyzes the samples as fast as technologically possible. Which, at S. T. A. R. Labs, is superfast.

“Her cellular structure is unlike anything I’ve ever seen,” Eobard observes. “Her nitrogen levels are off the charts.”

“Do you think we can help her?” Barry wonders.

“Well,” Eobard says, “to answer that question, we have to understand how she works, and to understand that, first we have to study her in action.”

“So you want her to blow things up,” Mac deduces.

“Yes!” Cisco pumps his fist with such enthusiasm that he bangs his elbow on the corner of the desk. “Now we’re talking!”

“Not in here,” Eobard clarifies, “she’s too unstable.”

“I know,” Cisco mumbles.

“I know you know,” Eobard tells him with no harsh edge in the tone of his voice.

Mac exhales with enough force to flap her lips. It hurts to remember that he’s capable of kindness as well as cruelty, to remember that she loved this side of him once upon a time. “Eiling is here,” she explains when he turns to look at her, “he’s in the main elevator with six other army men.”


[352] Cameron Scott was actually an alias used by Nathaniel Adam a.k.a. Captain Atom, to whom Bette was married in the comics. (Nathaniel was married to a woman named Angela, but then he ended up two decades into the future due to time travel shenanigans, and Angela got remarried to Eiling because she thought Nathaniel was dead. Angela died before they had a chance to see each other again. Bette and Nathaniel were divorced in the New-52, but I have no idea what’s going on post- *Convergence*. DC is a hot mess, imo.) I’ve decided that Nathaniel Adam is trans, because I can.

[353] Englewood is a residential area in Central City in the comics. It’s near Granite Peak National Park. Which, in this fic, is full of giant spiders.

I am bombarded yet I stand
I have been standing all my life in the
direct path of a battery of signals
the most accurately transmitted most
untranslatable language in the universe.
I am a galactic cloud so deep, so involuted
that a light wave could take fifteen
years to travel through me and has taken.
I am an instrument in the shape
of a woman trying to translate pulsations
into images for the relief of the body
and the reconstruction of the mind.

Adrienne Rich, “Planetarium”

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Shock Value
Part 2
Myth Can Make Reality More Intelligible
Book II
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III
There Are Too Few Immutable Truths Today

Mac texts Joan to meet her at Ferris Air while Caitlin drives, Barry sits in the passenger seat brooding over his fight with Iris the night before about her blog, and Cisco assembles various projectiles along with soft lead cylinders used to administer his amped up version of the Trauzl test. Bette sits in silence with her arms folded and both hands tucked under her armpits until they arrive at the airstrip.

When she emerges from their van, Bette stands to one side of the door and offers Mac a tentative hand. Mac squeezes Bette’s fingers and uses her cane to take the bulk of her weight as her feet touch the tarmac.

“What is this place?” Bette asks.

“Ferris Air used it as a testing facility before one of their pilots disappeared,” Mac informs her.

“Mac uses it to show other metahumans she meets what we’re capable of and teach us to control ourselves,” Joan elaborates as she puts the box of pastries and the portable cups of coffee she brought on the folding table Caitlin and Cisco are setting up. “Hi…” she smiles at Bette and holds one hand out for the shaking, “I’m Joan Williams. I brought one of those apple tarts you like.”
Bette was a regular customer at Joan’s bakery—the *Blue Canary Cake Emporium*—before she shipped out for her third tour. “I’m surprised you remember me,” she mumbles.

“I bake those apple tarts once a week,” Joan says, “and they always sell out by the end of the morning rush. Which is seven to nine. Whenever you weren’t in a war zone, you were at the *Emporium* every Thursday morning at seven o’clock on the dot. Also you have great hair.”

Bette smiles, a soft quirk at the corners of her lips. “Thank you,” she says, “you’re not so bad yourself.”

Joan smiles back and turns to grab a boomerang from the folding table. Caitlin side-eyes Cisco as the pastry chef throws the boomerang up into a blurring arc. “Didn’t really think that one through,” she quips. “Did you?”

“When I first met Mac, I couldn’t move my hands at all without making something go *boom*,” Joan says, “now I just point…” she unfurls one of her fists with a flick of her fingertips, “…and shoot.”

Bette stares at Joan as the boomerang explodes before it comes back. “Okay,” she unclasps the bracelet and picks up a purple Frisbee that matches her shirt, “my turn.”

“It looks like she generates a force of approximately four hundred twenty-seven kilopascals,” Cisco says after the Frisbee explodes in a purple conflagration, “her Trauzl rating is around forty-five. That’s the same as any Plastique…Plastique!” he grins so wide his cheeks hurt. “First try!”

Bette arches her eyebrows at Barry as she refastens the bracelet around her wrist. “Plastique?”

Barry shrugs. “Cisco gives a codename to every metahuman he meets,” he explains. “Just go with it.”

Bette is quiet for a long stretch of time. “If they could reverse it so you weren’t a metahuman, would you do it?” she asks quietly, “either of you?”

“When I first got my powers, a friend told me I was given my speed for a reason,” Barry tells her, “that I was chosen. I don’t know if I believe that, but all I’ve ever wanted to do is help people…and now I’m capable of doing that in a way no one else can.”

Then, as if on cue, his phone buzzes insistently. Barry extracts it from the pocket of his jacket and goes to answer it. Bette exhales a heavy sigh and turns back to Joan, who stuffs her hands in her pockets and shakes her head slowly. “I’m not like Barry,” she says, “I’m not cut out to run around fighting crime all day every day, but these abilities are part of who I am now and they’ve given me the best friends a girl could ask for. I wouldn’t change a thing.”

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Iris posts an article on her blog titled “Inside Central City’s Red Streak Phenomena” and puts her name on the byline. Barry spends the rest of that day speeding through the motions at the precinct so he won’t lose his day job. Then he suits up again and goes to Jitters to talk to Iris as the Flash—or technically as the Streak—later that night.

“Look,” says Iris, “I have these friends—they’re twins—and they had something terrible happen to them when they were kids. Caroline—the sister—she spends more of her time at work in her darkroom than she does in the light, and Barry—her brother—his whole life, he’s been telling stories about this impossible thing. And people laughed at him. And shrinks analyzed him. And he’s been searching for an explanation ever since. And now, suddenly, it’s like he’s lost his faith.”

When she babbles, Iris’s voice is a passionate frenzy. Barry can’t take his eyes off her and
suddenly he’s more struck by her than he ever was by the lightning.

“But people like you—” Iris smiles at him, and it’s sublime. “—people like my friend Mac Howell, or Shawna Baez, or the Black Canary—are proof that he wasn’t crazy,” she stops to suck in a loud, raucous gulp of air before she looks him in the eyes. “Help me save my friend,” she says breathlessly.

Barry swallows thickly and abruptly remembers to vibrate so she won’t recognize his face or his voice. “Barry’s a lucky guy,” he tells her before he speeds away.

Meanwhile, everyone else spends the afternoon at the airstrip eating pastries and blowing stuff up before they’re sure it’s safe to return to S. T. A. R. Labs. Bette spends the night on the couch in Mac’s office cuddled up under a colorful knitted blanket that Cisco’s abuela made. Caitlin starts running more tests on her bright and early. When he comes to check on her before he goes to work, Barry finds Bette holding back tears as she looks at the results.

“Hey,” Barry says. “What’s wrong? Wait, did Eiling find out you’re here?”

“No,” Bette informs him, “Caitlin was about to give me the not-so-good news.”

Caitlin bites her bottom lip before she bites the bullet. “Bette, the shrapnel in your body has merged with you on a cellular level…”

…and I’m afraid the technology required to unsplice your DNA hasn’t been invented yet,” Eobard adds.

Mac bites down on the inside of her cheek as silence blooms in the cortex. Gideon has enough futuristic knowledge in xyr database that he could anachronistically invent that technology himself, but he hasn’t bothered to do it and he probably never will. I hate him, she thinks, I hate how he can just sit in a wheelchair that he doesn’t actually need and tell himself the people here don’t matter because they’re already dead.

“Bette,” she says out loud, “I’m so sorry.”

“It’s okay.” Bette swallows hard. It’s not like this changes anything, really. After all, she’s not going to spend the rest of her life terrified of touching and being touched. It’s just that until now she’d been holding onto the hope that she could go back to how she was before, and now she knows that’s impossible. “Roger that. I…I just need a minute.”

After she leaves the cortex, it’s Cisco who looks like he’s about to cry. “What now?” he mumbles.

“She joins us,” Barry says. “Becomes part of the team.”

“Barry…” Caitlin shakes her head in such a small way that it goes unnoticed by everyone who isn’t a speedster, “…you have an amazing ability to help people. She…makes things explode.”

“It’s too dangerous,” Eobard adds. “Were she to remain at S. T. A. R. Labs, she would put us all at risk.”

“From who?” Barry scoffs. “Eiling?”

“Eiling is a dangerous man, Barry,” Eobard informs him flatly, “we don’t want him as our enemy.”

Barry glances at Mac, who’s massaging her left temple with two electrified fingertips. “After the
lightning bolt…” he shakes his head in quick bobbles, “…what if you hadn’t found me? It could’ve been me—hunted, on the run, cut off from everyone I know and care about—but you guys saved me.”

“I know,” Caitlin says and clutches at thin air with her fingers, flailing, “and I want to save her just as badly as you do, Barry…we all do.”

Barry heaves a sigh and speeds back to the precinct to find Joe waiting for him in the crime lab with a box of evidence. Caroline is flipping through one of the family photo albums they confiscated during the investigation fourteen years ago. “Joe?” he says. “What are you doing here?”

“Going over the materials in your mom’s case.” Joe sips his coffee and puts his C. C. P. D. mug down on Caroline’s desk. “How’s it going with you?”

“Stellar.” Barry heaves another sigh and goes to look up at the night sky through the smudged panes of the windows. “I made friends with a human bomb who I promised I could help and then I couldn’t—”

“Wait,” Caroline holds up one finger to stop him, “is this human bomb the hot redhead Cisco was hanging out with all day?”

Barry tries not to laugh at how transparent his twin is and fails, epically. “Yeah,” he says as he stops pacing erratically and goes to lean against the support beam, “and I finally diagnosed why Iris is writing about the Streak: she’s doing it for us, Carrie, to prove the impossible is possible.”

“How do you know that?” Joe asks.

“Well…” Barry has to force himself to stop grinning from ear to ear as he admits, “…the Streak may have talked to her.”

“Barry, didn’t you think Iris would recognize your voice?” Caroline wonders.

“No,” Barry says in a freakishly modular tone, “I can do this cool thing with my vocal cords where I vibrate them so I sound like this.”

Joe bursts out laughing. “Whoa,” he says incredulously.

“I know,” Barry grins. “It’s cool.”

“Well,” Joe huffs, “you put that out there now, so…” he heaves a sigh of his own, “I…I just want to keep her safe.”

Caroline thumbs an old family photo, traces the soft line of Nora’s auburn hair to where it falls back over her shoulder. Joe often conflates the concepts of secrecy and safety. It comes from being a single dad, from having to make every decision by himself when they were growing up. Joe is a good dad—the best dad—but sometimes Caroline wants to scream at him that he doesn’t get to decide what’s right for everyone in their family anymore. Barry got to choose to become a hero. Iris deserves a chance to make the same choice for herself.

“Yeah,” Barry says, “but you know the only real way to get her to stop is to tell her the truth.”

“Man,” Joe narrows his eyes at him, scrutinizing, “you really want to tell her.”

“I tell her everything,” Barry points out.
“Not everything,” Joe retorts.

Caroline watches her brother make a futile attempt to pretend he has no idea what Joe meant by that. When he runs out of false starts and half-baked excuses, Barry slumps back against the support beam and deflates like a burst bubble. “Okay,” he says, “is it that obvious?”

“Not to her,” Caroline deadpans.

Barry pouts and turns back to Joe. “How long have you known for?” he asks.

“I have watched you be in love with Iris since before you were old enough to know what love is,” Joe answers with a smile, “and I’ve been waiting years for you to tell her, but you haven’t.”

Barry shrugs. “Guess I was too slow,” he says, “and now she’s happy with someone else, so…”

“When the universe wants to make something happen, whether it be giving a young man lightning speed…” Joe glances at Caroline and smiles wider, “…or giving a young woman power over forcefields, or putting two people together, it has a way of figuring those things out.”

Caroline snaps the family album closed and puts it back in the box. *Screw the universe*, she thinks. *I do what I want.*

---

Eobard wheels into the cortex to find Bette staring at her test results with her arms folded. Mac is sitting in her office with the door open just a crack. Eobard hopes that one day she might let him in, again. “I know change is hard,” he tells the sergeant, “the same accident that changed you put me in this chair.”

Bette flicks her gaze to him and the sympathy in her eyes makes him want to snuff her out. “Sorry,” she mumbles, “I didn’t know.”

“I don’t share that story with you to garner sympathy,” Eobard informs her, “only to illustrate a larger point.”

“What point is that?” Bette wants to know.

“I would do anything to get back what I lost,” Eobard points out sharply, “as would you.”

“I would,” Bette tells him softly, “I just don’t know how.”

“I do,” Eobard mutters, “you soldiers call yourselves sheepdogs, am I right?”

Bette nods, an abrupt descent of her chin. “Happy and normal until someone attacks our flock.”

“Well,” Eobard tells her, “every good person who was changed that night—people like you, people like Mackenzie Howell, people like Joan Williams, people like Barry Allen—those people are your flock now, Bette. General Eiling will never stop attacking that flock, and he always gets his target. Unless you stop him…” he folds his hands and leans forward in his chair, “…you know your duty, sergeant: kill Eiling. One last mission, and then you go home.”

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Mac corners Eobard the next morning with angry static fizzing in her hair. “I know Bette went after Eiling,” she says flatly, “I heard you talking to her last night. I know you think because you made us, you can break us, but you don’t get to take credit for who she is, or who I am, Doctor…” she curls her fingers around the handle of her cane until her knuckles are white and bloodless, “…I
want you to know we are who we are in spite of you, and someday I’m going to make you pay for what you’ve done, but right now I have to save her life.”

“Hey.” Cisco reaches out to stop Mac on her way out with a hand on her shoulder. “What—”

What was that about? is the question he was going to ask her, but it dies at the brush of his thumb against her bare clavicle. Cisco is suddenly thrown into a dark room full of fear that he can palpably feel, even though it’s not his. There’s a thin man with a hawkish nose, a sharp jawline, and high cheekbones—all angular features and arrogance. There’s also a woman who looks like Mac, but she’s not Mac: she has brown hair, she’s wearing a pastel dress with a peter pan collar that Mac wouldn’t be caught dead in, and she’s not using her powers to fight the man who is obviously about to rape her.

“I love you, Rose,” the thin man says.

When he starts to slip his hand up over her knee and under her skirt, Cisco swallows thickly and squeezes his eyes shut. Whatever is about to happen, he doesn’t want to see it.

“So?” Mac says, jolting him out of her memories. “Cisco, I know you just vibed me.”

Cisco blinks at her in shock as the sliding doors open and the elevator dings! in his periphery. “I…” he gulps. “What…”

“I’m sorry.” Mac shrugs his hand off her shoulder and hobbles into the elevator. “I promise we’ll talk about what you saw later, but if I don’t leave now, Bette will die.”

Bette’s plan is simple and inelegant: call Eiling to meet her at the waterfront, pretend to turn herself in, and blow him to smithereens. Barry arrives in time to try to talk her down, but he’s too slow to stop Eiling from shooting her. Mac is the one who changes the trajectory of the bullet.

It goes through the meat of Bette’s shoulder without puncturing one of her lungs. It’s still enough of a shock to make her completely lose control of her abilities.

“Barry,” Mac says as Bette passes out, “you need to run on water.”


“Bette is going to detonate,” Mac informs him as she texts Shawna to get Caroline, “we need to get her out to Russell Island. I own it, and no one is out there hunting or fishing today. If you get her there, I can probably contain the explosion. If not, no one dies and I lose an island. I’m okay with that, now go.”

Barry nods. “Cisco,” he says so Mac knows he’s talking over the radio and not to her, “can I run on water? I built up enough speed to run up a building. How fast do I need to go to run on water?”

When she teleports into the crime lab, Caroline looks at Shawna and huffs. “Human bomb?”

Shawna nods, curtly. “Human bomb.”

Caroline sighs and shuts her eyes. When she opens them again, she’s standing in the mud and Mac is trying to absorb the explosive charge that Bette is generating. Bette is glowing eerie purple; Mac is glowing electric blue. Caroline blinks at how weird this is before she shakes it off. “What’s the plan?” she asks.
“I’m trying to absorb the charge in her body so she won’t explode,” Mac informs her. “If that doesn’t work, I need you to create an airtight forcefield around us. No oxygen…” she turns to glare over her shoulder at Shawna, who’s filming this on her phone. “No explosion.”

Caroline folds her arms and shakes her head so fast she almost discombobulates herself. “No oxygen means you’ll die,” she points out.

“I know,” Mac tells her softly, “better me than an entire city.”

Then she smiles, and Bette explodes.

Barry is exhausted and emotionally drained by the time he goes home to Joe’s house and finds Caroline and Iris sitting at the dining room table. Iris is typing industriously on her laptop; Caroline is slumped over making Tina Belcher noises. Barry heaves an umpteenth sigh and folds himself into the chair next to his twin. “Iris,” he says her name softly, “writing about this stuff, putting your name out there, it’s dangerous. So I’m asking you one last time. Please, stop.”

Iris exhales a frustrated noise. “Okay,” she retorts, “and I am asking you one last time to tell me what is really going on with you. Why am I the only one who’s interested in this?”

“I guess…” Barry mumbles and glances down at Caroline, who’s side-eyeing him over the crook of one elbow, “…all this stuff with our family, I finally just put it behind me. I’m asking you to also.”

“Barry…” Iris shakes her head slowly, “…that may have been how this started, but it’s about something more than that for me now. Whoever this Streak is, I am not stopping until the rest of the world believes in him.”

Barry is quiet for a few excruciatingly long seconds before he slumps in his seat. “Maybe we shouldn’t see each other for a while,” he says quietly.

“Yeah,” Iris mutters in the hushed tone she uses whenever she’s trying not to cry.

“It’s Barry,” Caroline mumbles.

“What?” Iris asks.

“Carrie,” Barry says, “don’t.”

“I’m sorry.” Caroline flops back on her elbows until she isn’t hunched over the table or hiding her face. “I can’t lie to you anymore, Iris. It’s Barry,” she flicks her gaze to her brother over her shoulder and silences him with a look, “he’s the Streak.”
**Unstoppable Force (1) Absolute Submission Can Be a Form of Freedom**

Chapter Notes

**Warning**: HERE THERE BE SMUT, specifically light bondage, proper BDSM etiquette, explicit verbal negotiation and consent, breastplay, nipple play, cunnilingus, edging, face-fucking, throat fucking, and PIV sex from behind that inevitably gets interrupted by the plot because Len getting cockblocked by the plot is a constant in the multiverse. Beware.

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I was not burned at all, not even my hair was burned, from arousal to the rewards of sex, love, and attachment to be on fire and not be consumed and then progressively a special sort of chemistry, it sort of whooshed all over me. I was not burned at all, not even my hair was burned. It was blue light, you know, what they call electric blue. It was me.

Daphne Gottlieb, “Because You Are a Libra There Is a Cherub at the Gates with a Flaming Sword and the Point Is Just I Love You”

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**Shock Value**  
**Part 2**  
**Myth Can Make Reality More Intelligible**  
**Book II**  
**Lightning Doesn’t Strike Twice**  
**Chapter 44**  
Unstoppable Force  
(1 of 3)

“Love requires compassion, nurturing…and above all, submission.”

Diana of Themyscira  
*Wonder Woman* Vol.4, No.35 (“First Born”)  
November, 2014

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**I**  
Absolute Submission Can Be a Form of Freedom

Len turns on the Channel 52 news broadcast just as they replay the footage of the explosion that Shawna took on her phone. It goes viral before the general has a chance to lie his lilywhite ass off and claim the detonation that almost destroyed the Gem Cities was part of a routine weapons test. When he’s swarmed by reporters, Eiling is forced to give no comment because he knows he
fucked up and talking to the press is only going to make things worse for him.

“As you can see,” Libby Lawrence-Chambers says as they replay the footage again in slow motion, “Central City’s own Mackenzie Howell was somehow able to absorb the explosive charge from the unconscious Sgt. Sans Souci before she could do any real damage. Caroline Allen—a forensic photographer with the C. C. P. D.—outed herself as a metahuman in order to help contain the blast…”

Len interlaces his fingers and leans forward until his elbows are digging into the tops of his thighs as they cut to a live press conference being filmed at S. T. A. R. Labs. When he sees Mac sitting in her wheelchair behind a lectern, he exhales a raw sound that shakes through his whole body. She’s okay, he thinks, his heart thundering in his chest. She’s safe.

“Major General Wade Eiling has spent the past ten months holding Sgt. Sans Souci against her will and performing illegal experiments on her without her consent,” Mac says. “I understand the impulse to use our abilities for the greater good, but metahumans aren’t meant to be used. We are not things. We’re human beings who are capable of impossible things. When I said ‘better me than an entire city’…” she bites down on the inside of her cheek and forces herself to look at the camera, “…I meant I can survive an explosion that would destroy an entire city.”

Len closes his eyes and inhales a sharp breath. Mac is talking to the government officials who ordered Eiling to turn Bette into a human weapon, the same people who sanctioned Task Force X and repurposed Belle Reve as a prison for people with powers. Oh, she’s too smart to explicitly threaten the government, but she’s implicitly telling the people watching and listening I am bulletproof and explosion-proof and if you make a move against metahumankind you’re going to make a powerful enemy.

When she comes home, he’s been watching the same fifteen-minute breaking news broadcast for almost two hours. Mac barely has time to shuck her heavy coat before he cups her face in both hands and kisses her so urgently that her knees go weak. Len pins her up against the wall and kisses her hard, savoring the way she moans into his mouth and sweetly flicks her tongue against his while he kisses her harder. After he breaks the kiss to catch his breath, Mac nuzzles his nose with hers. Len presses his forehead against hers and exhales a frustrated noise. After all, he’s not mad at her for trying to stop an exploding woman from self-destructing and blowing up the Gem Cities in the process. What’s pissing him off isn’t really anything she did. It’s the dull, persistent feeling of powerlessness gnarling in his gut—and the overwhelming fear of losing her.

“I love you so much, sweetheart,” Len murmurs.

“I love you, too,” Mac tells him softly, “don’t worry. I know exactly what I’m doing.”

“Throwing shade at the government?” Len deadpans.

“That,” Mac whispers conspiratorially, “and saving our city.”

Len smirks at her. “I like the sound of that,” he drawls, “our city.”

Mac smiles as she wraps her arms around his neck and goes on tiptoe to give him a sweet, lingering kiss. “I know you hate feeling out of control,” she murmurs, “what if I gave you explicit permission to control me?”

Len smirks wider. “Go,” he orders in a low voice that makes her feel heated and shivery all at once, “take a long hot shower. When you get out, I want you to put on your strapless lace bra, that garter belt with the triangular straps, and those stockings that came in the mail yesterday—the
sheer ones with the vertical stripes—but no panties, sweetheart…” he strokes her cheek with his
thumb and leans in close to whisper in her ear, “…they’ll just get in the way.”

Mac flushes bright red at how specific his instructions were—he’s obviously planning to fulfill a
particular fantasy, and knowing that he’s been fantasizing about her for twenty-six years is enough
to make her feel gooey in all the right places. After she hangs the lingerie he picked out for her on
the back of the bathroom door and gets in the shower, the adrenaline from absorbing the explosive
charge fades away. Mac groans externally as she flops into her shower chair to wash her hair. At
least now she has better control of the electricity inside her body, so she doesn’t induce electrolysis
in water on contact with her skin. It’s a waste of energy that she could be using for other things,
actually.

When she emerges from the bathroom in her lingerie with her hair blown dry and twisted up into a
clip, Len is waiting in bed for her in his boxer briefs with a pile of dark blue silk cords. Mac arches
her eyebrows at him as she comes to sit in bed with her back against the pillows. “So that’s why the
strapless bra,” she deduces. “So you can take it off while my hands are tied.”

Len cocks his head and narrows his eyes at her, the cool heat in his gaze so intense that she flushes
brighter. “Have you ever done anything like this before?” he asks.

Mac shakes her head slowly. “What exactly do you want to do with me?” she wants to know.

Len takes one of her hands in his and holds her gaze while he strokes the inside of her wrist with
the rough pad of his thumb. “I want you tied up and spread open for me,” he tells her lowly, “I
want to keep you on the edge of coming for hours and tease you until you beg for more, and then I
want to make you come so many times that you won’t be able to walk tomorrow.”

“Well,” Mac smiles at him shyly, “I don’t have to work tomorrow. So…” she bites her bottom lip
and holds out her other hand like an offering, “…do your worst.”

Len smiles back and shakes his head. “Nah,” he deadpans, “I’m going to do my best. Now…” he
picks up one cord and winds it around the palm of his hand, “…hands behind your back,
sweetheart.”

Mac does what he wants and turns away from him while he winds the cord around her forearms
and deftly ties the first knot.

Len kisses the nape of her neck and gently sucks on the knob of bone there to make her moan.
“Okay,” he murmurs while he winds the cord around her upper arms and ties the second knot, “this
is called a box tie. I could use this tie to put you in something called a breast harness…” he ties a
third knot to secure the binding and thumbs the words tattooed on her shoulder, “…but you bruise
so easily that I doubt it would be comfortable for you. If the binding starts to hurt or you go numb,
you need to tell me. If you want to stop at any point, all you have to do is say the word and I’ll
stop. I don’t want to hurt you. I want you safe.”

Mac nods and flexes her arms to test the ropes as she turns around to lie back against the pillows
again. Oh, he hasn’t done anything except tie her arms behind her back and kiss her neck, but her
nipples are achingly hard. “I trust you,” she says. Like she means it.

Whenever she tells him that, his heart clenches horribly and a fragile warmth unfurls in his chest.
No one else has ever made him feel this way. Like he’s loved unconditionally. Like he deserves to
get everything he wants. Like he’s good enough.

Len cups her face in one hand to steal a quick kiss and tugs her bottom lip between her teeth before
he pulls away. “I trust you, too,” he drawls. “Now…” he glances down at her breasts and smirks because her hard pink nipples are visible through the soft lace cups of her strapless bra, “…spread your legs for me, sweetheart.”

Mac blushes while he ties her ankles to her thighs, the dark blue silk cords smooth on top of the nylon of her stockings, her body tingling with anticipation from the crown of her head to the tips of her toes. Len thumbs where the lace trim meets the softness of her inner thighs and kisses her neck. Mac exhales a soft noise through her nose while he takes his time licking and nipping and sucking on her delicate skin. Len kisses the hollow of her throat and nibbles on her collarbone, his cold hands lingering over her hips and the curve of her waist before he palms her breasts and squeezes them. Mac jolts at the sensation of the rough lace rubbing against her skin and whimpers at the first slow flick of his thumbs over her nipples. Len drags the cups of her bra down and grins at the sight of her naked breasts. Mac squirms and arches her back as the sweet ache of her arousal throbs all through her belly and thighs. It’s too much and not enough all at the same time.

“Len,” she whispers. “Please.”

“Yes,” Len hisses, drawing the sibilant out into obscenity before he lifts her breasts and squishes them together to tease her nipples with rough swipes of his tongue.

Mac closes her eyes and bites her bottom lip to muffle a squeak while he sucks on both of her nipples at once. Len pulls back to blow a puff of cool air on her heated skin before he shifts his focus to the soft parts of her breasts—sucking and biting to leave bruises in the shape of his mouth behind. Mac opens her eyes and heat coils tight below her belly at the sight of him nuzzling her flabby stomach.

Len smirks up at her as he gets comfortable between her legs. “I can see all of you,” he tells her smugly, “your pussy is twitching for me, and you’re dripping wet already, even though I’ve only been playing with your breasts for…” he glances at the watch he left on the bedside shelf, “…eleven minutes and thirty-four seconds. Why is that, hmm?”

Mac looks him in the eyes and licks her lips without thinking it through. “I love you,” she tells him softly, “and I’m yours.”

Len sucks in a sharp breath and swallows thickly at the mouthwatering smell of her arousal. Yeah, he thinks possessively, all mine. “I love you, too,” he says with slow vehemence.

When he strokes his thumbs into the creases of her thighs to spread her open and roughly flicks the flat of his tongue over her clit, Mac screams his name. Len hums low in his throat and that sound buzzes through her while he licks the plump lips of her labia with teasingly slow drags of his tongue. After that, he greedily licks her in broad strokes along her slit to her clit and sucks on the swollen nub before he shifts his focus and fucks her with his tongue. It goes on and on until he’s taken her to the edge of coming more times than she could possibly count…only to stop and start his sweet torture all over again.

Mac is trembling by the time he switches things up and slips one fingertip inside her without bothering to go in past the first knuckle. When he swirls it all around her achingly wet hole, she moans softly and bucks her hips to get more friction.

Len chuckles and that sound is enough to make her clench tight inside even as his fingertip slips out of her. When he sucks her slick off his fingertip with an obscenely wet pop, Mac whimpers. “You taste so good, sweetheart. You’re so wet…” he says. “You want my cock, hmm?”

“Yes,” Mac tells him breathlessly, “but I know you won’t give it to me.”
Len cocks his head and smirks at her before he puts one hand on the back of her neck and pulls her head down into his lap. “We’ll see about that,” he drawls.

Mac exhales a high sound through her nose as Len takes his cock out of his boxer briefs and rubs the blunt head of him against her cheek to smear his precome on her skin. When she delicately licks the ridge of his cockhead, he grabs her by the hair and tilts her head back.

“Oh, sweetheart…” Len murmurs, “…you’re so cute, but you’re not the one in control here. Now,” he holds her gaze and rubs the head of him against the softness of her lower lip, “open your mouth. I want to fuck your face.”

Mac looks up into his eyes while he slowly thrusts inside her mouth and moans around his girth as the head of him hits the back of her throat. Len grits his teeth around a low groan at the soft flick of her tongue against the underside of his shaft. When she hollows her cheeks out and sucks him as hard as she can, he fists his other hand in her hair and pulls her down on him until the tip of her nose brushes his dark pubic hair. Mac gags softly every time he thrusts so deep inside her mouth that his heavy sac bumps into her chin, but she’s not doing anything to make him stop being so rough. If the lewd noise she makes as she swallows the precome he’s been pouring down her throat is any indication, she’s enjoying this as much as he is.

“I’m gonna come in your mouth, sweetheart,” Len tells her as the buildup to his orgasm jolts at the base of his cock. “I want you to swallow it all like a good little slut, hmm?”

Mac hums low in her throat and sucks him harder. Len exhales a sharp guttural noise and comes so hard that his whole body shudders with the intensity of his orgasm. When he looks down at her, Mac lets him slip out of her mouth with a sloppy wet sound and squirms until she’s sitting back against the pillows again. There’s a string of saliva that stretches from her swollen red lips to his cock before it breaks. Len makes a raw noise that unfurls from somewhere deep in his chest and cups her face in both hands to kiss her thoroughly while he twitches and goes soft against his thigh.

There’s something about the taste of him lingering in her mouth that makes him feel satisfied in a way he never has before. Len makes a smug noise low in his throat and breaks the kiss. Mac is blushing all the way down to where the waistband of her garter belt meets her belly. Len grins at her before he belatedly unclasps her bra and buries his face between her breasts to lick the sweat-slick hollow between them. Mac kisses the crown of his head, softly. Len smooths his hands from the curve of her waist to grab her hips and give her a squeeze.

“I’m going to eat you out again,” he says with slow vehemence, “but no more teasing. I just want to make you feel the same way that you make me feel. Which is very, very good.”

Mac smiles at him and his thundering heart actually skips a beat. Len feels his cheeks flush hot and he smiles back at her as she spreads her legs for him.

When he puts his mouth on her again, Len keeps his word. There’s no more teasing—instead he uses his thumbs to spread her open and greedily lips at her slick folds while he flicks the flat of his tongue against her clit. After the first mindblowing orgasm he gives her blurs into a second and a softer third, he curls two fingers inside of her to feel her clench tight around them and thumbs her clit gently. When she doesn’t tell him to stop, he pulls back to meticulously stipple her inner thighs with tingling kisses and roughly swipes his thumb back and forth over her clit while he fucks her with his fingers. Mac arches her back and moans his name and suddenly all he wants is to be inside of her, to get as close to her as possible.

Len makes her come three more times before she squirms back against the pillows and tells him to stop. Mac closes her eyes and winces at how oversensitized her clit is. Len sucks her slick off his
fingers and plucks a tissue from the box on the bedside shelf to wipe her tears and drool away before he kisses her with the taste of her arousal on his lips.

“I think we just came full circle,” he deadpans.

Mac snorts at the bad pun. “I need a glass of water,” she says. “Please.”

Actually—now that he thinks about it—he needs a glass of water too. After three and a half hours of intense foreplay, his throat is dry and his lower jaw aches from eating her out for so long. Len smirks and licks the corner of his lips where the taste of her lingers. I regret nothing, he thinks.

“Sure,” he drawls, “can do.”

Len undoes the knots binding her ankles to her thighs and leaves her to stretch her legs while he gets two glasses of water from the kitchen. Mac arches her eyebrows at him because he holds her glass of water for her and watches her drink it through neon green bendy straw instead of untying the knots binding her hands behind her back.

“Your joints okay?” he asks her softly.

Mac nods, a quick bob of her head. “I’m not in any more pain than usual,” she informs him, “don’t worry.”

Len huffs. “I don’t want you to be in pain at all,” he says.

Mac shrugs with one shoulder and gives him a heartbreakingly fragile smile. “I love you,” she tells him shakily. Like she’s about to cry.

Len exhales a raw noise and puts the empty glasses on the bedside shelf before he kisses her again. “I love you, too,” he tells her fervently.

After that, he orders her to stick her ass out for him because he wants to fuck her from behind. Len teases her by rubbing the blunt head of his cock against her to make her squirm and beg for more before he grabs her by the hips and thrusts all the way inside of her in one hard stroke. Mac moans out loud as his cock bumps her cervix and he does something with his hips to grind the head of him against the deepest part of her that he can reach. When he’s balls deep in her, her phone buzzes and warbles the opening verse of “Bird Set Free” by Sia.

Len grits his teeth around a frustrated noise before he grabs her phone and answers it. “Sara,” he drawls, “Mac is kind of tied up right now—”

Sara arches her eyebrows at him and he can feel it over the phone even though he can’t see her. “Wait,” she says, “do you literally mean that she let you tie her up and do unspeakable things to her?”

“Yeah,” Len smirks and she can hear the smugness in his voice, “that’s exactly what I mean. Now, it was nice talking to you, Sara, but Mac and I are busy working out a few kinks—”

Sara rolls her eyes at him so hard that he can feel her doing that over the phone, too. “Snart,” she says, “you need to tell Mac that Laurel told Cisco where she lives and he’s coming over to talk to her about something. I suggest you work out your kinks before he shows up.”

Mac exhales a soft whoosh of air that fogs up her glasses as Len reluctantly undoes the knots binding her arms behind her back. “Okay,” she says, eking the oh sound out into an ooh, “I did not see that coming.”
Len exhales a frustrated noise as Mac re-emerges from the ensuite bathroom in panties and a more comfortable bra—one without lace or frills or underwire. “I don’t understand why this is such a big deal,” he drawls. “Cisco seems like a pretty cool kid. I doubt he’s going to call the cops if he sees me in your house and finds out we’re living together.”

Mac exhales with enough force to flap her lips as she pulls on a pair of leggings. “Cisco pointed a gun at you the last time he saw you,” she points out.

“Yeah,” Len snarks back, “but he was bluffing. I think we both know he couldn’t have shot me if he wanted to, hmm?”

“Cisco built your gun to kill speedsters,” Mac retorts. “Just because he’s not a killer now doesn’t mean he isn’t capable of becoming one in the future.”

After all, it was his idea to force Griffin Grey to use his abilities until the eighteen-year-old metahuman overdid it and died of old age. If that’s not premeditated murder, it’s close enough for her.[355]

Len arches his eyebrows at her. “Mac,” he says her name in his softest, most serious voice, “does something happen between me and Cisco in the future that I should know about?”

Mac shakes her head slowly as she yanks on a floral print sweatshirt and hobbles over to the dresser to grab a pair of fuzzy black socks. “No,” she huffs. “Not that I would know, because I’ve changed the past to the point that I have no idea what’s going to happen next. I do know it isn’t the right time to tell my friends that I’m dating a wanted criminal.”

Len cocks his head in concession and frowns because he knows she’s right, but that doesn’t stop the twinge insecurity that lurches from his stomach into his chest. “Yeah,” he drawls with forced nonchalance, “you don’t want anyone to know about us because loving me makes you look bad. I
Mac heaves a sigh. “I don’t want anyone to know about us because you’re living in domestic quasi-bliss with me instead of skipping town after you derailed a train full of people. If the cops figure that out, they could arrest you,” she informs him, “and I can’t tell my friends about you because I let you get your hands on a superweapon that can kill speedsters so you might be able to protect yourself when my ex-fiancée inevitably tries to kill you. If they knew that I let a janitor steal from us because I love you, they would never trust me again.”

Len huffs and folds his arms. “I love you, too,” he tells her petulantly.

Mac hobbles over to where he’s sitting on the edge of the bed and cups his face in both hands. Len closes his eyes and exhales a soft noise before he covers the back of one of her warm hands with one of his cold palms and kisses the inside of her wrist; the heel of her hand; the hollow of her palm. Mac thumbs the stubble on his jawline as she slants her mouth over his to give him a kiss so hot that her glasses are fogged up when she breaks the kiss and nuzzles his nose with hers.

“It’s not about you,” she informs him softly. “It’s about me. I need S. T. A. R. Labs to change the future and create a better world…and I need friends who understand that impulse, too.”

“Okay,” Len glances down at himself and sighs because he’s still half-hard and totally naked, “but what exactly do you expect me to do while Cisco is here? ’Cause I’m telling you right now: I’m not gonna hide in the closet or under your bed.”


Len cocks his head and narrows his eyes at her. “I thought I wasn’t supposed to go in there,” he says.

Mac snorts. “I’m not Bluebeard,” she retorts, “there’s nowhere you can’t go. It’s your house, too.”

Len cups her face in his other hand and strokes her cheekbone with his thumb before he leans in and steals a quick, possessive kiss. “It’s my home,” he says with slow vehemence. “If home is where the heart is, then my home has always been here with you.”

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One Week Later

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Cisco has been lowkey avoiding Mac ever since she explained to him that one aspect of his vibrokinetics is the pseudo-psychometric ability to access sense memory from alternate timelines and parallel universes by touch. Mac tells herself he’s just being a good friend, that he doesn’t want to invade her privacy by accident, but he can’t look her in the eye and he won’t tell her what he saw. Cisco, for his part, saw a memory from the retconned future where Eobard held her hostage for days before he killed her and ran back in time to crash her father’s car. Only he doesn’t have any context for that memory. So all he knows is that one of his best friends was raped and he found out about it without her consent. So now he feels guilty and he doesn’t even know whether he should apologize or not—because it’s not like he vibed her on purpose. So he’s giving her space because he don’t know what else to do in this situation.

Iris, meanwhile, has spent the past week oscillating between giving everyone who kept her out of the loop the silent treatment and expressing her anger by eloquently telling everyone that they fucked up. Oh, she’s forgiven Caroline (who told her the truth), Mac (who still isn’t telling her
everything, but that particular secret wasn’t hers to tell), Cisco (likewise, not his secret to share), and Caitlin (who apologized so profusely that she couldn’t stay mad at her). Barry and Joe are still on her shit list, though.

Barry has been spending most of his nights running around the city rescuing stray kittens from trees and helping old ladies cross the street and performing other feats of heroism. Iris is still moderating her blog, *The Streak Lives*, even though she hasn’t posted anything herself since she found out her best friend is the scarlet speedster—and he wants to show her that he’s still the hero who inspired her to start a blog in the first place. After he runs to help the cops apprehend a carjacker and saves a grade schooler who’s inexplicably walking alone in the street after dark from getting hit by the stolen Humvee, he bites off more than he can chew because the carjacker is a metahuman with the ability to turn his skin into organic metal. When he punches the carjacker in the face, Barry fractures his hand and gets sucker punched before he speeds away.

When he collapses in the cortex, the only person there is Lily—who sees Barry on the floor without his mask and immediately deduces that he’s the Flash. Mac emerges from her office just as Cisco, Caitlin, and Eobard make their entrance. When she tries to touch his cracked ribs, Barry groans and curls up defensively. Which only makes the pain worse. Caitlin rushes to his side and starts palpating his chest to check for injuries while Cisco grabs a gurney from the closet full of medical supplies and wheels it over. Eobard sits back and watches as Lily—who’s small but mighty—helps them lift Barry onto the gurney.

It takes all four of them to reset his broken fingers before they start to heal wrong. Caitlin takes a full-body CT scan to assess the extent of the damage.

“Thirteen fractures,” she informs Barry as she stabilizes his fingers, “that’s a new record, and that’s just in your hand—you also have a concussion, three cracked ribs, and a bruised spleen. So even with your powers, you’ll need a few hours to heal.”

“So,” Lily ekes the *oh* sound out awkwardly, “you’re the Streak.”

“Yeah,” Barry says, “it’s kind of a long story.”

“Barry got struck by lightning the night the particle accelerator exploded,” Caitlin explains, “and the dark matter gave him the ability to run faster than the speed of sound.”

“Apparently not that long,” Cisco quips.[356]

“What exactly did you hit?” Eobard wants to know.

“A man,” Barry rasps. “A big, bad man…” he glances at Mac before he elaborates, “…his skin changed when I hit him. Like, it turned to metal.”

“I’m guessing your bad guy was a metahuman with biometal physiology,” Mac informs him, “the ability to alter his integumentary system and turn his epidermis into armor.”

Barry nods, his head bobbling slowly. Cisco frowns at him. “So you went after a metahuman alone,” he deduces. “Dude, why didn’t you call us?”

“I didn’t know what he was,” Barry winces through the pain as he sits up, “but the strange thing is, I feel like I knew him.”

“What do you mean?” Lily asks.

Barry shakes his head to clear the foggy sensation of the sedative Caitlin gave him. “I don’t know,”
he says, “he said something that was familiar, but he’s going to hurt someone if we don’t stop him. So how do I fight a guy who’s made of steel?”

“We will find a way,” Eobard tells him, “but tonight, you heal.”

“Yeah,” Barry mumbles as he flops back onto the gurney, “sounds good.”

Barry is late to the debriefing at the precinct the next morning. When he shuffles into the captain’s office, Eddie smiles and offers him a to-go cup of coffee. “Iris told me you drink espresso,” he says, “extra foam, just the way you like it.”

“Thanks,” Barry says. Eddie is such a good guy that it gets harder to hate him every day. Although it kills him to admit it, Barry understands what Iris sees in the detective: he’s sweet, and thoughtful, and he has a great smile…

Wait, Barry thinks. What?

“So pleased you could join us, Mr. Allen,” Captain Singh says, “rough night?”

“Uh,” Barry mumbles, “just a little beat, sir.”

Singh glances at Caroline, whose ensuing shrug is a nonverbal don’t look at me, sir, I’m not my brother’s keeper. “As I was saying,” he says, “our perp yanked three ATMs after he boosted the vehicle. ATM security cameras caught him on video. We got a hit on the database. Tony Woodward…”

Barry flinches at the name and frowns as familiarity churns nauseously in his stomach.

“…he’s got a history of violence, petty theft, assault, going all the way back to juvie,” Singh informs them. “Dropped off the radar ten months ago. Looks like he’s back.”

“Looks like you were born to take a beating, Allen,” Tony had said. It’s the same thing he said to him last night. Looks like he hasn’t changed in the past fourteen years.


“Yeah,” Barry tells him. Eddie smiles at him again before he leaves the office. Barry tries to ignore the way his heart skips a beat as he turns to face his twin. “Hey,” he says, “do you remember him? Tony Woodward?”

Caroline nods. “I got suspended for breaking his arm in two places after he pushed you into the lockers and dislocated your elbow,” she says, “but he never touched you again.”

“Until last night,” Barry says. “When I found out he’s a metahuman. Cisco didn’t tell you?”

“Nope,” Caroline says, popping the p sound. “I’m still not talking to him.”

Barry side-eyes her. “Cisco just thinks you should be using your abilities to help people,” he points out, “and for the record: he’s not the only one who does.”

Caroline huffs. “I do help people,” she retorts, “the evidence that I find helps put criminals away for good. I’m a forensic photographer, not a vigilante. Okay?”

Barry knows better than to argue with his sister. “Okay,” he says.
After Captain Singh returns from his coffee break and shoos the twins out of his office, Barry finds Eddie waiting for him in the bullpen. Caroline retreats back upstairs to the crime lab while Barry talks to him.

“Listen,” Eddie says, “I saw something last night that I just can’t get my head around. I fired a dozen rounds at our car thief, and it was like they sparked off him. What if he’s like Mac Howell, a…”

“Mac calls herself a fulgurkinetic,” Barry supplies, “fulgur is a form of the Latin verb ‘fulgeō.’”

“Okay,” Eddie says, “what does that mean?”

Barry smiles more to himself than Eddie as something occurs to him. “It means ‘to flash,’” he says.

Iris walks into the bullpen and breaks the awkward silence between them. “Hey, Barry,” she says, acknowledging him with a harsh edge in her voice that softens as she turns to Eddie. “Hi, babe. I saw the news…” she reaches out to squeeze his shoulder and smooths her hand down over his upper arm to feel him solid and safe before she takes his hand in hers, “…are you okay?”

Eddie smiles at her, wide and warm, and squeezes her fingers. “Yeah,” he tells her softly, “I’m fine.”

“So,” Iris says, “I heard the Streak saved a kid last night. Any comment, detective?”

Barry perks up. If she’s still investigating the Streak phenomena, she still believes in him—and that means there’s still hope.

“All I know is our perp got away,” Eddie says, “but Barry here is going to help me find him.”

“Yeah,” Barry says hopefully.

“Fine,” Iris huffs, but there’s no anger or heat in her voice. None that’s meant for Eddie, anyway. “I have other sources…” she leans in to give him a quick kiss, “…I will see you tonight. Bye.”

Barry watches her go and tries to hide how disappointed he is that she doesn’t even look back to glance at him on her way out.

“Bye,” Eddie says, the softness in his tone nothing short of besotted. When she’s gone, he turns and arches his eyebrows at Barry. “What is going on with you two?” he asks.

“What do you mean?” Barry hedges. “Nothing. It’s fine. It’s—” he backs into the door and jolts before he awkwardly careens around it to escape from this line of questioning. “I don’t know.”

Eddie shakes his head incredulously. “Okay…” he mutters under his breath as he walks away.

Eobard is wheeling towards the elevator when the sliding doors open to reveal Joe standing there.

“Dr. Wells,” he says, not unpleasantly.

Eobard narrows his eyes at the detective. “I guess you heard about Barry’s incident last night,” he says. “If you’re looking for him, I think he’s at the station.”

“I actually came here to see you,” Joe informs him. “I need your help solving an old case of mine.”

Eobard folds his arms. “What case is that?” he wants to know.
“Nora Allen’s case,” Joe says, “the murder of Caroline and Barry’s mother.”

Barry returns to S. T. A. R. Labs on his lunch break to see if they’ve figured out a way to help him fight Tony yet. Cisco has spent most of the morning with Syd building a robot for that specific purpose. Caitlin, meanwhile, has been working on her own research because at this point there’s not much she can do without a skin sample. Lily is filling orders for power damper bracelets while Mac types something with one hand and spoons homemade vegetable minestrone into her mouth with the other.

“So,” Cisco says, “your childhood nemesis is now an unstoppable metahuman. That is seriously messed up.”

“I had a childhood nemesis,” Caitlin says as she sips her latte, “Lexi La Roche. She used to put gum in my hair.”

“Jake Puckett,” Cisco adds. “If I didn’t let him copy my homework, he’d give me a swirly.”

“Summer Day.”[357] Lily heaves a sigh. “Seriously, that was her name. She made me give her my sack lunches and I had to eat the gross cafeteria food every day for five years, but I dated her sister Doreen in high school, so I win.”

Caitlin frowns, the space between her eyebrows furrowing. Ronnie’s college sweetheart was named Doreen Day.[358] That can’t be a coincidence. When jealousy unfurls in her chest, it comes with a twinge of guilt because Caitlin doesn’t know if she’s jealous of Doreen because of Ronnie or because of Lily.

“I didn’t have one bully,” Mac says. “It was more a group of mean girls who hated me…they’d pinch me wherever they thought I needed to lose weight and they stole my clothes from my gym locker until I started to wear my sweats to school every day.”

Caitlin reaches out to squeeze Mac’s shoulder with her palm still warm from her coffee mug. Mac covers the back of Caitlin’s hand with her fingers and squeezes back.

“Okay,” Barry huffs, “now that we’ve established we’re all über-nerds, what are we gonna do about Tony?”

“Glad you asked,” Cisco tells him with a grin, “we’re going to train you, man. Karate Kid style.”

Mac hobbles out of the training room and into the cortex to find Joe talking to Eobard about the murder of Nora Allen. There are pictures of the murder scene on the screens that hang from the ceiling and some of the ones bolted to the walls—a murder scene that Eobard made to frame a man for the murder of his wife.

Oh, she thinks as she flops into her chair and scoots out from behind the desk, the irony.

“Barry described a tornado of red and yellow lightning,” Joe says, “and inside there was a man in yellow. Then, bam! Suddenly he’s blocks away on the street. Doesn’t know how he got there. When I arrived, the place was a wreck.”

“Nora Allen was dead,” Eobard says and only Mac knows him well enough to hear the hint of smugness in his voice.

Joe nods, curtly. “Single stab wound to the heart,” he clarifies, “and Henry Allen was covered in
“So despite all the evidence that Henry Allen is guilty,” Eobard says, “now you believe this man in yellow is responsible?”

“Last night, I saw Barry rescue a young boy from being run over,” Joe tells him, “and it looked exactly like what Barry described as happening to him that night. It got me thinking. What if somebody with Barry’s abilities killed Nora?”

Eobard narrows his eyes at the detective. “There’s just one flaw with your theory,” he says, wheeling forward to gesticulate at the photographic evidence on the screens, “all of this happened almost fifteen years ago. Which is long before—”

“Your machine gave Barry his powers,” Joe supplies.

“No,” Eobard retorts, “an accident gave Barry his powers.”

Mac bites down on the inside of her cheek to stifle a snort.

“Ms. Howell,” Joe acknowledges her with a nod, “you didn’t get your abilities from the particle accelerator. If what you said in the interviews you’ve given is true, you’ve had them for over twenty years. I think it’s possible that somebody with superspeed could have existed before the explosion. What do you think, Dr. Wells?”

“I deal in probabilities,” Eobard says, “as a scientist, and in this case…” he pauses to shake his head, “…it’s highly unlikely.”

Mac exhales a soft whoosh of air as she watches him wheel out of the cortex. Welp, she thinks as raw fear pulses through her chest.

Joe files away the way her shoulders tense as the doctor zooms past her chair for future reference. “Barry told me that you said the same man in yellow crashed your biological parents’ car and caused the accident that gave you your abilities,” he says, “but I can’t find anything about your accident besides an old newspaper article and their obituaries.”

“Yes,” Mac murmurs the word and fizzles out on the sibilant, “and there’s a reason for that.”

Joe sighs. “Why do I get the feeling you’re not gonna tell me what that reason is?” he asks.

“Probably because you’re a good detective,” Mac tells him. “I just hope you’re good enough to figure this out before anybody else gets hurt.”
Barry gets his ass kicked by the robot Cisco built, and Caitlin pops his dislocated shoulder back into place before he goes to investigate a lead with Eddie. When he arrives on the scene, Caroline is taking interior shots of the Humvee that Tony stole the night before.

Eddie shakes his head on their way to get a closer look at the goldenrod monstrosity of a vehicle. “Barry,” he says, “you really need a car.”

Barry stuffs his hands into the pockets of his sweater and shrugs. “I usually manage on foot okay,” he says before he gently taps his sister on the shoulder and asks, “what have we got?”

Caroline adjusts her zoom and turns to show Barry what she found. “This is the rig Tony boosted last night,” she informs him. “There’s mud he must’ve tracked into the car. It’s possible we might be able to find out where he’s been, and figure out where he’s going.”

“No sign of the stolen ATMs,” Eddie adds, “he’s probably got ’em where he’s holed up. Though he’s going to have a hell of a time breaking ’em open.”

Caroline snorts. “I wouldn’t be so sure,” she mutters, “he is made of metal.”

Barry crouches to open his forensics kit. Caroline swipes a pair of latex gloves and goes to collect the bullets she found on the floor of the Humvee. Barry holds an evidence bag open for her and he zips it closed as she walks back to her Buick.

“So…” Eddie says, trying to sound nonchalant and failing epically, “about you and Iris…”

Barry groans internally. “Look,” he retorts, “we had a fight, and I just don’t really feel comfortable talking about it with you.”
“I get that, and I get that you two go way back,” Eddie tells him sincerely, “to be honest, I was a little threatened by you at first.”

Barry raises his eyebrows high enough to crumple his forehead. “Wait,” he says, “you were threatened by me?”

“Sure,” Eddie says, “I mean, I’ve seen how close you are, and you’re such a great guy, and in my experience, good friends are hard to find.”

Barry is struck by how much Eddie sounds like he means that. After all, he barely tolerates the guy and it’s not like he’s exactly been subtle about it. Only now he’s starting to get why Iris fell for him, and why she’s fighting for him even though Joe doesn’t approve. If she has to end up with someone else, Barry is startled to realize he’s happy that it’s someone like Eddie. Someone honest. Someone who’s brave enough to express his feelings. Someone who’d be a good friend if Barry gave him half a chance.

After one of the officers comes to tell him they found the owner of the Humvee, Eddie smiles at Barry. Oh, it’s not sublime…but it makes his heart flip.

“So, what do you think?” Eddie asks.

It takes a second for Barry to remember they’re talking about the case, not whatever is going on between them. “Judging by the mud and these kegs, I’d say he got hammered, stole a big-ass truck, and went joyriding,” he answers. “I bet they’re stolen too. Rusty Iron Ale, it’s a microbrewery right over in…”

“Keystone.” Eddie nods, succinctly. “I know the place. Let’s check it out.”

After she made the choice to stop pushing the people who matter to her away, Mac started to meet Laurel and Sara at Jitters for coffee every Wednesday afternoon. There’s an unspoken rule that none of their girlfriends or boyfriends are invited, because that could escalate into something conspicuous. After all, their entire “squad” consists of dozens of people: the Gorgonites, the Birds of Prey, and the multitude of metahumans who see Mac on a weekly basis.

“It’s excessive,” Mac says incredulously, “the amount of friends that I have is excessive. What the hell.”

“Well…” Laurel grins at her over the porcelain rim of her coffee mug, “…that’s what happens when your only hobby is saving the world one person at a time.”

Mac snorts. “I have other hobbies,” she retorts, “I watch a lot of shows—although for some reason a significant chunk of the shows that existed on Earth-33 don’t exist here—and I read.”

Laurel cocks her head in concession. Sara sips her dirty chai latte and glances at her sister. “I know you can’t discuss your cases,” she says, “but is the evidence Lisa gathered on Santini’s goons enough to convict them?”

“Yeah,” Laurel nods, a sharp descent of her chin, “but it won’t be long before Santini notices where the evidence is coming from. I’ve been trying to keep our office from publicizing the arrests, but I can’t explain that my informant cut an illegal deal to get admissible evidence—”

“I didn’t,” Mac informs her. “Santini conducts a bidding war every three years with shell corporations owned and operated by people in his organization. There’s a secrecy clause in his business agreements that explicitly requires the buyer not to disclose their identity to the seller, for
“Santini is the one who assumed all of the buyers were people he trusts,” Laurel realizes, “you can’t be arrested for that assumption.”

Mac nods as she muffles a yawn in the hollow of one palm. “What I’m running is a sting operation,” she clarifies, “but it’s not entrapment because I’m not in law enforcement. I’m 97% sure I haven’t done anything illegal, but if I’m wrong, I’m 100% sure they’ll give me immunity once the case against Santini finally goes to trial. What I need you to do is keep the goons we’ve caught from getting immunity in exchange for testifying against their boss. I don’t just want to take down Santini. I want to obliterate his entire organization.”

“Should we even be talking about this in public?” Laurel wants to know.

Sara glances at the other tables, but one is empty and the other is occupied by someone on their laptop who’s too busy watching How It Should Have Ended on YouTube to pay attention to their conversation. “Nyssa, Lisa, and I were talking about how to kill someone without getting caught,” she murmurs, “and the people at the table next to our booth thought we were discussing that new Shonda Rhimes show.[360] I doubt that anyone who overhears us talking about murder and mayhem is going to think we’re discussing the real thing.”

“It helps that we’re women,” Laurel points out, “women are nothing if not overlooked and underestimated.”

“Yeah,” Sara says, “but that’s what makes us dangerous.”

Mac takes a sip of her mocha and exhales a soft happy sigh at the feeling of warmth in her belly, a warmth that fades because Tony Woodward is advancing toward the counter—too close to Iris for comfort. Laurel narrows her eyes at him as Mac scoots her chair back and uses her cane to get back on her feet.

“How did you know I was here?” Iris wants to know.

“I’ve been reading up on the Streak,” Tony explains, “found your little blog. Why are you writing about this guy?”

Iris looks at him and sets her jaw, unflinching. “People say that he’s a hero,” she says.

“I say he’s a coward, and I happen to know he took a beating last night and ran off like a little girl,” Tony retorts, “you should write about that.”

Mac hobbles over to the counter as Iris tries to back away from him. Tony flirts like a guy who’s never bothered to develop any game because some women are inexplicably into guys with anger issues and six-pack abs, and he decided to roll with that instead. It doesn’t even occur to him that Iris isn’t interested.

Tony leans on the counter like he spent a lot of time slouching against a locker Jordan Catalano[361] style in high school. “So,” he says, “do you have any idea who leather boy is?”

“No clue,” Iris tells him with a fake lightness in her voice that she uses whenever she deals with difficult customers, “and if you don’t want a drink, I should probably get back to work.”

“Actually,” Tony says, “I’d prefer to buy you a drink. What time do you get off?”

“Thanks,” Iris fizzes out awkwardly on the sibilant, “but I don’t think my boyfriend would
“I never did like cops much,” Tony mutters in a vaguely menacing tone.

“Well,” Iris flicks her gaze to the news broadcast playing on the flatscreen in one corner of the coffee shop that’s been interrupted by an alert about Tony, “he’s picking me up for the policeman’s ball, wall to wall cops, can’t swing a cat…” she extracts her phone from her pocket and wipes her thumb across the screen as she babbles, “…I should probably call him to see where he is—”

“Give me the phone, Iris,” Tony snarls and grabs her by the wrist as the skin of his right arm turns to metal from fingertips to elbow. “Now!”

Mac puts her hand on his forearm. Tony jolts, galvanized. Mac generates a pulse that zings through his arm and forces herself to look him in the eyes. “With the right electromagnetic resonance,” she says flatly, “I can shatter metal. I suggest you take your hand off my friend. Unless you want to find out what resonant frequency will shatter you.”

Tony glances at Iris, who’s visibly shaken, and looks down at the floor like he feels guilty for scaring her—ashamed of himself, even. “We’ll pick this up some other time,” he says, and stuffs a wad of cash into the tip jar before he leaves.

Caroline brings a sample of the gravel that Barry collected from the Humvee to S. T. A. R. Labs on her lunch break, but instead of texting Cisco to ask what he wants to eat like she always has before, she doesn’t get takeout to give herself an excuse to leave as soon as she drops the evidence off. Cisco has other ideas. When she walks into the cortex, the smell of takeout from the *Ghost Dragon*—her favorite Chinese restaurant—floats up from the paper boxes festooned over a desk set like a table: spring rolls, cold sesame noodles, steamed dumplings, and crab rangoon. When he sees her, Cisco is noisily drinking a slushy through a straw and he keeps slurping even as she sits in the chair across from him. Caroline folds her arms and arches her eyebrows at him in a nonverbal *What the hell is this?* while he puts his drink aside.

“I’m sorry,” he says, “I shouldn’t’ve said your job with the C. C. P. D. wasn’t more important than what we’re doing here with Barry. It’s just that every time we help someone, or stop a bad metahuman, I wish you were here with us…” he smiles as she meticulously splits her chopsticks, “…and I guess I just don’t get why you don’t wanna be part of the team.”

Caroline huffs and eats a few bites of one spring roll before she responds. “Barry has always been working to get Dad out of prison,” she murmurs, “and what you’re doing is a way for him to finally make that happen. I’m not saying he doesn’t genuinely want to help people, because I know he does…” she pauses to finish her spring roll before she adds, “…but I won’t apologize for doing this my way.”

“Okay.” Cisco nods, bobbing his head while he takes another slurp of his slushy. “I’m not going to make you suit up and be a vigilante if that’s not your jam. I just…” he looks down at his drink and mumbles, “…miss you. When you’re not here, it feels like you should be, and I miss you.”

Caroline has a sudden vivid impulse to put herself in his lap and kiss him, but instead she blushes from her ears to the tops of her breasts.

Fact: Cisco has been living in her guestroom for a month now while he looks for a new apartment. It should be temporary, but they both know he isn’t her guest anymore.
Fact: they see each other almost every morning and most nights, and he shouldn’t have a chance to miss her, but he does.

Fact: Caroline doesn’t want him to leave.

“What would my codename be?” she blurts to break the loudest stretch of silence that she’s ever heard.

“Okay,” Cisco grins at her and shows off the adorable gaps between his teeth, “you have no idea how tempted I was to call you ‘the Force’—because if Barry’s the speed part of the equation, then you’re obviously the force, and it’s a Star Wars reference—but I think your codename should be Impact.”

Caroline tilts her head and narrows her eyes at him behind her glasses. “Why?” she wants to know.

“Um,” Cisco shrugs, trying to play it cool, “because the impact you’ve had on me is the reason I started doing this. I came to S. T. A. R. Labs to help people, but I never thought I’d be helping a superhero, and I wouldn’t have known it was possible to be my own hero if I never met you and Iris and Barry. Caroline, you don’t need to be a vigilante…” he smiles without showcasing his teeth and looks at her so seriously that she almost looks away, “…you’re already a hero to me.”

After he finds out what happened at Jitters later that night, Barry rushes in like a fool to fight Tony alone. Caroline, Cisco, and Caitlin find him unconscious at the abandoned warehouse that was Keystone Ironworks before the particle accelerator exploded with his broken leg trying to heal around his exposed femur. Lily has to help Caitlin rebreak a dozen of his bones and reset them so they won’t heal wrong. Barry isn’t fully conscious for a few rough hours while they do their work.

Eobard is seething by the time the once and future Flash wakes up the next morning with his impressive collection of injuries almost completely healed. “What were you thinking?” he shouts. “What were you thinking? I told you that we would figure out a way to deal with him.”

“I’ll heal,” Barry points out.

Eobard scoffs. “Mr. Allen,” he says flatly, “you can’t heal when you’re dead, and he could have killed you.”

“I know, all right? I know!” Barry shouts as he storms out of the bed in the med bay to pace haphazardly around the cortex. “In the past thirty-six hours, I’ve had my ass handed to me twice by the guy who tortured me as a kid! I couldn’t stop him then, and I can’t stop him now! I have superpowers, but I’m still powerless against him.”

“Not necessarily,” Mac informs him. “Any material that you strike at a high enough velocity can be compromised, including the metal Tony is made of.”

“I ran an analysis of the metal in Girder’s footprint,” Cisco explains, “based on its density and atomic structure, if you…” he glances at Caroline, who’s still conked out in the other bed in the med bay, and smiles to himself, “…impact him at just the right angle, at just the right speed, you could do some serious damage.”

“How fast would I have to go?” Barry wants to know.

“If you factor in the metal’s tensile strength, estimated dermal thickness, atmospheric pressure, air temp—” Cisco does the calculations again to check his accuracy before he says, “—you’d have to hit Girder at approximately Mach 1.1.”
“Wait,” Caitlin gives him an incredulous look, “you want Barry to hit something at eight hundred miles an hour?”

“Mach 1.1 is eight hundred and thirty-seven miles an hour,” Lily says, “approximately.”

“Which is faster than the speed of sound,” Mac adds.

“I know,” Cisco flaps one of his hands excitedly, “he would create a sonic boom. Which, as I’ve said before, would be awesome.”

“I’ve never gone that fast,” Barry points out.

“Yet,” Eobard mutters.

“I can’t believe we’re actually entertaining this idea,” Caitlin says, her voice pitching higher in distress. “I mean, he’d need a straight shot from miles away.”

“Yeah,” Cisco says, “five-point-three miles, theoretically.”

“Do it right and you’ll take him down,” Eobard says.

“Do it wrong and you’ll shatter every bone in your body,” Mac deadpans.


[360] *How to Get Away with Murder* 1x01 (“Pilot”) 25 September 2014. It premiered before the events of the pilot episode of *The Flash*. Its midseason finale aired two days after the episode I’m rewriting in this chapter did.


Barry speeds to the precinct before his work day begins at ten in the morning because despite the plethora of injuries he’s sustained in the past thirty-six hours, he needs his assistantship—and, of course, the paycheck that comes with it.

Joe catches him at the foot of one of the staircases the leads to the second floor, where the crime lab is waiting. “Barry,” he says.

Barry heaves a sigh and stops with his back to the detective. “Joe, I’ve been beaten up enough for one day,” he says in a voice that oozes with exhaustion and glances up the stairs, “I gotta…”

“Hey, wait,” Joe says as Barry slumps and turns to face him with a wince as he jostles his cracked ribs, “an anonymous tip led us to Tony Woodward’s hideout last night and the place was trashed. What happened?”

“Tony showed up at Jitters to see Iris,” Barry informs him sharply. “I had to go after him.”

“Iris…” Joe fizzes out and looks at Barry, wide-eyed. “Where is she?”
Barry heaves another sigh and squares his shoulders in a futile attempt to shake off the tension in them. “Iris is fine,” he says, “Eddie put a detail on her to be safe. I thought I could handle Tony. I tried…”

“Look,” Joe says, “I know what this punk put you through, but you can’t let emotion cloud your judgement.”

“Tollbooth camera got a shot of Woodward,” Eddie informs them, “he stole another car and headed out of town. State police are taking over. We lost him.”

“Don’t worry, Eddie,” Joe says, “they’ll get him.”

Eddie frowns. “I wanted to take this guy down,” he says.

“Not half as much as I did,” Barry points out.

Eddie exhales a petulant huff and shoves past him to climb the staircase. “Let’s go,” he says.

“Um,” Barry turns to look at Eddie over his shoulder, “go where?”

Eddie shrugs out of his jacket and folds it over his arm. “Blow off some steam, Barry,” he says. “I need to hit something.”

Barry arches his eyebrows as high as they can go and glances at Joe as Eddie reaches the top of the staircase. “What?” he blurts, his voice pitching awkwardly higher.

“I don’t think he meant hit you,” Joe reassures him, “go.”

Fact: Caroline met Iris in a kickboxing class when they were six years old and they became best friends like it was the easiest thing in the world.

Fact: Caroline started taking kickboxing classes again once she finished college and moved back to Central City.

Fact: Caroline has an old heavy bag in the crime lab that she punches in short bursts whenever she needs to clear her head.

Eddie knocks on the door to her darkroom in two light, quick taps. “Hey, Caroline,” he says, “can we borrow your heavy bag?”

Caroline nods before she remembers that Eddie can’t see what she’s doing. Then she pulls the protective screen in front of her developing photographs and steps out into the crime lab. “Sure,” she tells him.

Eddie grins at her before he starts unbuttoning his dress shirt to reveal a thin white undershirt that leaves nothing to the imagination. Caroline watches him fold his shirt and jacket over the back of a nearby chair with vague interest. Barry shrugs out of his sweater and plops it onto his desk, his gaze flicking to Eddie as he puts on a pair of fingerless padded boxing gloves and lingering on the contours of his chest and shoulders.

Fact: logic dictates that the twin ogling Eddie’s muscles should be Caroline.

Fact: she’s not the one doing the ogling—Barry is.

Fact: Barry is too demi to be attracted to anyone he doesn’t have feelings for. Whether those
feelings are romantic or even healthy is debatable, but time will tell. It always does.

“So,” Eddie says in between practice punches, “I heard you and this Woodward guy have a history.”

Barry frowns, his brow furrowing as he braces himself on the other side of the heavy bag.

“Hey, it’s okay,” Eddie says, “trust me, I had my fair share of bullies at school.”

Barry scoffs. “Yeah,” he mutters, “somehow I find that hard to believe.”

“I was short,” Eddie informs him, “fat, and the son of the politician who closed the factory in my school district. So…I wasn’t very popular.”

Caroline watches Eddie ream the heavy bag with her back to the morning sunlight filtering in through the thick glass panes of the window behind her. Barry watches Eddie move in slow motion, a minute stretching into an inert eternity of movement. All of the potential stripped down to anticipation—lightning waiting for a chance to strike.

“So what’d you do about it?” Barry wants to know.

Eddie chuckles. “I got my ass kicked a lot until my gym coach took pity on me,” he explains with a wide smile, “she said the key to fighting is patience. See…” Eddie reaches out to tap Barry’s sternum with two fingers and moves back to brace for impact as Barry settles into a semblance of a fighting stance, “…a lot of guys waste energy trying to land the most punches. All it takes is one, but you’ve got to make it count. Choose your weak spot and drive through it, like it’s six inches behind the target.”

Barry throws one punch and is shocked to find that his heart isn’t in it. There was a time when he wanted to punch Eddie’s lights out, but he doesn’t feel that way anymore.

“Harder,” Eddie says.

Barry throws another punch. Eddie gives him a lopsided grin, one with a dangerous edge tucked into the corner of his mouth.

“Harder,” Eddie says in a low voice that’s almost a growl.

Barry punches hard enough to put a hole in the heavy bag. Eddie stumbles back a few steps and hunches over, wheezing. Caroline slaps one of her hands over her mouth and nose to hide a loud snort of laughter as Barry glances down at the sand spilling onto the floor.

“Oh,” he blurts when he notices that Eddie is staring at him incredulously, “the seam was starting to split.”

After he flips the police car parked on the street outside her bedroom window, Tony abducts Iris from her home in broad daylight. Mac jolts in her seat at the sound of the crash blaring over the radio and clenches her teeth before the frequency dies, fading into static and then silence. It sends an alert back to the precinct that sends McKenna stumbling upstairs to the crime lab to tell Eddie what happened to the detail he tasked with keeping his girlfriend safe.

Barry extracts his phone from his pocket and speed dials Mac as Eddie storms out. “Tony took Iris,” he says after she picks up.
“I know,” Mac informs him. “I’m putting you on speaker.”

Barry nods before he remembers that she can’t see what he’s doing. “Guys,” he says, “you there?”

“Yeah, man.” Cisco walks over to stand in front of the leftmost desktop computer on the circular desk in the middle of the cortex. “What do you need us to do?”

Barry holds the phone between his shoulder and his ear while he walks down the stairs and buttons his shirt back up. “Whatever you can to help me find Iris,” he says. “Satellites. Security cameras. Hack ‘em all.”

“We’re on it,” Cisco says.

Mac uses her cane to get back on her feet and splays her left palm flat against the screen of the computer in the middle of the circular desk. “No,” she murmurs as her eyes white out and her brain starts to process the information from every camera feed in the city at lightning speed, “I’ve got this.”

Cisco gapes at her, gobsmacked, as the screens in the cortex blur through hours and hours of video footage in a fraction of a second. Caitlin types something on her tablet as Mac pings the stolen car Tony drove from the West house to a parking space in front of...

“Barry,” Caitlin says, “Tony took Iris to Robert Carmichael Elementary School.”

There’s a noise that booms like a thunderclap on the other end of the line, heralded by Caroline shrieking “don’t you fucking dare—” before her twin scoops her up and speeds away. Thirty seconds later they’re standing in the cortex and Caroline is too miffed to finish her sentence at a speed that everyone else can hear.

“Cisco,” she hisses the consonant in his name and he thinks she might be mad at him until he realizes she’s trying not to throw up, “where’s the body armor your sister made for me six months ago?”

“Um,” Cisco says, “it’s downstairs in my workshop. Hang on.”

Barry is vibrating with impatience by the time Cisco returns with the suit Armie made for Caroline. It’s not eye-catching like the suit Cisco made for Barry. It’s a flat shade of black that seems to swallow all of the light that touches the fabric. It’s more substance than flash.

After she emerges from Mac’s office all suited up, Cisco offers Caroline a matching domino mask. “Here,” he says, “so Girder won’t recognize you.”

Caroline takes the mask in one hand and squeezes his fingers as she cups his face in the other and pulls him into an earthshattering kiss. Cisco blinks in shock before he curls his other hand around her wrist and clings to her while he kisses her back. Barry exhales a frustrated noise and blurs into motion. When he opens his eyes, Cisco is kissing thin air.

When he licks his lips, he tastes a starburst of sweetness and grins. It wasn’t a kiss goodbye. It’s the first of many.

While the C. C. P. D. scrambles to block every major artery and clog the traffic in the heart of the city, Mac turns on the security cameras in the hallways at Carmichael and tunes into their feed. Tony is looking at a picture of himself at the regional wrestling championship he won as a sixth
grader while Iris tries not to roll her eyes.

“Tony,” she says, “you can still turn yourself in before you make things worse. It’s not too late.”

“Yeah it is,” Tony retorts, “the cops are already looking for me. So get ready to cover the showdown of a lifetime, ’cause I’m not going out without a fight.”

Barry speeds past them down the hallway and stops before he reaches the double doors that Tony left wide open. “Good,” he says in a reverberating voice that resonates over the radio like an echo, “’cause you just found one.”

Caroline peeks around the corner at the other end of the hall and groans internally as Tony squares his shoulders. “Come to save your little fangirl?” he asks.

“Let her go,” Barry says.

When he drops her arm, Tony all but throws Iris to the ground. “Oh, I could…” he says as his skin turns to metal, “but I’d rather make her watch while I break every bone in your body.”

Iris glances around haphazardly until she notices Caroline, who holds a finger to her lips and waits for Barry to run Iris to the lockers at her end of the hall before she generates enough force to send Tony sprawling. Barry smiles at her and goes to kick Tony while he’s down.

Caroline puts one hand on Iris’s knee and squeezes her shoulder with the other. “Hey,” she exhales the word in a puff of shaky laughter, “did he hurt you?”

Iris shakes her head. “I’m okay,” she insists, “don’t worry. This is going to make a fantastic story. I can see the byline now. ‘Saved by the Streak and His Mysterious New Partner in Crimefighting’—”

“I’m not here because I changed my mind about becoming a vigilante,” Caroline tells her softly, “I’m here to save my best friend.”

Iris smiles at her, wide and warm. “I love you, too,” she says fondly.

“Barry,” Mac says, “it’s taking more and more effort for Girder to maintain his organometallic armor. Now would be the time for a knockout punch.”

“Supersonic punch,” Cisco interjects.

“I’ve known guys like you!” Barry yells and it ricochets down the hallway. “Peaked in high school. Never got over it. All these powers, and look at you! Bully then. Bully now.”

Iris arches her eyebrows at Caroline and leans in close so Tony won’t overhear. “You think Barry’s working out some issues he should’ve gotten over years ago?” she whispers conspiratorially.

Caroline nods. “Toxic masculinity at its finest,” she deadpans. “Why talk about what’s bothering you when you can beat the crap out of each other instead?”

Tony keeps taking hits and throwing punches while Barry ducks and dodges his meaty swings. Barry grabs a flagpole and tries to use it like a spear or a staff. Trouble is, he’s never fought with any kind of weapon besides his own fists. Tony snatches and grabs at the pole, slamming Barry into a row of lockers and hurling him against the wall.

“No!” Iris screams as Barry staggers to his feet and speeds away.
Tony scoffs. “There goes your hero,” he says.

Caroline rises to her feet and generates a forcefield that fulminates with bright white energy. “Back off, jockstrap,” she snarls.

Tony frowns at the familiar sound of her voice. “Carrie?” he says. “Carrie Allen?”

Meanwhile, back in the cortex, an engineer hunches over his desk and exhales in a futile attempt to shoo the tension out of his shoulders. “He made it out,” Cisco mumbles. “Barely.”

Caitlin eyes the monitor curiously, her gaze flicking back and forth from the screen tracking Barry’s GPS to the data being streamed from the system Cisco invented that monitors Barry’s vitals. “Why did he stop?” she wonders out loud.

“He’s miles away,” Lily observes.

Mac smiles. “He’s five-point-three miles away,” she murmurs.

Caitlin lurches out of her chair and leans over Cisco to get closer to the transceiver. “Barry, wait!” she shouts.

Lily glances at the monitor incredulously as the speedster builds momentum to Mach 1.1. “No way,” she gasps.

“He’s doing it!” Cisco flails. “Go, man! Go!”

Barry crashes through the open doorway and punches Tony in the face.

Cisco fistpumps so hard he unseats himself. “Supersonic punch, baby!” he cheers. “Woo!”

Iris sucker punches Tony as he gets back on his feet. Caroline glances down at her manicure and shrugs. After all, she broke Tony’s arm a long time ago. It’s time for Barry to fight his own battles.

Barry grins up at Iris from where he’s slumped on the floor. “Nice cross,” he says.

Iris winces. “I think I broke my hand,” she says.

“Oh…” Barry flexes his fingers and grits his teeth at the burst of pain that ensues, “…me too.”

Joe invited Eobard to have a drink with him during his lunch hour in a transparent attempt to interrogate him about his whereabouts on the night Nora Allen died. Then he spends the better part of the afternoon looking up Tess Morgan, the award-winning cancer researcher who’d married Harrison Wells in 1991 and died in a tragic car accident in 2000. What’s interesting is the date of the accident that killed Tess. It happened on March twenty-first, three days after Nora was murdered. Dr. Wells started construction on the S. T. A. R. Labs facility in the heart of Central City a month later.

*That can’t be a coincidence,* he thinks as he steps into the elevator. *There’s something off about Dr. Wells. Ms. Howell knows what it is, but for whatever reason she wants me to figure it out for myself. This is the only way I can think of to know whether my hunch about Wells is right or wrong.*

Joe emerges from the elevator and walks down the hall to the cortex. “Doctor,” he says.

“Detective,” Eobard retorts, “are you here to make more accusations?”
Joe shakes his head slowly and puts the expensive bottle of scotch he’d been saving for a special occasion on the circular desk, positioning it like a peace offering. “I’m here to make amends,” he clarifies. “I looked up Tess Morgan. I’m sorry for your loss. I read that you two were research partners in Opal City, Maryland?”

“Yes,” Eobard tells him softly, “we were…married to the work as much as to each other. After the car accident, I could not go back to the work...could not go back to our lab.”

“So you moved here,” Joe deduces.

Eobard nods, curtly. “Where no one knew me,” he says. “Where no one could remind me of what I had lost, and….” he swallows thickly, “…I found it difficult, starting over, rebuilding, and what took me fourteen years, Tess could’ve done in four. Believe me. Nora Allen’s murder was tragic, and whomever or whatever is responsible for her death, it did not originate from me or from my work.”

There’s something off about the grief in his voice, some distortion underscoring the sincerity of his words that makes them sound almost suspicious. He’s lying, Joe realizes with a jolt of clarity. After all, if anyone knows what a man going through the motions of mourning his wife looks like, it’s him. “I’m sorry I doubted you,” he says out loud, “but I hope I can still count on your help.”

Eobard shakes his head before he exhales a rueful laugh. “You don’t give up,” he mutters.

“Nope,” Joe tells him with forced lightness. “Not until I get my man. I owe that to Barry, and to Henry.”

Eobard nods again, slowly. When he smiles, he can’t quite hide the implied threat he’s trying to keep out of his tone. “Barry is lucky to have you on his side, Joe,” he says.

Joe pretends not to notice that ominous edge and smiles back.

There’s a police car waiting in the parking lot at Carmichael to escort Iris to the closing shift at Jitters she offered to pick up because Tracy—one of the other baristas—called in sick earlier that day. Barry speeds back to S. T. A. R. Labs to let Caitlin take an X-ray of his hand and waits for those fractures to heal before he runs to Jitters to see Iris. There are no secrets left stagnating in the space between them, nothing to stop him from telling her everything he’s been wanting to tell her since he realized he could run faster than the speed of sound.

When he sees the light shimmer into the dark spill of her hair, he realizes that it doesn’t matter if she feels the same way about him. What matters is getting his best friend back.

Iris turns to look at him over her shoulder and smiles. “Hi,” she says.

Barry smiles back. “Hi,” he says almost shyly. “How’s the hand?”

Iris shrugs. “Not broken,” she informs him, “so that’s something.”

Barry squares his shoulders and inhales a slow, deep breath. “I’m sorry I lied to you,” he tells her softly. “I shouldn’t have. I’ve missed you this whole time, Iris. I wanted to tell you everything. When I heard that Tony took you, I…I just…I don’t know what I would’ve done if anything had happened to you.”

Iris smiles wider, and it’s sublime. “I’ve missed you too,” she says, “do you want to hang out and catch up?”
“Yeah.” Barry grins at her as the tension he’s been holding onto seeps out of his shoulders. “I’d like that. So,” he covertly speeds upstairs to wipe down the other tables and folds himself into the seat across from her a fraction of a second later, “Caroline told me you’ve been investigating other phenomena in the city you think is metahuman related?”

Iris grins back and nods, an enthusiastic bob of her head. “I’ve gotten scattered posts from people who’ve been to Granite Peak National Park about this guy that’s on fire, except he doesn’t burn up,” she explains.

“Wait,” Barry arches his eyebrows at her incredulously, “you’re trying to find the Burning Man now too?”

“Yeah, why not?” Iris raises her eyebrows at him like a challenge. “I mean, a lot can happen in the week, especially with the Streak. So,” she rolls her eyes at his ensuing snort, “how do you do what you do? When you move, Barry, you come and go in the blink of an eye, in a—”

“Flash?” Barry says.

Iris smiles so brightly that in his eyes she actually seems to light up from the inside. “Yeah,” she says, “in a flash.”

Mac comes home to find Len reading on the couch and cuddling with her squishable sea turtle, stroking its soft belly with the fingertips of one hand while he holds his book open with the other. When he glances up and sees her looking at him, his lips curl into a crooked smile.

“Hello, sweetheart,” he drawls.

Mac exhales in a huff as she blushes from her cheeks to the hollow of her throat and below. “Every time,” she mutters before she flops onto the couch next to him.

“Yeah,” Len smirks at her, “that never gets old.”

Mac puts her hand on his knee for balance and kisses him softly. Len smooths one of his cold hands over her flushed cheek to cradle the back of her head and deepen the kiss, making her gasp and moan sweetly into his mouth. Mac breaks the kiss to catch her breath and narrows her eyes at him through the fogged-up lenses of her glasses. There’s a furrow between his eyebrows and a clench in his jawline. “What’s wrong?” she wants to know.

Len makes a frustrated noise low in his throat and looks down at her squishable before he answers. “I went to see my brother today,” he tells her.

“Wait,” Mac bites down on the consonant, “you have a brother?”

Len grits his teeth around a sharp exhale and looks up into her eyes. “I have two. Mark and Clyde…’” he says flatly, “…the Mardon brothers.”

Mac opens her mouth to say What? but of course she’s thwarted by someone knocking on her door. Len exhales with enough force to flare his nostrils as tension seeps into the line of his broad shoulders. Mac flinches with her whole body at the noise and bites down on the inside of her cheek hard enough to hurt herself. “I’m going to answer that,” she informs him, “but don’t think for a second that we’re done talking about this.”

Len holds up his hands in mock surrender as she uses her cane to get back on her feet and hobbles to open the door. Mac’s eyes go wide at the sight of the man in her doorway. “Joe?” she says
hesitantly. “What are you doing here?”

Joe stuffs his hands in the pockets of his jacket. “Ms. Howell,” he says, “we need to talk about Dr. Wells. I think he killed Barry’s mother.”

[364] The Flash 3x09 (“The Present”) 6 December 2016. Julian clarifies that Barry’s workday is from 10am to 7pm. Which is great, because it gives me a timeframe for when certain things are canonically happening. I’m surprised the writers even bothered, since it’s obvious that neither continuity nor cohesive storytelling is their priority as creators…but I’ll take it.

[365] When you’re demisexual, an emotional connection is a prerequisite for sexual attraction. Whether those emotions are positive or negative depends on the person (or people) that you’re into. I’ve personally never been attracted to someone I didn’t want to get romantically involved with, but I don’t speak for every demisexual person. YMMV, obviously.

[366] Robert Carmichael first appeared in Doom Patrol Vol. 2, No. 49 (“Death in Venice”) November, 1991. I think the name of the elementary school where Iris and Barry went was actually a reference to Clifford “Cliff” Carmichael, a supporting character in the Firestorm comics, but Cliff is more likely to appear in canon than a dude who unironically named himself Love Glove.

[367] Mine has a different color scheme than the mini one shown here, because it’s limited edition or something? IDK. I’m not a collector. I’m just a twentysomething woman with an embarrassingly large collection of huggable stuffies. (x)
There is, it seems to us,  
at best, only a limited value  
in the knowledge derived from experience;  
the knowledge imposes a pattern, and falsifies,  
for the pattern is new in every moment  
and every moment is a new and shocking  
valuation of all we have been.  

T. S. Eliot, “East Coker”

Joe West is a lot of things, but he’s not stupid. It was only a matter of time before he realized what was going on with Eobard, and now all he needs is context for this truth that seems impossible.

I don’t like him. If I’m being honest, I don’t like any father who treats his daughter like she never grew up—especially since he doesn’t treat her sister the same way. Maybe because he thought Lola was his son until she came out to him after he came to visit her during her freshman year of college in National City, where she’d been passing as a cis girl. Or because three-year-old Iris almost died of smoke inhalation in the house fire that supposedly killed their mother while seven-year-old Lola snuck out to call 911.

There was no funeral for Francine West, no gravestone in any of the cemeteries in Central City, nothing but an urn that Joe bought and filled with sand from the park where his daughters liked to play. If she ever bothered to Google her mother’s name, Iris would find Francine in Keystone City. Maybe she’d even find Wally West, who started his senior year at Hudson University two months ago. These are Joe’s secrets, the lies he’s told his daughters and himself. It was about time I told him some of mine.

From the Watchtower Archives  
Recorded 22 November 2014

When he sees a cop at their door—the same detective who saw him at the museum, who chased him into the theatre, who pursued him to the train station, who’s obviously working with the Streak
—Len doesn’t think before he grabs the cold gun from the holster that hangs from the hook on the inside of their bedroom door and steps into the foyer. “Detective,” he sneers, “step away from my girlfriend. Slowly.”

Mac exhales a garbled noise as Joe gapes at her. “Wait,” he holds up one finger, “Leonard Snart is your boyfriend?”

“Yes,” Len drawls and glances at Mac before he asks, “is the speedster here, sweetheart?”

Joe looks at her with betrayal in his eyes as his gape becomes a glare. “How could you tell him who the Streak is?” he asks. “Barry trusted you! Iris trusted you! I trusted you!”

“Barry?” Len frowns, the space between his eyebrows furrowing as everything falls into place. “Barry Allen, that kid who got struck by lightning?” he cocks his head thoughtfully as his lips curl into a knowing smirk. It makes perfect sense: the lightning emblem on his chest, his weakness being a level of empathy that Len misconstrued as a hero complex, and everything she’s told him about how Barry’s idea of vigilantism is limited to reactionary heroics as opposed to progressive action. “So he’s the Streak, hmm?”

“I never told him who the Streak is,” Mac informs Joe, “you just did.”

Joe covers his mouth with one hand and shakes his head. “Nothing in my life makes any sense anymore,” he mutters under his breath.

Mac exhales with enough force to flap her lips. “I’m not asking you to trust me,” she says, “but if you want things to start making sense, then you should hear me out.”

“Well,” Joe heaves a sigh, “it’s not like I have a choice with your boyfriend pointing his supergun at me.”

“Oh!” Mac winces as she puts her weight on her cane and whirls to face Len. “Len, put the gun down. Please,” she tells him softly, “for me.”

Len exhales a disgruntled noise and pulls back with the barrel of the cold gun on his shoulder. Joe didn’t think to bring his sidearm with him because he’s off-duty, but he still reaches for it reflexively before he steps into their home. There’s a black leather jacket hanging from a hook by the door along with a familiar parka over a pair of heavy black boots too big to belong to someone as small as Mac, a framed photograph of seventeen-year-old Len teaching three-year-old Lisa to ice skate on a shelf next to a stack of worn Stephen King paperbacks, and a collection of geodes with vibrant crystals that shine even in the soft light in the sitting room. Mac flops onto the couch and gestures to the chair across the coffee table from where she sits. Len smoothly folds himself onto the couch beside her with one of his arms draped over the back of the couch behind her.

“Okay,” Mac says as Joe takes the seat, “first things first: if you attempt to contact the police in any capacity while you’re here, I won’t hesitate to use the evidence I’ve collected since I arrived in this century to hollow out the C. C. P. D. until the law enforcement in our city becomes irrelevant.”

History shows that Mac Howell is always in the right place at the right time. Joe knows that she has the city wired, that she’s the one who found Iris before Tony could hurt her, that she’s saved the lives of dozens of people since he met her ten months ago. Questionable taste in boyfriends aside, his gut is telling him that she’s not a bad person. “You don’t want to do that,” he says.

“You’re right,” Mac retorts, “I don’t, but if you try to take the man I love away from me, I will fight you and you’ll lose. You’ve seen me stop a falling satellite in midair and survive an explosion
that would’ve blown the Gem Cities off the map. What do you think I can do when no one is looking?”

“I’m not sure I want to find out,” Joe tells her, his voice equal parts exhausted and sincere. “It’s been a long day, Ms. Howell. I feel like I’ve been working this case for almost fifteen years, and I want answers. I won’t turn your boyfriend in, but I need you to tell me what you know.”

Mac bites her lip and nods, slowly. “It’s a long story,” she informs him, “but this is the condensed version. I’m from the future. I was born in 2157. I traveled back to the night of the particle accelerator explosion from 2183. Nora Allen’s killer was born in 2151. I know his name, but I’m not going to tell you—”

“Don’t feel bad, Detective,” Len deadpans, “she won’t tell me, either. Thinks I’d cause a paradox by killing his present-day ancestors and erasing him from the timeline.”

“You’re talking about time travel,” Joe says incredulously, “that’s impossible.”

“I need you to suspend your disbelief,” Mac says, “and listen to the story. Barry isn’t called the Streak in the future—he’s the Flash, the hero of Central City. When he was a kid, the man who murdered Nora Allen was obsessed with the Flash to the point that he made studying the mysterious force that gives speedsters their abilities his life’s work. Whenever he didn’t get his way, he used his speed to travel back in time and change the timeline. When he didn’t get a job that he wanted, he blamed his brother and killed their parents so his brother would cease to exist. After he spent years trying and failing to stabilize his connection to the speedforce, this man started to resent his hero and he convinced himself that he deserved to take Barry Allen’s place in history as the Flash. Nora Allen’s killer didn’t plan to murder her, he planned to murder eleven-year-old Barry and use the genetic resequencing technology he used to steal the identity of Harrison Wells to become the hero of the story.”[369]

Joe slumps in his seat and curls one of his hands over his mouth in horror. “What you’re saying means we couldn’t have found any evidence on the real killer,” he shakes his head slowly, “because technically he doesn’t exist at this point in time. Which actually makes a lot of sense, in a way that’s making my brain hurt, but I’m wondering how you fit into the story.”

“Nora Allen’s killer was a professor,” Mac tells him softly. “When a reporter came to interview him about his research, he fell in love at first sight. When he found out she was engaged to another man, he traveled back in time and killed that man before they ever went on a second date. When he returned to the present, the reporter was dating someone else…and he changed the timeline over and over, killing everyone she ever loved or could have loved until he met her again for the first time. When he asked her to have dinner with him, she told him no because she was too afraid of getting close to anyone to give him a chance…and he snapped. Took her. Told her everything he’d done to make her love him. Raped her. After he realized she was never going to love him back, he killed her. Tore her heart out. Then he traveled back in time and crashed her father’s car…” she swallows thickly and forces herself to look Joe in the eyes, “…my father’s car.”

Joe flicks his gaze to Len, whose jaw is clenched tight, before he focuses on Mac again. What she’s saying has so many horrific implications that he doesn’t want to believe it’s all true, but he knows from experience that the most believable lies are simple. Mac’s story is too confusing and messy and complicated for him to believe that it’s anything but the truth.

“After everything he’s done to you,” he says, “how you can see him every day?”

Mac exhales a soft whoosh of air. “So,” she bites her lip and smiles at him tentatively, “does that mean you believe me?”
“I’m still trying to wrap my head around it,” Joe tells her honestly, “but as impossible as everything you’re saying is, it makes more sense than anything I’ve come up with since I reopened the Nora Allen case. There’s just one problem: Dr. Wells has an alibi. I can’t arrest him without probable cause, and even if I could, I doubt any jury would convict him. Which,” he heaves a sigh, “means we can’t bring the real killer to justice or overturn Henry Allen’s murder conviction.”

“I’m working on that,” Mac informs him. “I’m running a sting operation that should give me enough leverage to make a deal that will get him out of Iron Heights in the next six months.”

Joe gives her an incredulous look. “I don’t think I wanna know,” he decides.

Len chuckles, a low sound that moves through his belly. Mac giggles, but it turns into a loud yawn that she muffles in the hollow of one palm. Len puts one of his arms around her shoulders and ducks his head to kiss her temple, softly.

Seeing a criminal with a record like Snart’s being genuinely sweet to his girlfriend is somehow more unbelievable than the possibility of time travel. Joe clears his throat and rises to his feet. “I think that’s my cue to leave,” he says. “I won’t turn you in, Snart, but I need you to promise me one thing…” he holds up one finger, “…you have the only gun that can hurt the man who murdered Nora Allen and left her husband to rot in jail for fourteen years. When the time comes, I want you to promise me you won’t hesitate to use it.”

Len cocks his head and lets one corner of his mouth unfurl into a crooked smile. “I promise,” he says, “and I always keep my promises.”

Mac takes a long hot shower after Joe leaves in a futile attempt to loosen the anxious knots and kinks in her neck and shoulders. When she emerges from the ensuite, Len is waiting in bed for her. “Why didn’t you tell me the Streak wasn’t the speedster who hurt you?” he wants to know.

“I didn’t think you’d assume the Streak and my abuser were the same person,” Mac tells him with a yawn, “in the other timeline you went after him because you thought he was a threat to you. I didn’t know you were trying to kill him in this timeline because you love me.”

Len shrugs as she crawls into bed with him. “I’m not saying the kid’s not a threat,” he bites down around the consonant, “but going around shooting your friends isn’t something a good boyfriend would do.”

“Neither is lying to me about how many siblings you have,” Mac points out, keeping her voice mild so he knows she isn’t mad at him. Just disappointed that he lied to her.

Which is almost worse, if Len is being honest with himself. When she doesn’t tell him everything, she’s thinking about keeping him alive or avoiding topics she assumes he doesn’t care about because she doesn’t want him to get bored with her—as if he ever could—but he didn’t tell her about Mark and Clyde because he decided they weren’t his problem before he met her and he’s starting to regret it now that he knows she saved their lives because that’s what she does: saving the world one person at a time. Which isn’t something Len could do if he wanted to—not that he does, because he’s not wired that way. Mac can say she’s not a hero until she’s blue in the face, but he can’t think of a more accurate term for someone who spends most of her time setting things in motion to bring on a brighter future at the expense of her own mental and physical health. Lewis taught him that the first rule of business was to always protect yourself, and for a long time he was all business. Mac taught him that his feelings aren’t a sign of weakness, and a small part of him resents the woman he loves for melting the layers of ice around his cold heart. Unlike him, her survival has made her so ferociously kind and brave that he gets jealous of the world sometimes.
Maybe that’s selfish. After all, it’s not like Len wants her to save him, but he hates that she gets so focused on saving the world that she forgets to take care of herself.

Len glances sidelong at her before he bites the bullet. “I went to Iron Heights to visit my dad before the particle accelerator exploded,” he tells her softly. “I was planning to leave town for a job, and he tried to convince me that I should let Mark and Clyde join my crew. I said no. When he said they were my brothers, I told him I didn’t care and I meant it,” he turns to look at her with his jaw set in a stubborn line, “the Mardon brothers are hotheads who don’t play well with others, and they would’ve been a liability. I didn’t want another incident like what happened with Mick that night he set himself on fire. I went to pull that job, and I didn’t give Clyde or Mark a second thought until the morning after I came home.”

“When you found out they supposedly died because of the particle accelerator explosion,” Mac says.

Len nods, a sharp descent of his chin. “I didn’t know Clyde was still alive until a month ago,” he clarifies, “and it’s not like I could go visit him at Iron Heights. I didn’t know Mark was in a coma until a few days ago. I wanted to tell you that I was going to visit him today. I just…” he exhales a frustrated noise, “…I’ve spent more time with my sister in the last year than I have in the past decade and met another sister I never knew I had. When he wakes up, I’m planning to ask Mark to join my new crew. Things have changed, Mac. I see the world differently now because of you. Maybe that’s why I don’t want to kill the scarlet speedster. Not that I’m planning to stop being a criminal anytime soon,” he looks at her as his lips curl into a crooked smile, “but the job isn’t all I care about. Not anymore.”

Mac throws her arms haphazardly around his neck and kisses him so passionately that he forgets how to breathe for a few seconds before he kisses her back, tangling the fingers of one hand in her hair while he wraps his other arm around her waist and pulls her close enough to feel the vivid thud of her heartbeat against his chest.

*Not close enough,* Len thinks and licks into her mouth to deepen the kiss as she moves to straddle his lap and digs her fingertips into the nape of his neck.

Mac nibbles and sucks on his bottom lip to make him moan before she pulls back and breaks the kiss. “I want you to know one thing,” she tells him breathlessly, “you don’t need to change for me. Only change if you want to. I won’t stop loving you if you do change, but I won’t stop loving you if you don’t. Okay?”

Len closes his eyes and swallows hard before he presses his forehead against hers. “Okay, sweetheart,” he says with soft vehemence and cups her face in one of his cold hands before he kisses her again. Like he means it.

Like he has all the time in the world.

[368] Those who have a hero complex are characterized by the tendency to create problems so they can resolve them and make themselves look heroic. Which is what Len assumed the Streak was doing. It’s actually not a stretch to say that Eobard had a hero complex before he chose to become a supervillain, given his canon characterization both in the comics and on the show.

[369] While I’m 97% sure the reason that Eobard brought the genetic resequencing technology he used to steal Wells’ identity was a combination of plot contrivance and lazy writing, my interpretation makes sense if you listen to his rant in *The Flash* 2x11 (“The Reverse-Flash Returns”) 26 January 2016. Eobard has, at this point, attempted to kill Barry’s mother three times and succeeded twice. It’s a vicious circle. Pre-Flashpoint!Eobard murdered Nora in 2000 and ended up
stranded in the past/present until he ceased to exist in 2015. Post-Flashpoint!Eobard tried to murder Nora, was foiled by Pre-Flashpoint!Barry, and then went back in time to murder her again to reset the timeline at the request of Post!Flashpoint Barry. Pre-Flashpoint!Eobard, also known as Wells!Eobard, was a time remnant. Or that’s my theory, anyway.

Joe was openly hostile to Len in the only interactions they had in The Flash 1x22 (“Rogue Air”) 12 May 2015. However, that was after Len (a) tried to kill Barry four times, (b) abducted Caitlin and almost blew her up, (c) abducted Cisco and tortured his brother, (d) gifted Mick a handheld flamethrower he used to put several cops in critical condition, (e) murdered a mob boss and almost started a mob war to get his hands on a pile of cash, and (f) manipulated Barry into erasing his criminal record. Since none of that has happened at this point in the story and a significant portion of those things won’t happen in this ‘verse, Joe and Len currently have an uneasy coexistence. Now, as for Joe basically asking Len to promise to kill Eobard, we know Joe was willing to kill Clyde to protect Barry in the pilot. I don’t think it’s a stretch to postulate that after he realized they don’t have a legal way to bring a time-traveling speedster who’s also a serial murderer to justice, he might begrudgingly acknowledge that icing him is the only logical way to stop him. Also, at this point in the story Eobard has just threatened Iris. Not cool, bro.
Through the slit of our open window, the wind comes in and flows around us, nothingness in motion, like time; the power of what is not there.

Margaret Atwood, “Shapechangers in Winter”

Shock Value
Part 2
Myth Can Make Reality More Intelligible
Book II
Lightning Doesn’t Strike Twice
Chapter 49
Watching the Detectives
(3 of 3)

III
Slipping Into Madness Is Good for the Sake of Comparison

Mac disabled the surveillance network that Eobard had spent the past fourteen years assembling like he was setting a trap, but that doesn’t mean he isn’t still keeping an eye on everything. There are plenty of camera feeds he didn’t set up that Gideon can monitor. Although he’s been trying not to use Gideon as much. After all, he knows AI can’t be trusted with a technopath in the city. It’s made him realize how much he’s been relying on xyr to stay ahead of the game and leery of whatever Mac is doing in her spare time.

Upon closer inspection, she’s running a sting operation meant to bring down the Santini crime family with the help of an assemblage of drabs and metahumans alike. Eobard considers how easily he could ruin her plans, but he doesn’t want to hurt her more than he already has. It’s become glaringly obvious to him that Mac doesn’t have any intention of returning to the future with him, but he doesn’t want to start over with someone who constantly looks at him like he’s a monster. Maybe she won’t look at him that way once he tells her that he won’t try to stop her from living in the present. After all, she’s altered the shape of things to come to the point that a blissfully oblivious version of Rose should be waiting to meet him in the future by the time he makes his triumphant return as the hero he was always meant to be.

“It has now been three hundred and forty-nine days since lightning struck,” Eobard tells Gideon.[371] “Mr. Allen has begun relying on his speed in everyday life, using his extraordinary powers to accomplish ordinary tasks. Unfortunately, his penchant for the heroic persists…” he shakes his head and lets himself smile, “…the fact is, he can be a bit of a showoff. While his desire to help others is commendable, it’s impeding him from realizing the full scope of his abilities, but there is still time, as the future remains intact.”

Whenever they don’t have a metahuman-related emergency, Barry still comes to S. T. A. R. Labs almost every morning to check in before he goes to work at the precinct. When the clock ticks past
nine-thirty and he still hasn’t arrived, Eobard glances at the time and exhales a frustrated noise. “Where’s Barry?” he wants to know. “He’s late.”

“Well,” Lily ekes the l sound out with a one-shouldered shrug, “isn’t lateness kind of his signature move?”

Caitlin frowns just as Barry speeds into the cortex. “Sorry, guys,” he blurts in a voice that’s almost too fast for anyone who isn’t a speedster to follow and grins before he explains, “I got a little held up.”

“I’m going to need a moment or two alone with Barry,” Eobard says pointedly.

Caitlin looks down at her phone as she leaves, her stiletto heels clicking an erratic downbeat against the floor. Lily shrugs again, with both shoulders this time, and makes a tactical retreat to her office.

“Ooh,” Cisco whispers conspiratorially to Barry on his way out, “you’re in trouble.”

Mac, who has her nose in a book, makes no move to get up and leave. Eobard turns to look at her with an exasperated flare of his nostrils. “Ms. Howell,” he says, “I don’t think you heard me.”

“I own this building,” Mac informs him without bothering to look up from the page she’s on. “I’m not going anywhere.”

Eobard tries not to gnash his teeth at that before he focuses on Barry—the sooner he gets him up to speed, the sooner he can go back to the future. “Now,” he says, “may I remind you, Mr. Allen, we had an agreement: we would help with your heroics out there, while you would help us research and develop your abilities in here. Right?”

Barry sits in one of the empty chairs and scoots until he’s on the edge of his seat, one of his feet tapping idly while his fingers drum offhandedly against the denim covering one of his knees. “Yeah,” he says, “I know. I guess I just got a little caught up with being able to help people,” he smiles for a spilt second before his tone slips into something more defensive, “you know, put the bad guys away. It feels good.”

“Imagine how good it will feel to cure diseases, stop aging, reverse paralysis,” Eobard says flatly.

Barry nods, his head bobbling slowly. “All good causes,” he says, “so how can I help you guys do that? You need another MRI, or more blood, or—”

“I need more speed,” Eobard tells him sharply, “speed is the key to progress. You need to kick it up a notch.”

Barry watches him wheel closer and nods again, his head bobbling faster. “Okay.” Then his phone buzzes and he glances down at the lockscreen to read the alert. “There was a homicide,” he says, blurring from seated to standing in a fraction of a second and stuffing his phone into the pocket of his jacket. “I’m sorry. I’ve got to go.”

“This is not just about you,” Eobard adds softly. “Remember that, Barry.”

Barry nods again, a quick bob of his head, and speeds away. Mac snorts once Eobard is out of earshot and closes her book. *I’d say that was good advice, she thinks, if I didn’t know he was incapable of taking it.*
Joe arrives at the brightly lit murder scene to find Barry squatting next to the corpse and Caroline standing on a short rise of scaffolding taking shots from above. It’s a beautiful day, the body a morbid contrast with the cheerful morning sunlight filtering down through a cluster of soft white clouds. Whoever did this cornered their victim in a storage lot behind an office building with rusted metal siding and left his corpse a mess of burned meat.

“Whoa,” Joe says.

Barry turns and looks over his shoulder at them as Eddie appears. “I hope you both skipped breakfast,” he quips, his attempt at humor falling flat before he turns back to look at the body.

“What the hell could do that?” Eddie asks, horrified.

“2,400 degrees, give or take,” Barry answers reflexively.

“Fahrenheit,” Caroline specifies, “not Celsius. 2,400 degrees is the approximate level of heat it takes to turn sand into glass.”

Joe side-eyes the tanks with their D. O. T. hazard labels: angry red with a stylized white flame above the word *FLAMMABLE*. “This area’s filled with combustibles,” he points out, “how come nothing else burned up?”

“You see those streaks of soot on the ground where the cement is burnt?” Caroline flails one hand at the charred black slashes before she extracts her phone from her pocket and texts Mac. “That’s evidence of arc blasts.”

“Happens when high-amperage currents travel or arc through the air,” Barry explains.

“There’s no live wires,” Joe says, “no utility poles.”

“So how was this guy electrocuted?” Eddie wants to know.

Mac appears on the scaffolding next to Caroline with a resonant *boom!* and gnaws on the inside of her cheek as the police officers on the ground look around frantically in case any of the combustibles gained sentience and decided to explode. *Welp,* she thinks, *at least I’m still fully dressed. I might be getting the hang of this electroportation thing.* “I think I can answer that,” she says out loud.

Joe squints into the glare of daylight as he looks up at her. “Mac,” he sighs, “this is an active crime scene. You know you can’t be here.”

“I think a fulgurkinetic metahuman did this,” Mac informs him. “You can’t tell me you’re not thinking the same thing.”

“So how do we know you didn’t do it?” Eddie asks suspiciously.

Mac scoffs. “I know better than to waste the energy it would take to deep fry some dude when I could just stop his heart in his chest instead and make his death look accidental,” she deadpans.


Mac exhales with enough force to flap her lips. “I’m joking,” she says, “but seriously, whoever did this doesn’t know how to use their powers.”

After a few days of mulling it over, Joe is starting to believe her story without second-guessing.
himself or questioning her mental stability, but that doesn’t mean he trusts her. Mac could get away with murder if she wanted to, but he’s seen her help so many people and he doesn’t think she could fake how much she cares. Central City is a better place because of her. There’s no doubt in his mind about that. Joe still makes a mental note to ask her if she’s ever killed someone, if only to see how she’d answer that question. “Well,” he says, “the first thing we need to do is I. D. the victim.”

Caroline nods as she reintroduces her feet to the cement below and crouches to take a close-up of the victim’s face. Eddie gives her an incredulous look. “His face is melted off,” he says dubiously, “how’s that picture going to help us I. D. him?”

Barry grins. “We’ve got mad skills,” he says.

“Please don’t ever say that again,” Joe mutters.

“So what is fulgurkinesis, exactly?” Eddie asks Mac once they’re back at the precinct in one of the debriefing rooms. Caroline and Barry are upstairs in the crime lab, leaving Mac alone with the detectives. It’s a rarity for police departments to consult with civilians instead of other law enforcement agencies, but no one knows more about metahumans than she does.

“It’s the ability to manipulate any form of energy that falls on the electromagnetic spectrum,” she informs him. “X-rays. Gamma radiation. Microwaves. Radio frequencies. Infrared radiation. Ultraviolet light. Terahertz radiation. Not to mention electrical energy. Modern society runs on electricity and technology. Human beings run on the electrical impulses our brains use to tell our bodies and minds how to function. I could do a lot of damage with my abilities. It’s a pretty comprehensive power set, but I’m the only fulgurkinetic that I know of who’s the total package,” she pauses to take a sip from a can of Dr. Pepper, “and I think your killer might only be able to manipulate electric charges.”

Joe closes his eyes and exhales a sharp breath. Just thinking about the possibility of a homicidal metahuman with her kind of power is making his stomach twist anxiously. “There are other fulgurkinetics that you know of?” he asks.

“Not yet,” Mac answers.

Eddie flicks his gaze between them as they share a significant look. “Okay,” he says, “what did I miss?”

“Nothing,” Joe tells him.

Mac yawns into the hollow of one palm. “I can’t sense whoever did this,” she says, “and that means they probably used all of their excess electrical energy to kill the victim. Which is why I don’t think your killer knows how to use their powers. I also think they’re going to have to recharge themselves before they start to burn out. Which…” she covers her mouth with one hand to muffle another yawn, “…could get messy.”

“How messy?” Joe wants to know.

“Wait,” Eddie says, “you said people run on electricity.”

Mac nods, a slow descent of her chin. “If your killer gets desperate,” she says, “more people are going to die.”

Then her phone buzzes and blurts out an exquisitely ominous sound, the opening notes of
Beethoven’s fifth symphony. Amanda Chen—the paraplegic metahuman whose psionic abilities include possessing the bodies of others—plays the cello, and Symphony No. 5 is her designated ringtone.

“Hi,” Mac says without mentioning her associate by name, “is something wrong?”

“Farooq Gibran returned to Central City after midnight last night,” Amanda informs her, “we have satellite footage of him electrocuting a man to death in Lawrence Hills. I had your friend Mr. Ramon at S. T. A. R. Labs run facial recognition on the victim and we found a match in the DMV database: Casey Donahue, who worked at the electrical substation in Petersburg.”

Mac exhales a soft whoosh of air. “Thank you,” she says, “I’m at the C. C. P. D. headquarters. I’ll talk to you later.”

“Zài lián xi,” Amanda says before she hangs up.

“What was that about?” Joe asks. There’s a note of hesitance in his voice, like he isn’t sure whether he really wants to know.

Mac drops her phone into the depths of her purse and forces herself to look him in the eyes. “I think my associates just found your killer,” she says, “and I know where he’s going.”

Farooq has almost drained the power grid by the time Barry gets suited up and speeds to the substation. Veins of strange illumination fume under his olive skin in eerie yellow and unearthly blue as currents of electricity run through his body, cyanic light flooding his eyes with an uncanny glow.

“I’m pretty sure this is a restricted area,” Barry quips.

Farooq turns to look at him with a shambling, awkward slowness. “I need to feed,” he says, his voice a deep grotesque thrum. Barry speeds to the side to evade one creeping vine of lightning, but he doesn’t move fast enough to avoid the next one. Farooq groans ecstatically, his breath hitching in his throat. “What was that?” he wonders. “I need more.”

“Barry,” Eobard says as the telemetry of the suit fluctuates too fast for anyone but a speedster to follow. “What’s happening?”

Barry screams as Farooq zaps him again and chokes on the feeling of being snuffed out like a shattered lightbulb.


“Run, Barry,” Eobard tells him urgently.

“I can’t,” Barry says as Mac hobbles into the cortex, “my speed…is gone.”

[371] The Flash 1x07 (“Power Outage”) 25 November 2014. Eobard canonically says it’s been 311 days since lightning struck, but that’s inaccurate because on 25 November 2014 it would’ve been 349 days since the particle accelerator exploded on 11 December 2013.

[372] Okay, so the timeline of this episode is wonky. Barry goes to investigate the murder of Casey Donahue in the morning (he jokes about skipping breakfast, so it’s early). Then, in the next scene, it’s the end of the day and he’s at S. T. A. R. Labs getting Cisco to I. D. the victim. (Which is weird, because you’d think he’d have access to facial
reconstruction software as a C. S. I. What was he even doing all day? Unless he really is the only C. S. I. in Central City and he was working other cases before he got around to the plot-relevant one. IDEK.) Why would it take Farooq all day to use the I. D. he stole to break into the substation? I know the answer is plot contrivance, but I’m still vexed.
Lily drives to the substation to pick up Barry and bring him back to S. T. A. R. Labs while Mac uses her powers to monitor the surveillance footage in the city. Farooq is in the wind, nowhere to be found.

“How is that possible?” Barry asks as he awkwardly strips out of his suit in the backseat and pulls a S. T. A. R. Labs sweatshirt over his head.

“Farooq absorbed all of the speedforce energy you had inside your body,” Mac informs him, “he could’ve teleported like I did this morning or turned himself into pure electricity to travel through the electrical grid or any number of applications for his abilities…” she pauses to exhale a frustrated noise, “…abilities he has no idea how to control.”

“How’d you learn to control yours?” Lily wants to know.

“I didn’t,” Mac informs her. “When I was a kid, I kept causing blackouts. Citywide. Statewide. Nationwide. After that, my aunt let A. R. G. U. S. take me. I was vivisected, experimented on, and forced to use my powers for ‘the greater good.’ I had to learn to control myself. I didn’t have any other choice.”
Barry gapes at her in the rearview mirror as she crooks her fingers like quotation marks around the greater good.

Mac sighs and looks away. “Zero out of ten,” she quips, “would not recommend.”

“You can’t just lose your powers, okay?” Caitlin insists once they’re back at S. T. A. R. Labs running tests on Barry to find out why his speed is gone. “Your DNA was transformed by the particle accelerator explosion. There’s no way to un-transform DNA.”

“Barry,” Mac says, “we’ve been observing you in action long enough to learn that speedsters absorb kinetic energy when they move at ordinary speeds and convert it into electrical energy when they move at superhuman speeds.”

“So you’re saying my powers recharge when I move at ordinary speeds,” Barry says.

Caitlin nods. “So you’re still a speedster,” she clarifies, “you just haven’t absorbed enough kinetic energy to trigger the endergonic reaction that sustains your abilities.”

“This metahuman siphons electricity,” Eobard adds, “thereby removing your power.”

“I’ve got to warn Joe,” Barry says, “he and Eddie need to know their killer is still out there.”

Mac glances down at the lockscreen of her phone and sees a text message from Joe that says Captain Singh says we need your alibi before we can eliminate you as a suspect in this case. “I’ll drive you,” she offers.

Barry nods, a quick bob of his head. “Let’s go,” he says.

When she hobbles into the precinct, Julie smiles and waves to Mac from her desk in the bullpen. McKenna, whose sister is a metahuman who works at the clinic Mac owns, glances up from the report she’s writing to acknowledge her with a half-smile and a nod.

Mac smiles back and goes to knock on the door to the Singh’s office. “I had dinner with Officer Jackham last night,” she tells him, “and I didn’t get home until around two in the morning.”

Singh narrows his eyes at her, assessing. “Why didn’t you tell the detectives that earlier?” he wants to know.

Truth is, she didn’t give them her alibi because they didn’t ask for it; but that would probably make them look bad to their captain and she doesn’t want that. “I went into librarian mode when Detective Thawne asked me about my abilities,” Mac says, “I think I might’ve blinded him with science.”

Singh nods. Eddie is a great guy and a good detective, but he’s never been the brightest bulb in the box. “Thanks for coming back in, Ms. Howell,” he says.


Singh exhales an exasperated noise. “Where exactly is Mr. Allen?”

Mac shrugs, one of her shoulders hunching toward her earlobe. “I think he’s upstairs writing up a report on how we identified the victim,” she says.
Singh is opening his mouth to ask about the identity of their killer when an officer taps him on the shoulder and takes him aside to discuss another ongoing case. Mac is pressing the button to summon the elevator when she hears a familiar voice call her name.

“Mac!” Iris bypasses the bullpen to get in the elevator with her. “Cisco texted me that Barry lost his speed,” she says as soon as the doors are closed. “What the hell happened?”

There’s a security camera in one corner of the ceiling, but it’s not technologically advanced enough to record audio as well as video. Iris knows this because her dad has been working at this precinct for most of her life.

Mac sighs as the sliding doors open. “I’ve had an associate of mine monitoring a man named Farooq Gibran, who climbed an electrical tower across the river in Keystone on the night of the particle accelerator explosion, because I thought he might end up like me,” she murmurs as they emerge from the elevator.

“So he’s the powers vampire who stole Barry’s speed,” Iris deduces as they walk into the crime lab. “Cisco’s words, not mine.”

Caroline looks up from the file on her desk and waves to them, a slow flutter of her fingers. “Cisco’s calling him Blackout,” she says, “and he’s the one who burned up the Kentucky fried corpse we found in the alley this morning.”

Iris folds her arms and doesn’t make eye contact with her father because she’s still mad about him lying to her. “You need to tell the police not to confront him,” she says.

Joe exhales a sharp breath through his nose and turns to look at Mac. “With the Flash out of the picture, who’s protecting the city?” he asks.

“Oracle, the Canaries, the Roc, the Huntress, Plastique, Fire, and Ice,” Mac informs her. “I know a lot of other people with powers, but most of them aren’t vigilantes. Which,” her gaze slants to Caroline, “is a totally valid choice. I’m not going to ask them to drop whatever they’re doing to help me stop an unstable fulgurkinetic who’s only dropped one body so far.”

“I think we should all go back to S. T. A. R. Labs,” Joe says, “figure out a way to track this guy down before he hurts anybody else.”

Barry shrugs his jacket back on. “Let’s go,” he says.

Caroline grins. “I’m driving.”

Farooq is still in the wind by the time everyone has assembled in the cortex. Mac keeps sensing him in different parts of the city simultaneously, and that means he probably got stuck trying to travel as pure energy and scattered himself like dandelion seeds—only with more sparkle. Syd is sitting at a desk in one corner, sipping a blue slushy and stealing glances at her.

Cisco is hunched over a section of the main circular desk researching Farooq on his tablet. Caroline is sitting next to him, monitoring the police bands on the centermost screen while one of her hands idly strokes his knee under the table; her fingernails lightly scraping against the material of his pants in a way that shouldn’t be sensuous, but is, somehow. It’s been a week since their first kiss, and they’ve been trying to take things slow. Cisco had a spectacularly bad experience in college with the first guy he dated, a grad student who broke his heart and messed with his head to the point that his self-esteem is a lot more fragile than he makes it seem, and Caroline has broken a lot of hearts. What’s happening between them is too special to rush, especially since they’re both in
uncharted territory with their fledgling superpowers on top of their feelings for each other.

Barry is staring at the mannequin dressed in his suit, a placeholder he hopes will never be permanent. “I didn’t have my speed for very long,” he murmurs, “but now that it’s gone, it feels like part of me is gone, too.”

Iris, who’s standing behind him, reaches out to squeeze his shoulder and lets herself linger. There’s something more in how it feels to touch him, now that she knows he’s the Flash, and it sends a throb of guilt seething through her because it almost feels like she’s cheating on Eddie—like her feelings for Barry aren’t as platonic as she originally thought.

“With or without your speed,” Caitlin says, “you’re still you, Barry.”

“But I’m not,” Barry insists, “I’m not the best version of me. I love being the Flash. I love everything about it, the feeling of running hundreds of miles per hour, wind and power just rushing past my face, being able to help people… I’m not sure I can live without it.”

Iris is opening her mouth to say something when the alarm goes off. Farooq trickles out of the powerlines stretched along the side of the street by the main entrance in a shower of sparks, like falling stars. Mac brings up the security camera feed on a screen hanging from the ceiling of the cortex as Gideon shows the same footage to Eobard, who’s in the Time Vault.

“Dr. Harrison Wells!” Farooq yells, his voice jagged and broken. “I need to see you! Come on, I know you’re inside. Open the door! I just want to talk, Dr. Wells. Let me in!”

Mac brings up the footage on the desktop screen in front of her and zooms in for a closeup of his eyes. “Oh,” she murmurs, “crap.”

Lily scoots her chair over and squints at the image. “What’s wrong?” she asks.

“Look at his eyes,” Mac says.

“Wait,” Cisco says incredulously, “are they glowing?”

Mac nods. “It’s a symptom of incomplete metagenic dominance,” she informs him. “It happens to people who have more than one active metagene. It causes a psychogenic fugue, one that alters your sense of self and changes your personality by augmenting your worst traits. Farooq’s powers are trying to express themselves, but most of the time codominance isn’t possible with metagenes, and that means he’s unstable—his brain is scrambling to avoid tearing his body apart on a cellular level and he has no control over himself or his abilities.”

Joe folds his arms and looks at her over his shoulder. “So you’re saying he can’t be held responsible for what he did to Casey Donahue?” he asks.

“I’m saying that a year ago he died for a few minutes and he came back to find the people he loved the most dead on the ground next to him,” Mac retorts. “I’m saying he’s angry and he deserves to feel that way, to want revenge for what Dr. Wells did to him,” she exhales a soft, broken noise and bites down on the inside of her cheek to stop the telltale prickle of tears at the corners of her eyes because Eobard is wheeling into the cortex and crying in front of him is not an option, “I’m saying —”

Mac is saved from blurting out that Eobard knew the particle accelerator was going to explode by a cacophonous thrum of electricity surging throughout the city before darkness falls. Farooq siphons all of the power in the city and flings a blast of electricity at the main entrance, shattering glass
panels and warping the metal that frames the doors.

Iris clutches at Barry’s upper arm reflexively as her fingers slip off his shoulder. “What was that?” she asks, her voice hushed.

“He just blacked out the entire city,” Caroline says incredulously.

“He’s inside.” Barry whirls to face Eobard with urgency in his voice. “I need my powers back now.”

“Okay,” Eobard matches that urgency in the way his hands flail as he talks, “you’ve lost your speed, but nothing has changed inside your body on a subatomic level, in other words,” he says, “your cells are still primed.”

Cisco nods. “You just need a jumpstart,” he clarifies.

“Okay,” Barry says. “How do we do that? How do we jumpstart me?”

“By replicating the initial jolt to your system,” Lily postulates.

“But that would mean a peak current of at least twenty thousand kiloamps,” Cisco says dubiously.

“Which is insane,” Caitlin says pointedly, her voice pitching higher in distress, “that’s more electricity than they give to people in the electric chair.”

“Caitlin,” Eobard sighs, “with Farooq in the building we’re all looking at a death sentence here. Ms. Howell can generate a current of that magnitude—”

“I could kill him,” Mac cuts in before she turns to look at Barry. “I could kill you,” she tells him softly, “do you understand that?”

Barry glances at Iris, who’s holding onto him like she doesn’t want to lose him to the lightning all over again. “I don’t care,” he says, “but first I’m going to talk to him.”

“No.” Eobard grits his teeth around a snarl. “No.”

“Okay,” Barry says, “you didn’t see Farooq at the substation. He needed to feed. I got superspeed from the particle accelerator blast. His best friends died. He woke up with a disease.”

“He’s a murderer,” Eobard snaps back, “and you are powerless to defend yourself against him!”

“He may just need help,” Barry says, “like I did. I don’t need my powers to offer him that. I have to try.”

“I’m going with you,” Iris tells him in a soft voice that leaves no room for argument. “I want to help.”

“No,” Joe says. “Iris—”

Iris turns on her heels and glares at her father, her jaw set. “Dad, a girl’s gotta be her own hero every now and again,” she says, “and you can’t stop me.”

“Fine.” Joe draws his sidearm from its holster. “Then I’m coming with you.”

Mac feels an assortment of generators bringing the city back into the light and keeping the people
who need machines to live breathing. Which is one less problem for her to solve, but that doesn’t stop her phone from buzzing insistently.

From: Canary Cry

**Mac, was that you? What’s wrong?**

From: Kunari

where are you?
who turned out the lights?
is this a code midnight?

From: Muffin Top

**R U OK?**
**SHOULD I CALL BETTE?**

From: Au

bitch, Lenny is freaking out. call me so we know you aren’t dead or being transported to a government facility for illegal experimentation or whatever.

Lily shrieks as Shawna appears in the middle of the cortex. Shawna wrinkles her nose because it’s black as pitch and she’s afraid of the dark. “I’m guessing this wasn’t you,” she deadpans.

Mac shakes her head slowly. “There’s a homicidal fulgurkinetic metahuman in the building,” she says, “tell everyone I’m fine and that I don’t need backup.”

Shawna gives her a slow smile that spreads into a smirk. “You mean tell your boyfriend not to call the cavalry and come over here with guns blazing,” she teases.

Mac sighs. “Yes,” she says, “that’s exactly what I mean. Now stop causing more trouble for me and get out of here. I don’t want you to get hurt.”

Shawna teleports out before anyone thinks to ask if they can go with her. Mac is saved from being questioned about the boyfriend none of her friends knew she had by Farooq, who zaps Barry hard enough to send him back through the entrance to the cortex, where he skids across the floor like a bag of bones in a plaid dress shirt and a cardigan. Caroline generates a forcefield to keep Farooq stranded in the hallway while Cisco pulls a lever that drops a sheet of heavy metal alloy between them and the guy who’s trying to light them up in the worst possible way. Caitlin drops gracelessly onto all fours to check Barry’s pulse and listen to him breathe, to make sure none of his ribs are cracked or broken.

Cisco exhales a loud whoosh of air as Caroline cups his face in both hands and curls a fingertip into the divot behind one of his ears. “Not sure how long that’ll hold,” he says, and turns his head to softly kiss the heel of her palm before she takes her hands away.

“Caitlin, get Mr. Allen to the treadmill,” Eobard tells her with an order implicit in his tone of voice. “Ms. Howell, I trust you to do what needs to be done.”

“Wait,” Lily gives him a wide-eyed look, “you’re not coming with us?”

Cisco shakes his head so fast he almost discombobulates himself. “I am not leaving you,” he says.
“Listen to me,” Eobard grits out, “of everything I’ve done in my life, of everything I have invented, my most important creation is the Flash. Barry Allen must have a future. Now go.”

Syd is holding a flashlight for Eobard and they’re about to walk back out into the hallway when Joe offers to help them reboot the generator while Mac recharges Barry. Caroline is still afraid of thunder, and Iris doesn’t want to watch one of her best friends get struck by lightning again, so they reluctantly leave the cortex to take back the night. Barry wobbles and he has to grip the metal bars on the sides of the treadmill to stay on his feet. Mac sucks in a sharp breath as she absorbs the power she needs from electrical discharges in the atmosphere all over the world. There’s always a storm brewing somewhere, after all.

Caitlin grabs her shoulder without thinking and squeezes too hard, her fingernails digging into the sleeve of her sweater to find the ultraviolet glow underneath. “I can’t,” she says, the pain she tries to keep hidden most of the time showing palpable and fragile in the cadence of her voice. “I already lost someone I care about in this building. I can’t do that again.”

Barry exhales with enough force to flare his nostrils. “Caitlin,” he says, “someone once told me that I was struck by that lightning for a reason, that it chose me. I’m not sure that I believe it,” he hunches over, his knuckles clenched white over the metal bars, “but right now, it doesn’t matter what I believe. What do you believe?”

Caitlin is quiet for a second that stretches into an eternity before she lets go. Lily hesitantly touches her hand: fingertips to fingertips, no pressure. Caitlin bites her lip and interlaces their fingers.

Mac props her cane against the wall and curls her hands around the metal bars of the treadmill. Barry flinches and bites down around a gasp as the first jolt of electricity surges through his system. Mac closes her eyes and feels the power, the strange otherworldly threads of the speedforce in every cell of his body, the pulse of the lightning that lives inside of her.

When he moves, his hands vibrate so fast he phases through the metal bars he was holding onto. Barry wobbles and looks down at himself—at his shaking hands—before he looks up and sees Mac looking back at him, hunched over and wheezing harshly as her ethereal bioluminescence fades into the ordinary sallowness of her skin.

“I think it worked,” he tells her softly.

When she tries to hobble over to where she left her cane, Mac winces as her knees give out. Cisco supports her with one hand on her forearm, the other at the small of her back. Barry almost blurs out of his skin before he splays one of his hands over the hollow between her shoulder blades. Mac closes her eyes and magnetically attracts her cane to the palm of her hand.

“Barry!” Iris screams.

Mac opens her eyes as Barry speeds into the hallway. When she hobbles out of the cortex, she tries and fails to look everywhere at once. Syd is leaning up against the wall, his forearm a blackened mess of charred flesh. Eobard is sitting behind him with his back against the wall and a sour expression on his face. Caroline is putting all of her energy into a forcefield that Farooq is trying to feed on, Iris is sobbing, and Joe is crumpled on the floor.

“Mac!” Iris wails, “Mac, he’s not breathing!”

Joe isn’t cold. There’s still a faint undercurrent of electricity in his body. Mac knows how to restart his heart, how to bring him back to life. It’s the flesh wounds that worry her, the bloody pulp on his
chest staining his shirt red, but…

*I have to try*, Mac thinks, *for Iris*. “It’s okay,” she says aloud. “I can bring him back.”

Joe gasps and sits up abruptly as his heart starts beating again, thundering in his chest. Mac gapes as his burns heal under her hands and feels the energy she used to help him fizzle out until only a ragged slub of scar tissue remains. Joe looks at her over his shoulder before he closes his eyes and exhales a shuddering breath. It occurs to him that his death might’ve made her life easier, but he’s too disoriented to say anything but “Thank you.”

Mac nods and smiles at him shyly, a nonverbal *You’re welcome*.

“I can’t…” Caroline gnashes her teeth, “I can’t hold it much longer…”

Farooq generates enough voltage to break down the forcefield and takes a step closer to them, wads of electricity crackling in his hands. Iris wipes her tears with the back of one hand and glares at him. When she inhales a shuddering breath, the building shakes.

“Leave my friends *alone*,” she tells him sharply.

Farooq is opening his mouth to retort when a shrieking gust of wind snarls out of thin air with enough sheer to knock him backwards until he slams into the wall at the other end of the hallway. Joe turns to look at his daughter, gobsmacked.

“Oh my god,” Cisco says.

“Holy *crap*,” Caroline mutters more to herself than anybody else.

“Oh my god,” Caitlin says, “Iris…is a metahuman.”

Iris whirls to look at Mac, wide-eyed. “Was that me?” she asks. “Was that…did I seriously just do that?”

“Welp,” Mac deadpans, “I didn’t see that coming.”

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[374] Codominance is what happens when two alleles that are neither dominant nor recessive express themselves equally. Incomplete dominance combines the expression of two dominant alleles. It’s a lot more complicated than just that, obviously, but if we’re working with the idea of superpowers being genetic then I think a lot of weird crap would happen to people with two or more metagenes. I’m just saying.

[375] Psychogenic or dissociative fugues are a type of dissociative amnesia. Which is a thing I’ve actually had, where I dissociated from myself and I didn’t remember what happened for stretches of time or I remembered things as autoscopies (i.e. out-of-body experiences). I use past tense here because it hasn’t happened since I was a teenager, and it was caused by traumatic experiences, not symptomatic of something else. Fictional villains are often characterized with various dissociative disorders (DID, dissociative identity disorder or more commonly known as multiple personality disorder, is probably the most common), so the symptoms of those disorders are implicitly or explicitly demonized. As someone who’s personally experienced those symptoms, I try to humanize them instead.

[376] Kunari (كانياري) is the Arabic word for “canary.” Sara’s name, al-Ta’ir al-Usfar (which is a more linguistically accurate version of Ta-er al-Sahfer, the name *Arrow* gave her) actually translates as “yellow bird.”
Hypothesis: the brain is “lighting up.”
Hypothesis: to burn and not consume.
Hypothesis: to consume and not extinguish.

Daphne Gottlieb, “Because You Are a Libra There Is a Cherub at the Gates with a Flaming Sword and the Point Is Just I Love You”


After the particle accelerator exploded, Farooq went into a prolonged dissociative fugue symptomatic of what the scientists at S. T. A. R. Labs are calling incomplete metagenic dominance. Or, what happens when two or more dominant metagenes try to express themselves at the same time. Farooq was compelled to attack Harrison Wells to avenge his friends, Jacob Davenport and Daria Kim, who died the night of the incident that gave him the fulgurkinetic ability to manipulate electric charges.

No charges have been filed against him for the murder of Casey Donahue. According to assistant C. S. I. Barry Allen, who took the lead on the forensic aspects of the case, the C. C. P. D. hasn’t found sufficient evidence connecting Gibran with Donahue’s untimely death.

From “The Metahuman Theses: Blackout” by Iris West
Printed in the Central City Citizen on 25 November 2014

Iris is too shocked to say much as Caitlin draws her blood and puts the sample in the refrigerator before she takes another sample from Barry and starts running tests to see if anything has changed inside his body on a subatomic level. Mac gets the first aid kit she keeps in her desk and tries to touch Syd’s burnt arm, but he jerks away so hard he grits his teeth in pain and glares at her.

“I’m sorry,” she tells him softly. “I know it hurts, but if you don’t run it under cold water, it’s going to feel a lot worse tomorrow.”
Lily folds her arms as Syd winces over to the sink to run a stream of cold water over the burn and pats it dry with a sharp hiss. “What the hell happened?” she wants to know.

“What was he even doing back there?” Cisco asks, frowning so hard the space between his eyebrows scrunches up. “That’s not where the generators are.”

Eobard sighs. “I sent him down the wrong hallway,” he admits.

Barry whirs in his seat to face him, lower extremities blurring within the abrupt movement. “Why?”

“To divert our intruder’s attention while we worked to restore your speed,” Eobard says matter-of-factly.

Caroline gawks at him. “You used Syd as a distraction?” she blurs out incredulously.

“How could you do that?” Iris asks, quiet and overwhelmed.

Eobard nods, curtly. “I had a choice to make,” he says, “him or all of us. I chose us without a second thought.”

“Wow,” Barry shakes his head so fast he starts blurring again, “all your talk about miracle cures and scientific breakthroughs, and you don’t care about people at all.”

“Well, maybe you care too much, Barry,” Eobard snaps back. “I know being a hero is important to you, and I respect your ideals. I just don’t have the luxury of sharing them.”

“I forgot,” Barry retorts, “your game’s chess. We’re all just pawns to you, right?”

Joe looks at Mac, who’s gnawing on the inside of her cheek the way she does whenever she’s trying not to speak without thinking. “So what’s your move, Doctor?” he murmurs. “Which one of us gets sacrificed next?”

Mac huffs to break the silence that’s stretching out between them, heavy and palpable. “I’m texting Shawna,” she says as she swipes her thumb across the screen of her phone. “Syd needs to get his arm checked out, and I think Joe needs to get some tests done. I’ve never healed anyone before. I don’t know how I did it or if there might be side effects.”

Joe nods. “Beam me up, Shawna,” he deadpans after she appears in the middle of the cortex and stuffs her hands into the pockets of her jacket. Shawna rolls her eyes at the detective and teleports out with Syd first before she reappears and puts one hand on his shoulder.

Iris offers her elbow to the teleporter. “I’m going with my dad,” she says. “I want to help, but I just found out that I’m a metahuman and I have no idea how to use my abilities or what they even are —”

“I think your power is anemokinesis,” Mac informs her, “the ability to manipulate air, wind, and sometimes other gaseous substances. I might’ve assumed telekinesis, but typically people with psionic abilities generate and control electric fields they use to move things with their minds, and I didn’t sense anything like that from you.”

Iris blinks at her, nonplussed, and is opening her mouth to ask if that means she might be able to fly when Shawna tucks one hand in the crook of her elbow and teleports out.

“We have to get out of here,” Eobard says.
“Shawna can’t take all of us,” Caroline mutters. “It’s not fair to keep using her like she’s a taxi, not a person.”

Eobard hums softly in tacit agreement. “Well,” he says, “it’s my move, Ms. Allen, and I say we make a run for it.”

Mac shakes her head slowly. “I’m not going anywhere,” she informs him. “Farooq is down in the garage. Barry, I need you to distract him for me. I can help him, but I need to touch him to do it.”

“How?” Barry wants to know.

Mac slants her gaze to Eobard, who’s watching her intently enough to make her nauseous. “I’m going to send an electrical impulse to his brain,” she explains, “one that should make one of his dominant metagenes dormant and bring him back to whoever he was before he got stuck in a prolonged fugue state.”

“We can use the mobile lab van to get out of here,” Cisco adds, “with or without Blackout.”

Eobard nods. “Let’s move,” he says.

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Farooq is lurking in the garage, the lights flickering ominously as his eyes glimmer in the dark. Eobard stops moving and he keeps clicking the buttons on his chair even though he should know better. After all, it runs on electricity.

*I might actually feel sorry for him, Mac thinks, if he wasn’t pretending to be disabled.*

Caroline generates a forcefield around them, a surge of bright white energy that makes Farooq wince and shut his eyes. Cisco puts one hand on her waist and tries to gather seismic energy in the palm of the other, ready to fight for her and for their friends. Caitlin moves to grab Lily’s hand and holds it, clinging.

“Finally you show your face,” Farooq murmurs.

“Well,” Eobard says, “I wasn’t exactly eager to be killed.”

“Neither were my friends,” Farooq retorts.

“I know,” Eobard tells him softly. “I hurt a lot of people that night.”

Farooq exhales a sharp, shuddering scoff. “You don’t even know their names,” he snarls.

“Jake Davenport,” Eobard says. “Daria Kim. Ralph Dibny, Al Rothstein, Will Everett, Grant Emerson…” he looks over his shoulder at Caitlin before he says, “…Ronnie Raymond. I know the names of every person who died that night. I know they all mattered, and the fact that the world is now deprived of their potential is something I have to live with every day,” he gives Mac a long, lingering look, “but these people have done nothing wrong. If you want to punish me, fine, let’s do that, but let these people live.”

Mac swallows thickly and looks away. There’s still a part of her that loved him once, and it hurts to remember that he isn’t just a monster; that he’s human, too. Which only makes things worse, because it’s simpler to think of people who do monstrous things as monsters set apart from the rest of humanity, but it’s wrong to ignore the monstrosities that human beings are capable of.

After all, we made the monsters. There’s nothing in our myths that isn’t rooted in reality—no
monstrosity that isn’t part of our species, part of our stories.

“You died that night, too,” Farooq says, his voice shaking with rage. “You just didn’t know it ’til today.”

Barry speeds back to the cortex to suit up and returns a fraction of a second later to stand between Farooq and Eobard. Mac props her cane against the side of one of their vans and siphons the electricity Farooq has been accumulating out of him. There’s too much to take all at once, every volt he stole from her city. When he electrocutes Barry, the radiant energy resonates until the speedforce pulses between them and they both fall to their knees. Barry screams. Farooq wails at how bright the energy is, how wrong it feels inside his body. Mac hobbles over to splay her hands over his head and conducts a more palatable current of electricity through him. Farooq gasps as Barry watches his eyes fade from eerie blue to warm brown. Eobard can’t take his eyes off her, his mind considering the implications of what Mac is doing to the other fulgurkinetic at breakneck speed.

Farooq turns and looks over his shoulder at her. “What did you do to me?” he whispers, his voice raw from screaming.

“I saved you from yourself,” Mac informs him, “you’re welcome.”

Farooq tries to insist he should turn himself in once he’s coherent enough to process what he did to Casey Donahue. Mac points out that he won’t be able to learn how to control his powers at Iron Heights, and he can do more for this world by becoming an electrical engineer—the degree he was pursuing before the particle accelerator exploded and he dropped out of Hudson University—than he ever could sitting in a six-by-eight-foot cell. Farooq stops arguing with her eventually and goes to catch a bus to his mother’s house in New Mansour, a neighborhood in Keystone that has a majority population of Muslim-Americans and Muslim immigrants. Mac flops back in her chair and exhales a soft whoosh of air. I’m winning, she thinks, and it feels good.

“Look,” Caitlin tilts her tablet to show Barry something on the screen, “this is a sample of your blood from just after you were struck by lightning,” she swipes one of her fingers across the screen to show him something else, “and this is the sample I took an hour ago. Now your cells are generating more energy than ever before.”

Barry watches her scroll back and forth between the images to showcase the difference. It’s obvious that his cells are more supercharged in the aftermath of Mac using her powers to give him back his speed. Whether that’s because of her or not, he feels more connected to her than he did before. When she yawns, he waits to catch her eye and smiles at her. Mac smiles back and holds his gaze for a fraction of a second that he might’ve missed if he wasn’t a speedster before she looks away.

“But what does that mean?” Cisco asks.

“I think it means he’s kicked it up a notch,” Caroline says.

Barry clears his throat awkwardly once he’s alone in the cortex with Mac, who’s doing something on the computer at the circular desk, and Eobard. “Dr. Wells,” he says. “What I said about how you don’t care about people. I…”

“No.” Eobard sighs with one hand gesticulating vaguely in front of him while the other lingers on the toggle he uses to move around in his chair. “Look, Barry. There is a reason my biography describes me as arrogant, prickly, brusque—”
“‘At times contemptuous,’” Barry quotes. Eobard arches his eyebrows at him. Barry stuffs his hands in the pocket of his jacket and hunches his shoulders into a shrug. “I read it twice,” he explains sheepishly.

Eobard exhales a quiet huff of laughter and shakes his head. “I don’t care much for people, Barry,” he says. “I find them misinformed, shortsighted.”

Barry frowns. “So why do you do what you do?” he asks, “why get up in the morning?”

“Well,” Eobard glances at Mac, “because I believe in a brighter future. One that I very much want to see. One that you are a part of. I might not care much for people, Barry…but I care about some of them. I care about you.”

Barry is too busy smiling at that to notice Mac biting the inside of her cheek hard enough to draw blood. After that, he speeds to the clinic and finds out that Dr. Claiborne wants to keep Joe overnight for observation. Iris is planning on spending the night in the hospital, so Barry speeds back to S. T. A. R. Labs with Joe’s keys and drives Joe’s car to the clinic so they’ll have a way to get to work the next morning. Eddie has arrived by the time he returns, but seeing him sitting next to Iris and holding her hand doesn’t hurt as much anymore for some reason. Barry sits on Iris’s other side and smiles at Eddie, who smiles back.

Okay, Barry thinks as his heart actually skips a beat, I’ve been in love with Iris since I was eleven and I think I might also have a crush on her boyfriend. So…that’s a thing. This is happening.

Now.

What am I gonna do about it?

Mac waits for Barry to leave before she shuts down the system of computers and screens and shifts her focus to Eobard. “‘What if I can’t use my speed like I used to because traveling to the past and resequencing my DNA triggered the activation of another dominant metagene?’” she says in a harsh, biting voice. “That’s what you’re thinking, isn’t it?”

“What if I am?” Eobard retorts. “I don’t think you’d tell me one way or the other.”

Mac shrugs and hobbles around the circular desk. “I lied,” she informs him, “that night I came to your house I was trying to kill you, but the speedforce wouldn’t let me. I felt it inside of you and it…” she frowns, the space between her eyebrows furrowing. “Well, it didn’t say anything exactly,” she articulates. “I don’t think it can talk outside of its dimension. Which is probably why it thinks striking people with lightning is a form of communication, but I understood it enough to know it’s keeping you here. I didn’t know about incomplete metagenic dominance until I remembered my darkest timeline, and I didn’t know you had it until I saw you that night. I figured if I couldn’t kill you, I’d reverse it and see if you could change.”

Eobard takes his glasses off to look at her, to see if she’s telling the truth. It startles him that he doesn’t know. After all, he thought he knew everything about her until now. “I love you,” he tells her softly. “I know you hate me, and that you should, but I need you to know I still—”

“I don’t care,” Mac says, “because you haven’t changed. I know you love me. I know you never stopped. I just don’t care. I don’t want your love, Eobard. I don’t want someone who cares more about having me all to himself than making me happy. I don’t want someone who can say he loves me and mean it while he rapes me and kills the people I love and tears my heart out because I’m not what he wants me to be.”
Eobard watches her hobble over to the elevator and swallows the angry lump in his throat. “Mackenzie,” he says quietly, unsure where to begin.

“I don’t love you anymore,” Mac tells him. “I will never love you again. If you care about me at all, you’ll let me go.”

“I’m not going to kill whoever this boyfriend of yours is,” Eobard says matter-of-factly. “That would be a waste of time and energy.”


Eobard watches her yawn again as the sliding doors move to seal her fate. “I’ll see you tomorrow, Mackenzie,” he says.

After all, tomorrow is another day.

Joe waits for Eddie to leave his hospital room in search of caffeinated beverages and turns to give Barry a look. “I need a minute alone with my daughter,” he says pointedly.

Barry nods, a quick bobble of his head. “Okay,” he mumbles, “I’ll just…go somewhere that isn’t here.”

Iris frowns because he’s only used that voice once before, the night he told her that her mom was dead. “What’s wrong?” she asks as soon as Barry is gone.

Joe sighs. “There’s something that I need to tell you, Iris,” he says, “something I probably should’ve told you a long time ago—”

“Joe?” a hauntingly familiar voice says.

Iris looks up and sees a woman standing in the doorway in a gorgeous red dress and a soft-looking beige coat. There’s a stab of hurt in her brown eyes, a quiver in her lips, and a tarnished gold wedding band on her ring finger. It’s been so long, but that doesn’t matter. Iris would know her anywhere.

“Mom?” she whispers.

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[377] Michael Amar first appeared in *The Flash: Iron Heights* Vol. 1, No. 1 (“Iron Heights”) August, 2001 and in *Arrow* 3x16 (“The Offer”) 18 March 2015. Farooq is based on a character from the comics named Farooq Amar, who only exists in the Flashpoint timeline. Which is why I made the Arrowverse version of Murmur his father: because their surname in the comics is the same and I like fleshing out backstories for minor characters, obviously.


When she comes home, Mac finds a note on the fridge that reads:

Mac,

Went to Saints and Sinners w/Lisa and Mick. I won’t do anything that you don’t want me to do, but I can’t sit around twiddling my thumbs while you’re in danger.

I love you.

—L

While she doesn’t notice that he’s older than her most of the time because his emotional maturity—or lack thereof—puts them more or less on the same level, it’s glaringly obvious sometimes. When he does something like writing her a note on paper instead of texting her, for instance.

Mac sighs and props her cane by the door before she hobbles into their bedroom, undressing herself gracelessly as she goes: socks toed off into blobs of sheer fabric, bra peeled out from under her dress because she’s been sweating and wearing underwire for hours and she’s too impatient to take her dress off first, leggings in a rumpled pile on the floor. There’s a cold sheen of sweat that’s dried on her skin, chills shivering through her once she’s naked and standing in the ensuite with one hand on the edge of the sink for balance. Mac turns the shower on and leaves her glasses next to the sink before she flops into her shower chair and heaves another sigh, longer and louder.

When she told Eobard that she didn’t care about his feelings, she wasn’t lying, but surges of adrenaline seething through her veins had made her reckless. Oh, she believes his plans to return to the future unequivocally matter more to him than she does; but that doesn’t mean he’s stopped thinking he’s entitled to her simply because he loves her.
History shows that her feelings don’t matter to him. There’s no reason to take him at his word, no reason to trust him at all.

When she’s half-asleep, Mac hears the thrum of a motorcycle engine outside. It cuts off with a soft withering sound before Len walks up the front stairs onto the porch and unlocks the door. There’s a familiar rhythm in the quiet clatter of his keys in the bowl on the coffee table, the sound of his footsteps coming down the hall toward their bedroom, the subtle cadence of his breathing. It uproots the tension in her shoulders and makes her sigh as she wakes herself back up while he folds himself onto their bed next to her.

Len peels back the blankets with one hand and touches her face so gently that her heart clenches horribly in her chest. Mac kisses the heel of his palm softly and he swallows hard. “Hi,” he murmurs.

Mac doesn’t get a chance to say *Hi* back to him because he’s kissing her breathless, tangling the fingers of one hand in the hair at the nape of her neck where her braid is loose and wrapping his other arm tight around her waist to pull her flush against his chest. Len curls his fingers into the flabby curve of her bare waist and squeezes with enough pressure to make her moan sweetly into his mouth before he breaks the kiss.

“You’re safe,” he whispers.

Mac nods and nuzzles his nose with hers. “It was never me I was worried about,” she tells him softly.

“Yeah,” Len mutters, “that’s the problem.”

Mac sighs and kisses the corner of his mouth instead of pointing out that she can take care of herself. Len knows that, and he trusts her to call the shots in the aspects of her life that are just hers. S. T. A. R. Labs is her business; metahumans are her people. Len won’t interfere with that unless she wants him to get involved.

Trouble is, he’s all in—and the way he sees it, that makes her business his, too. When she told him to mind his own business and stay out of the line of fire, he had the epiphany that he’d go down in flames for her.

*Never thought I would hate being left out in the cold*, he thinks, pressing his forehead against hers and skimming one hand up from her waist to thumb at the soft underside of her breast while he tries to ignore the tightness in his throat.

Mac sleeps in her underwear and nothing else. There’s something incredibly sexy about her all but naked in their bed smelling clean and sweet from her shower. Len cups her breast and swirls his thumb in a slow circle over her nipple while he glances down the line of her body to see that her panties are a pale shade of blue, light enough that he wants to tease her and see how wet he can make her just by touching her through her underwear. Mac whimpers and clutches at his shoulder.

Len groans and buries his face in her hair as her other hand finds his half-hard cock and strokes him through the thick material of his jeans.

“…why are you still wearing pants?” Mac asks breathlessly.

Len grabs her wrist and holds her gaze while he moves to kneel on top of her and pin both of her hands over her head, keeping his eyes on her face to see if she’s in the mood for this. Mac doesn’t seem to mind him holding her down. Instead she arches under him to taste the sharp jut of his collarbone with a lingering flick of her tongue. Len smirks and hunches to put most of his weight
on his elbow and knees before he slips his free hand down between her legs.

“You’re wet already, sweetheart,” he drawls as she spreads her legs further apart for him and moans at the sensation of his fingertip stroking along her slit through the soft fabric of her panties. “You want me that badly, hmm?”

Mac nods. “I’m yours,” she tells him softly. “I always want you. I missed you so much tonight, Len. I wished you were there with me. I know that’s selfish, but I…”

Len stops her mouth with a kiss so hot that she feels it from the crown of her head to the tips of her tingling, tightly curled toes because that was exactly what he desperately wanted—and needed—to hear. Mac kisses him back while he rubs the wetness soaked into the crotch of her underwear around, the sensation of his thumb against her clit slightly less intense with her panties in the way but still enough to make her moan and squirm.

“I could make you come like this,” he murmurs as her muscles clench all through her belly and thighs. “I’m not going to, not until I get my mouth on you, anyway… but I could.”

Mac rolls her eyes and smiles at him. Len sucks in a sharp breath as heat flares in his cheeks and down his neck. When he moves to get on his knees between her legs, he keeps his eyes on her face to watch her glasses fog up around the edges. Then he kisses her cunt through her panties and sucks on the soaking wet fabric before he slowly drags his tongue along her slit to her clit. Mac jolts and jerks her hips up hard enough that he has to hold her down with both hands—one splayed over her belly, the other squeezing one of her hips just hard enough to make her clench tight from the inside. Len hums against her and his cock twitches in his jeans as she bites her bottom lip to muffle a litany of lewd noises.

Then someone knocks on their door, the frantic sound reverberating like a thunderclap out of the blue. Len groans as she squirms out from under him. Mac hobbles to their closet and yanks one of his softly worn shirts over her head before she goes to answer it. Whoever is knocking on their door at one-seventeen in the morning isn’t allowed to complain about seeing her thunder thighs in all their pale glory.

While she gapes at her mother, the blur of her memories from twenty-two years ago fading into the woman in red framed by the entrance to her father’s hospital room, Iris’s mind races faster than any speedster could ever run until her thoughts are overlapped and obvoluted into one long internal scream.

*Mac brought my dad back to life tonight,* she thinks. *I shouldn’t be surprised that my mom is alive.*

Iris doesn’t hesitate: she grabs the jacket her dad left on the chair next to her, takes his keys out of the right-hand pocket, and stomps past her mom into the hallway. Francine tries to stop her with a hand on her shoulder, but Iris shakes her off and she storms down the hallway past Barry with his hands full of snacks from one of the vending machines, and past Eddie with coffee he charmed one of the nurses into making with the French press in their breakroom, until she’s texting Cisco from the passenger seat of her dad’s car to ask where Mac lives before she speeds off into the night.

Mac lives so deep in the woods that she thinks she might have gotten the address wrong for a few minutes there in the dark until she sees a familiar MINI Cooper, its blue exterior illuminated by the headlamps on her dad’s car before she parks and kills the lights.

There are no lights on inside the house. Iris still doesn’t hesitate to knock on the door. Mac answers with an annoyed expression that slips into something more scrutinizing once she sees who
knocked.

“What’s wrong?” she asks.

Iris shuts her eyes tight as tears threaten to fall. “I saw my mom tonight,” she says, “you know how my dad told me she died twenty-two years ago? Apparently not.”

Mac sighs. “I know,” she says.

Iris opens her eyes. “How?” she blurts incredulously.

Mac shrugs. “I’m a technopath,” she says apologetically, “if it’s online, I know about it, and that’s how I know Francine West doesn’t have any funeral records. No burial or cremation. I didn’t bother to check the county records office,” she turns to hobble down the hallway and flops onto the couch, “but I doubt she has a death certificate and I’m guessing Joe never took you to her gravesite.”

“No.” Iris exhales the word so heavily that it weighs down the air between them as she folds herself into the armchair on the other side of the coffee table. “I don’t think he ever did.”

Mac nods. “There are divorce records,” she informs her almost mechanically. “Filed on 2 June 1992, citing irreconcilable differences. Finalized two months later on 1 August 1992.”

Iris gives her an incredulous look. “You just looked that up,” she deduces. “You just accessed sealed divorce court records with your brain.”

Mac nods again, slowly. “You’ve seen me do that before,” she says.

“I’ve never seen you do it without touching a computer,” Iris points out.

“I have more in common with a computer than I do with most people,” Mac deadpans. Iris laughs in spite of how overwhelmed she is and smiles at Mac, who smiles back.

Len ruins the moment when he emerges from the bedroom and drawls, “Who’s your friend, sweetheart?”

Mac turns to look at him over her shoulder and makes an indignant noise because he’s not wearing a shirt. Len folds his arms over his bare chest and smirks at her. Iris gawks at him before she looks at Mac, gobsmacked. “What the hell is Captain Cold doing in your house?” she asks in a shrill hiss of a whisper.

“Um,” Mac ekes the mm sound out awkwardly.

“I live here,” Len drawls. “This is my house, too.”

Mac groans. “Len,” she huffs, “cut it out. Iris has been through enough today without you taking your insecurities out on her.”

“Mac,” Iris shakes her head in disbelief, “how can you be living with him? He’s a criminal. He was going to shoot my dad! He would’ve, if Eddie hadn’t been there! He tried to kill Barry!”

When she shouts, the empty air in the room spins into a whirlwind that knocks Len back against the wall. Mac sighs and generates an electromagnetic pulse to dampen Iris’s powers. Len cocks his head and arches his eyebrows at the anemokinetic reporter.

“Well,” he snarks back, “I guess revealing the Flash’s secret identity in the heat of the moment
runs in the family.”


Iris is shocked—pun unintended—when he actually looks guilty. Len steals a glance at her as the whirlwind unspools and exhales a petulant huff.

“Sorry,” he mutters.

Iris acknowledges his apology with a curt nod. “What do you mean, it runs in the family?” she wants to know.

“Well,” Len flicks his tongue against his teeth to elongate the mellifluous l sound, “your dad showed up here last week and he let it slip that Barry Allen is the Flash. Mac is a bad liar,” he says before he stands in one smooth movement and goes to sit on the couch next to her, “so I get why you both thought she told me, but that’s not what happened, because she cares too much about you, and Cisco, and Caitlin, and Barry. Oh,” he drawls, lingering on the shape of the vowel, “and for the record, I wasn’t actually trying to kill him. I just didn’t realize there were two speedsters in Central City.”

“You thought the Flash was the man in yellow,” Iris deduces, “the speedster who murdered Barry and Caroline’s mother…” she glances at Mac as comprehension dawns, “…and killed Mac’s father.”

“Iris,” Mac whispers, “he did a lot more than just crash my father’s car. I dated him for two years. I was engaged to him. I loved him before I realized who he was and what he’d done.”

Iris frowns, the space between her eyebrows furrowing. “Mac,” she says, “you’re not making any sense.”

When she flashes back to the night she died on the road, Mac bites down on the inside of her cheek and exhales a sharp breath through her nose as the jolt of pain brings her back to the present.

“Iris,” she says, “you said you trusted me seven months ago before you helped me get Helena out of Starling City. I need you to trust me now. What I’m saying doesn’t make any sense to you because you don’t know the truth. Joe came to see me last week because he realized who the man in yellow is but he didn’t want to believe it. I told him the truth,” she says, “and now I’m going to tell you.”

Len takes one of her hands in both of his. Mac squeezes his fingers and forces herself to meet Iris’s eyes.

“I’m from the future,” she says.

Iris looks at her with an unreadable expression before she stands up and walks out.

Mac closes her eyes and exhales with enough force to flap her lips. “Well,” she deadpans, “that could’ve gone better.”
Seeing Red (1) Expressing Anger Is Necessary

We go for the throat in anger.
We have bad genes and good minds.
We drag a load of peacock tales sweeping the dust.

Myths come to life around us
like butterflies hatching, bright and voracious.

Marge Piercy, “Brotherless One: Sun God”

Shock Value
Part 2
Myth Can Make Reality More Intelligible
Book II
Lightning Doesn’t Strike Twice
Chapter 53
Seeing Red
(1 of 3)

“We still don’t know how much time we have. If we’re even asking the right questions. I thought waiting a week or a month or three years for the next piece of the story had made me a patient person. Of course, that was when I only had fictional people to worry about.”

Faith Herbert
Faith Vol.1, No.3 (“The Moment”)
September, 2016

I
Expressing Anger Is Necessary

I am always angry.

I’m angry at the injustice in this world. I’m angry that I have to see my rapist every day, and I can’t tell my friends the whole truth about myself because of him and his long history of murdering the people I love. I’m angry because I can’t feel happy or safe without flashing back to the night he killed my biological father…the first time he killed me. I’m angry that sometimes I can still feel his hand vibrating inside my chest, his fingers squeezing my heart into a bloody pulp.

I’m angry because sometimes I miss the illusory version of Eobard that shattered after I woke up next to him as Mac instead of Rose. I’m angry that he can still make me laugh, that I still like his sense of humor, that he still thinks he knows me well enough to manipulate me.

I don’t get overwhelmed by anger—I don’t lose focus—but that doesn’t make me immune to the other problems that anger causes. When you bottle up your feelings, they pressurize until you reach a boiling point and explode.

When I reach mine, the force of the explosion is going to change everything.
Iris has been spending most of her nights with Eddie at his apartment since Joe found out that his partner is also her boyfriend. There’s no pressure and nothing to hide…except the big fat secret she’s keeping from him and how guilty she feels for keeping the man she loves out of the loop. It occurs to her that she can’t imagine her life without him, and that means she needs to find a way to tell him everything.

Well, she thinks as she flicks her gaze away from the screen of her laptop and glances down at the journals that Mac gave to her to read, the journals that contain the whole impossibly true story of her life as a time traveler, maybe not everything.

Iris turns to look back over her shoulder at Eddie and smiles at him as she clicks through to the front page of her blog. “Another picture of the Flash came in,” she tells him. “See?”

Eddie frowns skeptically and shakes his head before he moves to get a closer look at the picture. “You mean that red blur?” he says. “How do you know that wasn’t photoshopped?”

“It wasn’t,” Iris retorts as she watches him button up his shirt. “It’s not a hoax or a mass hallucination. There are metahumans in Central City. You’ve seen what they can do. You haven’t seen the Flash yet, but every day, someone new accepts the impossible and believes in him. Why can’t you?”

Eddie smiles and crawls back across the mattress to sit next to her. “I believe in what I can see,” he tells her softly, “what I can touch,” his calloused fingertips linger over her shoulder while he leans in, “what I can feel. Which,” he whispers conspiratorially before he cups her face in his hands and kisses her, “means I believe in you.”

After a week of the should-be-patented West family judgmental silent treatment, Iris texts Mac to ask if she wants to have breakfast at a place around the corner from C. C. P. N. called Upper Crust. Mac orders a cheese omelette with a side of potatoes and gnaws on the inside of her cheek once their server is out of earshot.

“So,” Iris takes a sip of her Americano before she gives Mac a knowing smile, “I read all of your journals.”

Mac flushes bright red. “Please tell me you skipped the smutty parts,” she whispers.

Iris smiles impossibly wider. “Nope,” she says, popping the p sound.

Mac blushes so hot that her glasses fog up. “I didn’t think I would ever get a chance to fall in love again when I wrote that stuff down,” she mumbles, “and I didn’t think I would ever feel safe again. I wanted to remember how it felt to love and be loved by someone who’s never hurt me.”

Iris looks down at the coffee cup in her hands and focuses on the warmth seeping into her fingertips instead of the chilling horror of everything that Mac went through. “I’m sorry,” she says. “I shouldn’t have walked out on you that night. I’ve been trying to get you to tell me your story for months now, but when you finally told me the truth I was too overwhelmed to hear it.”

Mac shakes her head slowly. “Iris, you have nothing to apologize for,” she says, “you found out that your best friend is a superhero like two weeks ago, and then in the span of a few hours you watched your father die, superpowers of your own emerged, you found out that your father lied to
you about what happened to your mother for most of your life, and learned time travel is less science fiction and more science fact.”

“I also found out that my other best friend—one of them, anyway—is dating a criminal,” Iris points out, “and that my dad hasn’t arrested your boyfriend for stealing the diamond from the Kahndaq exhibit at the museum and derailing a train because he wants him to use the gun he stole from S. T. A. R. Labs to kill the speedster from the future who murdered Barry and Caroline’s mom.”

Warmth unfurls in her chest as Mac glances over her shoulder to see if anyone is listening to their conversation, even though she knows no one could electronically record what they’re saying without her knowledge and no one is close enough to overhear them organically. “I’m one of your best friends?” she asks with an edge of vulnerability in her voice.

Iris frowns at her. “Of course you are,” she says, “my dad told me the man in yellow threatened to kill me if he kept trying to find out who really murdered Nora Allen. I’m still mad at you and Barry and my dad for keeping me out of the loop, but I understand that you lied because you were trying to protect me.”

“I was trying to protect myself, too,” Mac tells her sheepishly, “but…you read my journals. I lost my husband. I lost the future I was fighting for. I lost an entire world. I lost myself. I don’t want to lose anything—or anyone—else. I am sorry I lied to you. I just don’t know what else to do. I can’t tell Barry. There’s no way he’d be able to keep up the façade, even to contain the threat of the Reverse-Flash. Which is why I’ve been keeping this secret,” she pauses to take a long drink of water and exhale a heavy sigh, “because he seems to like being part of Team Flash, and that means he has something to lose, at least as long as Barry isn’t up to speed. I can’t tell Caroline, because she’d tell Barry. I can’t tell Cisco, because he’d tell Caroline, and she’d tell Barry. I can’t tell Caitlin, because she’s always been the most loyal to Dr. Wells. I can’t tell Lily, because she’d tell Caitlin. I can’t tell Syd, because he’s been angry ever since he found out that I have a boyfriend and I have no idea why. It’s not like who I date is any of his business.”

Iris tries and fails to muffle a spurt of laughter. “Syd likes you,” she clarifies, still trying not to laugh and failing spectacularly. It only gets worse once she looks up and sees the expression of pure shock on Mac’s face. “Wait,” Iris gapes at her as her voice pitches incredulously higher, “you seriously didn’t know that?”

Mac gapes before she closes her mouth. “I’m his boss…” she fizzles out on the sibilant as comprehension dawns, “…and he’s been flirting with me for months and I’ve been oblivious the whole time.”

“Yes.” Iris nods, a quick bob of her head. “Yes, you have.”

“Ugh…” Mac groans loudly before she changes the subject. “So why did you come to talk to me about your mom?” she wants to know.

Iris sighs. “I told Eddie,” she murmurs, “and we had a really good talk about it after he helped calm me down, but I still haven’t told Barry or Caroline. I know they’d give anything to have one more day with their mom. I don’t even know if I want to see mine after everything that happened. Lola thinks we should talk to her together so it’s on our terms, not hers. I just don’t think I’m ready for that.”

“Jeepers,” Mac says, “your sister is such a lawyer.”

Iris smiles and laughs, a warm sound that moves through her belly. “I know, right?” she says. “Oh! There was something else I wanted to ask you…” she leans in and whispers conspiratorially, “…
can you teach me how to fly?”

Mac smiles back. “Yes,” she says. “Yes, I can.”

Mac spends the next few hours answering every question Iris has about temporal mechanics to the best of her knowledge before she hobbles back to where she parked her MINI Cooper—in a handicapped space behind the bank across the street because it was as close as she could get to the restaurant—and tunes into the radio frequency Team Flash uses to see what’s going on back at S. T. A. R. Labs. Then she stops cold as she senses a strange electric field. It doesn’t feel anything like TTK fields that people with psionic abilities have, or the plasma field that Barry generates when he runs. It feels…red.

“Barry,” Lily is saying, “robbery in progress at Gold City Bank.”

“I got it,” Barry says.

“Wait,” Caitlin interjects with her furrowed brow audible in her voice, “that’s where I bank.”

“Once super thieves showed up,” Cisco mutters, “I went mattress.”

Mac stops trying to buckle her seatbelt and jolts as she hears a muffled cacophony of angry, clawing screams. When a gunshot ricochets over the radio frequency and echoes from inside the bank out into the parking lot, the harsh sound rings palpably in her ears as she meets the blaring eyes of the thin man fleeing the scene of the crime—and sees red, red, red.

While his best friend is learning about the minutiae of time travel as theorized by a librarian from the twenty-second century, Barry drops the suit off at S. T. A. R. Labs and speeds to the precinct to pick up his forensics kit. Then he responds to the robbery at Gold City Bank without the mask. While he tells Joe that he thinks a metahuman caused the riot, Eddie collects statements from the bewildered rioters. There’s a common thread in all of their stories: none of them know why they got so angry, they just saw red and things went horribly wrong.

Eddie hears the word “red” at a robbery where the Flash was seen leaving the scene and he starts to think that’s kind of suspicious. Once he’s back at the precinct, he decides to share his suspicions with the Captain. Maybe it’s the jealousy talking. Maybe he doesn’t think he can trust a hero who zooms around the city, never stopping long enough for people to see that he’s more than just a modern myth. Maybe it’s both, but that doesn’t mean the C. C. P. D. shouldn’t be investigating people who take justice into their own hands.

When she comes to the precinct to meet Eddie for lunch, Iris sees Barry frowning as he watches her boyfriend talk to Singh. “Hey,” she says. “What’s going on in there?”

Barry exhales a frustrated noise. “I think Eddie’s trying to convince the captain that the Flash is a public menace,” he mutters.

Iris whirls on Eddie as soon as the captain tells him to get back to work. “So,” she says, “after a month of trying to convince you that the Flash is real, now that you finally do believe me, you’re trying to have him arrested? What the hell?”

“Don’t worry,” Eddie retorts, “the captain shot me down. Look,” he heaves a sigh and shakes his head in a futile attempt to shake the tension out of his shoulders, “I’m not feeling like lunch. I’ll see you later.”
Iris exhales a loud burst of air. “Sorry,” she tells Barry, “he’s just jealous.”

“Should he be?” Barry wants to know.

Iris shakes her head so fast she almost discombobulates herself. “No,” she blurts out. “I should go. I’ll see you later?”

“Yeah.” Barry smiles to himself as he watches her leave. Then he blurs into motion, using his speed to steal the double cheeseburger and fries on the captain’s desk before he speeds to S. T. A. R. Labs.

Joe sends the people from the bank to the clinic that Mac owns, where they all sign a waiver that gives the scientists at S. T. A. R. Labs permission to access to the results of their CT scans and bloodwork. If anyone looks at the paperwork, they’re officially trying to determine whether or not a neurotoxin was used on the people in the bank during the robbery; but unofficially, they’re trying to figure out how the metahuman who robbed the bank does what he does.

“Anger can be a powerful emotion,” Eobard murmurs. “If this metahuman can engender irrational feelings of anger in his victims, he can do a lot of damage.”

Caitlin nods as she pulls up the computerized tomographic renderings of the victims’ brains. “These are copies of the CT scans the clinic did on everyone at the bank,” she explains, “take a look.”

Lily tilts her head to one side and narrows her eyes at the scans. “It looks like their emotional centers are still showing signs of being overwhelmed,” she observes, “particularly the part of the brain that controls executive function.”

Caitlin hums her agreement as she highlights the frontal lobe of the brain on the screen. “Which is also the part of the brain that stops people from doing whatever random and potentially destructive thing that pops into their head,” she says.

Mac appears in the cortex with an earsplitting boom and generates a pulsing force that sends Eobard sprawling out of his wheelchair and into the wall behind him. “I can’t take it anymore,” she snarls at him. “I am done lying, do you hear me? I am done. So admit it,” she looks at him as her eyes fade from bright lightning strike white to ordinary grey, “admit what you did to Barry, to Caroline, to me—” she puts her weight on her cane as she takes one step closer to him, “—and don’t try to gaslight me or I will siphon the speedforce out of your body jolt by jolt and show everyone here the monster that you really are.”

It’s chaos for a few seconds. Barry speeds over to help Eobard and runs into an electric field that stops him cold, Cisco shouts that she’s been whammied, and Caitlin frowns as she starts to wonder what Mac thinks Dr. Wells did to Barry, to Caroline, to her…and then something impossible happens.

Dr. Wells stands up.

“Oh my god,” Lily whispers, “he can walk.”

Eobard rolls his eyes and exhales a derisive snort. “Very astute, Dr. Stein,” he tells her. “If only it hadn’t taken you almost a year to realize I was faking my injuries. Mackenzie had an unfair advantage,” he turns to smile at the woman who’s still glowering at him like a storm cloud, “and as for admitting what I did, Mackenzie? I loved you. I loved you so much that I murdered your family because I wanted you all to myself. I loved you so much that I ran back in time to kill the man who
took you from me and got stuck almost two centuries in the past. I loved you so much that I was going to leave you here in this place and time because that’s what you want—"

“So you could go back to a future version of me who would be easier to manipulate,” Mac retorts.

Eobard cocks his head and shrugs as he discards the glasses that he doesn’t actually need. “Fine,” he says, “you want me to admit it? I ruined your life. I raped you. I killed my parents, and my brother, and your father, and your ex-fiancée, and whoever else you tried to date before we met at the Flash Museum,” he slants his gaze to Barry and looks at him while he adds, “and I murdered Nora Allen. If you want me to be a villain,” he zooms over to where Lily is and vibrates his hand through her skull to scramble her brain, “then that’s what you’re going to get.”

“No!” Cisco shouts and throws a blast of seismic energy at Eobard, to the shock of everyone in the cortex. Caitlin covers her mouth to muffle a wordless scream as Lily flops onto the floor, blood oozing from her ears. Barry doesn’t even bother to put on the suit before he speeds out of the building after Eobard and chases him through the streets of the city in broad daylight.

Caitlin collapses and puts her head on Lily’s chest to listen for the sound of her breathing, for a heartbeat, for any sign of hope. Mac kneels next to Lily’s head and closes her eyes as she uses her powers to fix what Eobard broke. Caitlin makes a soft, desperate noise as Lily opens her eyes and says her name.

Mac smiles at them and uses her cane to get back on her feet before she blacks out.
You silly little girl,
you’ve survived so long
you think
survival shouldn’t hurt anymore.

You keep trying to turn
your body bulletproof.
You keep trying to turn your heart
bomb shelter.

Stop, darling.
You are soft and alive
you bruise and you heal. Cherish it.
It is what you were born to do.

Clementine Von Radics, “There Is the Worst and Then There Is More”

Shock Value
Part 2
Myth Can Make Reality More Intelligible
Book II
Lightning Doesn’t Strike Twice
Chapter 54
Seeing Red
(2 of 3)

II
Playing It Safe Can Cause a Lot of Damage in the Long Run

We all keep something to ourselves. We all keep secrets. We all keep things bottled up inside. If someone forced you to reveal everything you’ve been hiding, what would you do?

From “The Metahuman Theses: Rainbow Raider” by Iris West
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Iris arrives at S. T. A. R. Labs to find Mac unconscious and conscious members of Team Flash in shock, pun unintended. Cisco is using a portable CT machine to give Mac a brain scan. Which is odd, because he’s not the one who has a medical degree; but Caitlin is holding Lily’s hand and she doesn’t want to let go. When she looks around the room to see that Barry is nowhere to be seen and neither is Eobard, she doesn’t want to assume the worst even though her gut is telling her that something has gone horribly wrong. “What the hell happened?” she asks.

Cisco tenses at the sound of her voice before he turns to look at her. “Mac electroported into the cortex and started shouting at Dr. Wells,” he tells her softly, “told him that she was done lying and hit him with some kind of supercharged EMP.”
“Dr. Wells said all these horrible things,” Caitlin swallows hard, “and I don’t want to believe he was capable of doing what he said he did, but…” she bites her lip and squeezes Lily’s hand before she exhales a sharp breath, “…he lied about not being able to walk and he could have killed Lily.”

Lily smiles and squeezes back, gently. “Mac saved me,” she points out, “healing people takes a lot out of her, but she did it anyway because that’s who she is. Dr. Wells lied because he wants something from Barry. Mac lied because she didn’t want him to hurt us.”

“I can’t believe he was lying to us this whole time,” Cisco mutters and flaps his hands as something occurs to him. “Caitlin,” he ekes the *n* sound in her name out into a jittery mess of polysyllables, “remember when Mac told us that she’s from the future? Dr. Wells must be a time traveler, too.”

“Wait,” Lily squawks, “since when is Mac from the future, and since when did time travel stop being theoretical, for that matter?”

“2183,” Iris informs her, “since that’s the year she came from, and time is only linear because we experience it that way, so technically time travel has always been possible.”

“Um,” Cisco arches his eyebrows at Iris, “how do you know that?”

“Mac keeps a journal,” Iris explains, “it’s mostly audio recordings—because apparently that’s how people journal in the future—and I’ve been listening to her talk about temporal mechanics all week.”

Cisco flails and gasps audibly. “I need to hear those journals,” he intones. “Mac told us that she was from the future after we found Dr. Stein and the giant meta-spiders in the woods at Granite Peak National Park, and I figured she didn’t know how time travel works beyond her ability to create traversable wormholes—”

“Wait,” Lily holds up one hand to stop him. “What happened with my dad and the giant meta-spiders?”

“We think the meta-spiders were human before the particle accelerator exploded,” Caitlin tells her, “because Mac theorized that hominids were the only species who were affected by the particle accelerator explosion, and a lack of other meta-animals seems to support that theory. We went out into the woods to look for Dr. Stein, and he saved us from the meta-spiders.”

“I need to see those journals,” Cisco adds, repeating himself. Like history. “I need to see them right now.”

Iris glances at Mac as Lily and Caitlin lift her onto a bed from the med bay. “I’ll let you see the one with her theories about time travel if you help me hack her phone so I can call her boyfriend and tell him what happened,” she says.

“I don’t need to hack it,” Cisco says. “Mac’s passcode is fourteen-oh-eight, like the haunted hotel room in that Stephen King story.”

Iris extracts the phone from the messenger bag that Mac dropped on the floor at some point between teleporting into the cortex and raging at Dr. Wells. Then she hands the notebook where Mac archived her theories about temporal mechanics over to Cisco, who flaps one of his hands before he flips it open. Snart’s name in Mac’s phone is Cold as Ice. Like the Foreigner song. Iris snorts at that before she takes a selfie with Mac in the background to show him that she isn’t trying to lure him into a trap.
To: COLD AS ICE

Snart, this is Iris on Mac’s phone. Something happened. I think she needs you here at S. T. A. R. Labs.

Barry speeds into the cortex and stops next to Iris. “What’d I miss?” he asks, the words blurring into a squashed mess of syllables.

Iris glances down at Mac’s phone to see that Snart texted back.

From: COLD AS ICE

What happened?

Iris looks up to see Barry staring at her expectantly. “Why don’t you fill me in on what you found out about the robbery?” she says.

Barry nods as Lily brings up security camera footage from the bank at the time of the robbery on one of the wallscreens. “I think it’s safe to assume that the same metahuman—whose powers somehow lower inhibitions—must’ve whammied Mac,” he says, “that’s all I know so far. I was too busy trying to catch up with the man in yellow to check in with Joe or Eddie to see if they’ve made any progress in their investigation.”

To: COLD AS ICE

Gold City Bank was robbed by a metahuman with the ability to lower inhibitions this morning. Barry thinks he whammied Mac because otherwise she never would’ve attacked Dr. Wells.

Where are you?

“If you couldn’t outrun him,” Lily interjects, “that means we have to assume he’s faster than you are.”

Barry nods again, sharply. “When she wakes up,” he tilts his head at Mac, “we should ask her what his name is.”

From: COLD AS ICE

I’m almost there. My sister’s driving. Mac is…very important to her.

Iris sighs. “Okay,” she says, “Mac’s boyfriend and his sister are on their way here. I need to tell you something so you don’t freak out.”

Barry folds his arms and shrugs. “I don’t think anything you have to say will be worse than finding out that Dr. Wells killed my mother,” he points out.

Iris heaves another sigh before she bites the bullet. “Mac is dating Captain Cold,” she says.

“What?” Caitlin shrieks.

Iris winces at the shrillness of her shock and folds her arms without thinking about it, subconsciously mirroring Barry. “My dad realized that Dr. Wells is the man in yellow about two weeks ago,” she explains, “and he went to talk to Mac about it because he had a hunch that she knew something. Snart was there because they’ve been living together. My dad was so shocked
that he…” she ekes the *ee* sound out awkwardly, “…kind of accidentally told Snart that Barry is the Flash.”

Barry frowns so hard his forehead starts to crumple. “Wait,” he says, “if Snart has known who I am for weeks, why hasn’t he come after me? I mean, he wanted me dead pretty badly.”

“Yeah,” Iris says, “because he didn’t know there were two speedsters in Central City and he thought the Flash and the man in yellow were the same person.”

Cisco doesn’t bother to look up from the journal even though he’s trying to split his focus and listen to their conversation. “Snart wasn’t trying to kill you because you tried to catch him, Barry,” he deduces, “he was trying to kill you because he thought you were the guy who hurt his girlfriend.”

“Which is totally understandable,” Lily interjects. “If someone raped the woman I loved and murdered her father, I would probably try to shoot them, too.”

“Well,” says a sardonic voice, “isn’t that sweet?”

Caitlin flushes bright red as everyone else turns to watch the siblings enter the cortex. Len is dressed all in black: a black leather jacket and a soft black shirt over black jeans and heavy boots. Lisa is wearing faded blue jeans with a hole artfully worn through the knees, a faux leather jacket festooned with shiny gold zippers, a *Saints & Sinners* logo t-shirt, and black ankle boots with vaguely menacing stiletto heels. There’s a .38 special revolver holstered on her left hip, and a butterfly knife in the right-hand pocket of her jacket. While her brother isn’t visibly armed like she is, Len never goes anywhere without the semiautomatic .22 caliber pistol their grandfather Lester gave him before he died.

Lisa cocks one hip and smirks at Cisco. “Hey, Vibe,” she smirks wider and waves, a slow furling slash of her fingers. “I’m Lisa, but I think you know me better as Golden Glider.”

Cisco has been instant messaging Lisa sporadically for months now because he makes the bodysuits and an assortment of gizmos for the Gorgonites and the Birds of Prey, and she’s in charge of acquisitions for both teams. It’s nice to put a face to the name, but he had no idea she was so gorgeous. It’s throwing off his groove. “Um…” he swallows hard and waves back awkwardly. “Hi.”

Len steals a chair from one of the desks against the wall of the cortex and walks over to sit by Mac’s bedside. “So,” he drawls after he folds himself into the chair in one smooth movement, “what’s going to happen when Mac wakes up? ‘cause I’m telling you right now, she’s terrified you’re going to hate her for not spilling the beans about…all of this…” he flails one hand obliquely, “…sooner, even though she only did that to protect all of you from someone with a long history of murdering the people she cares about. If you want out, you should leave before she wakes up. I don’t want her to have to watch you go.”

Iris shrugs. “I had an out,” she tells him. “I didn’t take it.”

Caitlin and Cisco glance at each other before the bioengineer shakes her head. “Mac is our friend,” she says firmly.

“We’re not going anywhere,” Cisco adds.

Lily nods her agreement. “Mac saved my life,” she murmurs, “and she’s doing everything in her power to help me save my father. I trust her. I’m not leaving.”
Barry is opening his mouth to say something to a similar effect when Mac starts hyperventilating in her sleep. Lisa holds up a hand to stop Caitlin before she rushes to her bedside. “Mac has night terrors,” she explains. “It happens sometimes, but don’t worry. Lenny always takes care of her.”

Len puts one hand on her waist and bends to kiss her gently and meticulously until she remembers how to breathe. Mac gasps into his mouth as she wakes up and wraps her arms around him to feel the reality of his lips on hers, one hand clutching at the back of his head while she fists the other in the fabric of his shirt. Len breaks the kiss to press his forehead against hers and sucks in a sharp breath as she nuzzles his nose and makes an overwhelmingly soft noise that he knows intimately by now.

“I had such a bad dream,” Mac whispers, “everything was red and I put everyone in danger and I —”

Len swallows thickly. “It wasn’t a dream, sweetheart,” he says, “but your friends don’t hate you. I think they’re just…” he pulls back to smile at her, “…in shock.”

Mac snorts at the bad pun in spite of herself before she looks around the room. “Lisa,” she says, “I need you to alert the Birds of Prey and tell the Gorgonites that we have a Code Derecho.”

Cisco frowns at the word. “Code Straight?” he says. “Mac, I’m pretty sure no one in this lab is straight.”


Mac shakes her head as she adjusts her position so she’s sitting on the edge of the hospital bed with Len next to her. “Derechos are groups of thunderstorms that move fast and sometimes they generate flash floods,” she clarifies, “the codename I came up with for this worst-case scenario was a pun.”

Len smiles and laughs, a deeply warm sound that moves through his belly. Mac smiles back and ducks her head to nuzzle his shoulder. Len smiles wider and puts one of his arms around her. Mac exhales softly through her nose and leans into him as the tension oozes out of her body. “Okay,” she ekes the oh sound out into an ooh, “I need to call the S. C. P. D. so they can find the real Dr. Wells’ body.”

Iris wordlessly hands her phone back to her before Cisco offers her a voice distorter that she uses to anonymously make the call. Once that’s done, she slips her phone into the pocket of her skirt and exhales with enough force to flap her lips.

“Won’t that cause more problems than it solves?” Caitlin asks, “since the fake Dr. Wells owns twenty percent of the company?”

“Actually,” Mac says, “he doesn’t. I kept asking him to sign things like acquisitions deals and partnership contracts because he was still my business partner on paper even though I wasn’t letting him make any real business decisions, and eventually he just signed whatever I put in front of him. I’ve been the sole owner of the company for almost three months now.”

“Hold up,” Cisco says. “How did he not notice that?”

“I’m not saying he didn’t notice,” Mac says. “I know he did—in fact, he made a really passive-aggressive remark about it a few days later—but he didn’t try to fight me on it. I think that’s when he decided to leave me here in the present and try his luck with some other version of me in the future.”
“So,” Barry says, “what’s his name? I don’t think we should keep calling him ‘the man in yellow’ or ‘the fake Dr. Wells’ now that his secret’s out. It feels like he’s Voldemort or something.”

Mac covers her mouth to muffle a squeak of laughter. “Eobard,” she says after her shoulders aren’t shaking anymore, “his name is Eobard Thawne.”

“Wait.” Iris frowns, the space between her eyebrows furrowing. “Thawne, like Eddie?”

Mac gnaws on the inside of her cheek before she nods. “Eddie is his present-day ancestor,” she clarifies, “but he has no idea. Which is why I didn’t tell you about this until now. I don’t want you to see him any differently because of what his great-great-great-great-grandson has done.”

Iris folds her arms and turns to give Len a warning look. “If you hurt Eddie,” she says, “I will destroy you.”

Lisa smiles at her sweetly, poisonously. “I’d love to see you try,” she says in her softest, deadliest voice.

Mac is opening her mouth to interject when the alarm blares loudly enough to make her wince.

“What was that?” Barry asks.

Cisco uses his tablet to look at the alert from their monitoring system. “C. C. P. D. just got a ping,” he explains, “from the tracer in the stolen cash. S. W. A. T. team’s closing in.”

Barry nods and he turns to look at Mac. “When you told me that the man who murdered my mom killed your father, I realized that I didn’t have to do this alone anymore,” he tells her, “and neither do you. I’m going to get this metahuman, and then we’re going to find Eobard Thawne and bring him to justice…” he uses his powers to suit up and smiles at her before he pulls the cowl up over his face, “…together. Okay?”

Mac bites her lip and chokes back tears as he blurs into motion and speeds away. “Okay,” she says quietly. Like she means it.

Bivolo whammies one of the members of the S. W. A. T. team and he tries to shoot Joe before the Flash arrives on the scene, and a man in a green hood intervenes. Oliver, John, and Felicity are in Central City for a case they’re working on, and they’re operating out of a warehouse that Mac owns because Queen Consolidated went bankrupt and Team Arrow can’t afford to vigilante without her help anymore. Oliver is reluctant to reveal his secret identity to everyone at S. T. A. R. Labs, so Felicity offers to bring the high-tech boomerang they found at the scene of the murder they’re trying to solve to them. Barry scoops her up and speeds away before he has a chance to protest too much. John watches the streak of red zoom off into the night and tries not to freak out.

Barry sets her down in the middle of the cortex in front of the circular desk. Felicity wobbles in her heels and glances down at herself. “Why aren’t my clothes on fire?” she wants to know.

“I generate a plasma field when I run that helps mitigate wind shear and keeps dirt and stuff from getting into my eyes or in my mouth,” Barry explains, “and it gets stronger as I go faster so I don’t incinerate the clothes or shoes that I run in anymore.”

“Cool.” Felicity smiles at him before she turns around. “Hey, Iris. Hey, Cisco. Hey, Caitlin…” she cocks her head and smiles wider, “…and you must be Dr. Stein. Caitlin told me all about you.”

Iris smiles back, wide and warm. “Hey, Felicity.”
Lily nods, a quick bob of her head. “Call me Lily,” she says.

“Hi,” Caitlin says, “Felicity, it’s so good to see you. What brings you back to Central City?”

Felicity extracts the evidence bag with the boomerang inside from her purse. “I’m here because of this,” she informs them.

Cisco gasps audibly. “Awesome,” he intones, “what are the wings made of?”

“No, sure,” Felicity says. “I’m thinking some sort of composite or high-density plastic.”

Cisco nods more to himself than her. “Reinforced with carbon fiber,” he says. “Oh, that’s weird…” he frowns, “…it almost feels like it’s vibrating. Oh, I wanna run some tests, and I wanna run ’em right now!”

“So where’s Mac?” Barry asks as Felicity follows Cisco into his workshop.

“Snart took her home,” Iris tells him, “how are you holding up, with everything that’s happened?”

Barry heaves a sigh. “I’m still letting it sink in,” he admits, “it’s a lot to process.”

Iris gives his shoulder a gentle squeeze. “I get that,” she says, “take all the time you need. I’ll be here whenever you’re ready to talk about it.”

Barry smiles and leans into her touch without thinking about it, like it’s the simplest thing in the world. “Thanks,” he says before he turns to Caitlin. “Hey, did you come up with anything new on the metahuman?”

“Mac told me that she saw a flash of red before she lost control,” Caitlin informs him. “I suspect this metahuman is inducing rage via the ocular nerve. Oh,” she flails one of her hands in the direction of the office formerly occupied by Eobard, “Joe is here and he wants to see you.”

Joe is sitting behind the desk and having a drink by himself while he waits. Barry stands in the doorway and lingers before he hesitantly walks into the room. “Why do I feel like I just got called into the principal’s office?” he asks with an edge of apprehension in his voice.

“Why didn’t you tell me that you know the Starling City vigilante?” Joe wants to know.

“He calls himself the Arrow now,” Barry points out.

“Oh, does he, Flash?” Joe snaps back.

Barry frowns and folds his arms. “Wait,” he says, “what’s the problem?”

“I don’t trust him,” Joe says.

“You don’t even know him,” Barry argues.

“I know he’s wanted for murder in over a dozen cases dating back three years,” Joe retorts, “and there’s been at least two major terrorist attacks in Starling City since he showed up.”

“Alright,” Barry concedes, “but the cops there are cool with him now. He doesn’t kill people anymore.”

“Okay,” Joe says, “but what about all the criminals that he put arrows through? Those, what, don’t count?”
Barry shakes his head so fast he almost discombobulates himself. “He’s a hero, Joe,” he says firmly.

“You’re a hero, Barry,” Joe mutters, “the Arrow is something else.”

There’s a crash in the cortex as the boomerang ricochets around the room. Caitlin flails and shrieks as she tries to outrun it before the elevator doors open and Caroline emerges to see the lab devolving into chaos. “That’s my bad,” Cisco says as his girlfriend stops the boomerang in midair by generating a forcefield around it. “That’s on me.”

“Okay,” Caroline says, her voice pitching higher in distress, “what the hell did I miss?”

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[381] While the word “derecho” means “straight” in Spanish, it doesn’t have the heterosexual denotation that “straight” does in English. Instead it has legal and moral connotations (i.e. “straight” like “on the straight and narrow”). Cisco actually meant that no one at S. T. A. R. Labs is a law-abiding citizen, because they’re all vigilantes and vigilantism is illegal.
While they both drive motorcycles as their primary mode of transportation, the Snart siblings do each own a car. Len hasn’t bothered to take his grandfather’s old clunker out of storage or put in the work it would take to get the car running again. Lisa has a vintage 1967 Ford Mustang that she drives whenever she doesn’t want to deal with the hazards of helmet hair. Len rides shotgun and looks at Mac in the rearview mirror as she flops into the backseat and curls up before she awkwardly finagles her seatbelt into buckling around her waist.

“Mac,” Lisa says as soon as they’re on the road, “are you okay?”

“No,” Mac tells her softly, “I was psychically violated and I put all of the people that I love in danger. I am the antithesis of okay. I need you to call Violet. I think the metahuman who whammied me today is one of her brothers.”

Lisa doesn’t bother to point out that Violet Bivolo, a photokinetic metahuman whose ability to manipulate light is limited to the visible parts of the electromagnetic spectrum, is getting her Psy.D. in Coast City. “I’ll text Shawna,” she says, “but I won’t force her to teleport all the way to California unless she’s up for it.”

Mac nods. “I don’t want you to make her do anything,” she mumbles. “I don’t need Violet to come back here. I just thought she’d want to know one of her brothers has powers and that he’s using them to rob banks and whammy innocent people into overdosing on rage. Maybe he needed the money and he stole it because he’s too stubborn to ask Violet or their six brothers for help.”

“Or maybe he just wanted money and he didn’t care who he had to hurt to get it,” Len murmurs. “Not every criminal has a sob story, sweetheart.”
Danton had his groundbreaking research and his hope of saving his wife stolen from him before he became a criminal. Kyle was framed by the people he thought were his family and betrayed by the only man he’d ever loved. Billy wanted to save his sister from the disease that was killing her slowly. Tony was beaten by his father and he took his anger out on people he thought were too weak to fight back. Shawna lost her father to Huntington’s disease, lost her mother to cancer, and she was abused by her high school boyfriend until she broke up with him because she realized she was gay. Brie’s parents disowned her for being trans and kicked her out of their house. Mark and Clyde lost their mother in a flood and lived with their abusive uncle for years before Flannery intervened and gave the Mardon brothers a home, something they should’ve gotten from their father, who didn’t give a damn about them until it was almost too late. Mick burned his house down and caused a wildfire that not only killed his parents but also destroyed acres of farmland in Smallville. Len stayed in a toxic, abusive environment to protect his sister long after he could’ve saved himself by leaving and he still couldn’t save Lisa from getting her heart broken or becoming like him. Eobard, for all his faults and the wrongs he can never make right, thought going back in time and taking his hero’s place in history was the only way for him to stop hating himself.

Mac looks up and holds his gaze in the mirror. “That hasn’t been my experience,” she tells him softly.

Lisa drops them off and calls Violet from their driveway before she drives back to the Clocktower where Sara, Nyssa, and Sin are waiting for her. Mac sighs as she shucks her sweater and hangs it from one of the hooks by the door. Len hangs his jacket next to her sweater before he crouches to untie his bootlaces and leaves his shoes in the foyer.

Mac sits on the couch and slumps as she groans out loud for almost a full minute without stopping. Len goes to the kitchen to get something to drink before he folds himself onto the cushion next to her, sitting close enough to feel the soft curve of her left hip and the cloying warmth of her thigh against his side. It still hasn’t ceased to amaze him that she’s real, she’s his as much as he’s always been hers, and what he has with her is more than he ever dared to dream he could have with anyone.

Len puts his hand on her knee and swirls his thumb over the knob of bone through the gauzy material of her stocking. Mac yawns and turns to smile at him. Len swallows hard as his heart constricts deep in his chest. “Hey,” he says, “I know I’m not great at the whole touchy-feely thing, but I’m here if you need to talk.”

Mac shakes her head slowly. “I love you for saying that,” she says, “but it feels like all I’ve done for the past two weeks is talk. I’ve been telling the same secrets and the same stories over and over. I don’t want to talk anymore…” she puts one hand on his shoulder for balance and moves to straddle him before she starts unbuttoning the front of her dress, “…I want you to make me stop talking.”

Len cocks his head and looks her in the eyes. “I know Caitlin said you didn’t have any lingering side effects,” he murmurs, “but just in case… I don’t want to take advantage of whatever that metahuman did to you.”

Mac stops trying to undo the second of her seven buttons and cups his face with both hands before she kisses him, sweet and electric. Len splays one of his hands over her hip and curls the fingers of the other into the midnight blue of her hair while he kisses her back. “I trust you,” she whispers after she breaks the kiss. “I need you to trust me, too. I’m not doing this because I got whammied. I want you. I always do.”

Len groans as she kisses the side of his neck and sucks gently. There’s a time and a place for
roughness, but if he’s being honest, he likes how gentle she is with him. It’s a luxury he’s never had with anyone else. “I do trust you, sweetheart,” he says with slow vehemence, “and I love you, too.”

Mac pulls back to smile at him before she starts unbuttoning her dress again. It’s a pretty dress, the fabric a bright shade of cerulean blue patterned with yellow flowers shaded in black and dark green, the front held together by a row of big tarnished gold buttons. It looks good on her. It’s going to look better on the floor.

“Here,” Len murmurs after she fumbles and frowns at the spasmodic fingers of her arthritic hand. “Let me.”

Mac huffs and hooks one finger under the collar of his shirt, a nonverbal I’ll show you mine if you show me yours. Len grins and pulls it over his head before he undresses her slowly, kissing the tops of her breasts once her dress is half undone and savoring the sight of her black lace bra against her pale delicate skin. Mac wraps her arms loosely around his shoulders and strokes her fingers lightly along his spine, her touch making tiny sparks that go straight to his cock.

Len squeezes one of her breasts hard enough to make her moan softly and flicks his thumb over her nipple through the lace. Then he tugs the soft cup down and does the same thing with his tongue. Mac squirms in his lap and whimpers at the sensation of him sucking her nipple into the heat of his mouth before he pulls back and blows a puff of cold air over the hard nub. Len moves his mouth to her other nipple and tugs it between his teeth. Mac digs her fingertips into his back and wraps her legs around his waist as her whole body trembles with knee-weakening need. Len smooths one of his hands down between her legs and uses his thumb to move the crotch of her panties aside.

“I know you said you don’t want to talk,” he drawls, “but that doesn’t mean I can’t. I know exactly what my voice does to you, hmm? Now…” he slips one fingertip inside of her to the first knuckle. “Let’s see if I can make you tighter just by calling you sweetheart…”

It’s a truth universally acknowledged that he can make her embarrassingly wet just by saying certain words in a certain way. Mac flushes bright red as she clenches down around his fingertip and covers her face with both hands. Len smirks and works two fingers all the way inside of her, thumbing her clit in slow circles while he crooks his fingers to stroke the sensitive place that makes her pussy flutter and pulse around him. Mac blushes hard enough that her glasses fog up around the rims as she arches her back and bites her bottom lip. When he slips his fingers out of her, she exhales a soft noise through her nose and it makes his cock throb with the overwhelming need to fuck her—right here, right now.

Len holds her gaze while he licks and sucks the taste of her off his fingers. Then he smooths his other hand up from her waist to cup her face in his palm and caresses her flushed cheek with his thumb. Oh, he’s perceptive enough to deduce that she wants to feel in control for once after what happened to her today, and he’s cool with that. ‘I’m ready when you are, sweetheart,’” he murmurs.

Mac uses her powers to unzip his fly and lets her hands linger on his chest before she takes his cock out of his pants. Len shifts awkwardly to slide them down over his hips until they’re around his ankles. Mac exhales a soft Oh! and leaves him wanting as she belatedly unhooks her own bra. There’s a faint red groove under the heavy curves of her breasts from the underwire. Len makes a low, appreciative noise at the sight of her naked from the waist up and squeezes her hips just hard enough to make her moan softly. Then she wraps one of her hands around the base of his cock and rubs his sticky precum over the head of him with the other. Len groans as she strokes him up and down from base to head and hisses sharply as she rubs his blunt tip against her swollen clit.

“Mac,” he growls, “don’t tease me.”
Mac doesn’t say anything. Instead she kisses him hard and tugs his bottom lip between her teeth as she takes all of him inside of her with a slow thrust of her hips. Len closes his eyes and makes a guttural, inarticulate noise as the head of him hits the deepest part of her. Mac puts her weight back on her knees and rides him slowly until he starts thumbing her clit again. When she comes on his cock, she trembles and buries her face in the crook of his neck. Len grits his teeth around a low moan and comes inside of her as the aftershocks of her orgasm flicker around him. It’s quiet, and bright, and sweet.

It’s everything.

Len checks the couch for splatter while she showers and cleans himself up before he gets in bed with her. Mac curls up against his side and splays one of her hands over his chest, stroking the sparse hair there.

“So,” she yawns and ekes the oh sound out into an ooh, “is there anything you want to talk about? I’m sorry I didn’t ask before I jumped your bones.”

Len snorts. “It’s okay, sweetheart,” he murmurs. “I don’t mind you using me for my admittedly gorgeous body.”

“Ugh!” Mac groans and makes a garbled noise before she exhales a soft laugh and nuzzles his shoulder. “I wouldn’t want your body if I didn’t get your smarts and your bad puns and your snark and your deadpan sense of humor too,” she tells him.

Len smiles as she jabs at his chest with one finger to make her point. It makes him feel all warm and fuzzy to hear her talk like that. “I know,” he says. “So,” he smooths one of his hands over the curve of her back to her waist, “what happens now?”

Mac shrugs and snuggles closer to him. “I think now we do what we do best,” she says matter-of-factly, “we survive.”

Under the Rainbow (1) Fear Is the Greatest Incapacitator

Your anger
is an engine that has consumed
your past, is stoked now
by the present as you break
it into kindling, grind
it into sawdust. Now
you burn down the future
to speed and soot.

Marge Piercy, “A Warm Place Becomes a Cold Place”

Shock Value
Part 2
Myth Can Make Reality More Intelligible
Book II
Lightning Doesn’t Strike Twice
Chapter 56
Under the Rainbow
(1 of 3)

“I don’t kill…but I don’t lose, either.”

Cassandra Cain
Batgirl Vol.1, No.8 (“Batgirl”)
November, 2000

I
Fear Is the Greatest Incapacitator

When she wakes up the next morning, Len is gone and his side of their bed is cold. Which is enough to make Mac have another panic attack. Eobard found out she was dating someone two weeks ago, and she has to assume he knows who she’s dating by now. After all, he’s always thinking ahead; he’s arrogant, but he’s one of the smartest people she’s ever known, and that means she can’t make the mistake of underestimating him.

Then she notices a blue post-it note stuck on the bedside shelf near her glasses that reads:

Julie had to go to work early so I’m at her place w/Josh.

I love you.

—L

It’s okay, she thinks as she remembers how to breathe. Len went to watch his nephew like he’s done pretty much every day since he met Julie at the clinic last month. It’s fine, he’s fine, I’m fine.
Mac still fumbles to grab her phone from where it’s been charging all night and calls him as soon as she stops hyperventilating. Len picks up after the first ring and it’s enough to make the tension ease out of her body until she slumps back against the pillows.

“Hello, sweetheart.” Len drawls with a smile that’s audible in his voice. “I take it you missed me?” Mac sighs. “I woke up and had a panic attack,” she tells him softly, “I thought…” Of course she can’t bring herself to say *I thought my ex-fiancée murdered you while I was asleep and left your body somewhere else so I’d find it where he could see me break all over again*, but he knows her well enough by now to understand what she can’t say out loud.

Len exhales a sharp breath. “I’m sorry,” he says. “I didn’t want to wake you, but I shouldn’t’ve just left you alone like that. Not after everything that happened yesterday.” Mac shakes her head before she remembers that he can’t see her. “No,” she says, “you have nothing to apologize for. I’m just being paranoid.”

“It’s not paranoia if someone’s actually out to get you,” Len points out.

Mac heaves another sigh in a futile attempt to unclench. It helps, being with someone who knows she isn’t blowing things out of proportion. There is a reason to panic, a reason to be afraid of what Eobard is going to do next.

“I love you so much,” she says.

Len smiles wider and reaches out to gently boop Josh’s nose. “I love you, too,” he says.

Caroline meets Felicity at Jitters before her shift at the precinct starts. Oliver is stoic as usual, but he acknowledges her with a nod and the semblance of a smile.

“So,” he says, “I hear you have powers now.”

Caroline shrugs. “Technically I’ve had powers since before my brother woke up from his coma,” she clarifies, “I just haven’t been using them for crimefighting.”

“Um,” Felicity ekes the *mm* sound out awkwardly, “can I ask why not?”

Caroline sighs. “I’m a photographer with degrees in forensic science and criminal justice,” she explains. “I can do more as a C. S. I. than I ever could as a girl in a silly costume. I can’t use my abilities to fight yet. I can barely use them to defend. I’m not like Barry. I won’t rush into this before I know exactly what I’m doing,” she slants her gaze to Oliver, “and I don’t know if I want to put on the mask.”

Oliver nods, curtly. “I know it’s not an easy choice to make,” he tells her softly. “Mac thinks we do it because we’re trying to save ourselves.”

“What do you think?” Caroline wants to know.

Oliver exhales a sharp breath as Felicity looks at him from across the table. “I think we do it because we have to,” he murmurs, “because we don’t have any other way to go on living after everything we’ve been through.”

“There’s always therapy,” Caroline points out.
Barry arrives before the archer has a chance to respond. Caroline waves to her twin. Felicity smiles at him brightly.

“Hey,” Oliver says, “the bad guy that you’re after—the one who robbed the bank—his name is Roy G. Bivolo.”


Caroline snorts. “Smooth,” she deadpans.

“I’m just asking,” Barry says defensively before he turns back to Oliver. “I thought you didn’t want to help.”

“I’m not,” Oliver tells him. “It’s just a name.”

“Alright,” Barry mutters skeptically.

Iris comes to the table to bring them coffee at that opportune moment. “Hi,” she says to the twins before she turns to smile at the bespectacled hacker, “one nonfat latte with extra sugar for Felicity,” her smile widens and slips into something more flirtatious she turns to look at the former billionaire playboy, “and one black coffee for Oliver. I brewed you a fresh pot, so…”

Oliver smiles back. “Thank you,” he says.

“You’re welcome,” Iris tells him. “Barry, can I talk to you for a second?”

Barry frowns at the starstruck look in her eyes. “Yeah,” he says. “Okay.”

“I still can’t believe you know Oliver Queen,” Iris whispers conspiratorially as soon as they’re out of earshot. “He’s even more handsome in person. His arms are like twice the size of yours.”

Barry slumps and stuffs his hands in the pockets of his jacket. “Technically they’re not twice the size,” he mumbles.

“He’s on my three list,” Iris tells him excitedly, “my list of three people I’m allowed to cheat on Eddie with. Usually you don’t meet people on your list, but now here he is and I just cannot stop staring at him.”

Barry watches Iris watching Oliver from behind the counter for a few seconds that stretch out into a hellish eternity at superspeed before he decides to leave.

“Felicity,” Oliver says as she looks at him over the edge of her coffee mug, “this is me noticing you staring.”

“Oliver,” Felicity says, “we need to help Barry with his case. Why don’t you want to help?”

“Barry doesn’t want my help,” Oliver insists, “he only thinks he does.”

Caroline snorts. “Joe—our foster dad, who’s a cop, by the way—told Barry that you’re dangerous and a bad influence, but he defended you.”

“Okay,” Oliver says as Barry approaches on his way out.

“Okay, what?” Barry asks.
“Okay,” Oliver says, “we’ll help you catch your bad guy.”

Barry glances at his sister, who gives him a nod that would be imperceptible to anyone but a speedster, before he flashes a smile. “Great,” he says. “Partners?”

Oliver tentatively smiles back and shakes his hand. “Partners.”

Mac drives to the cookie-cutter house in the suburbs where Julie lives instead of going to work. It would be idyllic, if not for the sinkhole in the tiny backyard. Josh is playing on top of a blanket spread out in front of the couch—he’s too young to crawl, but not too young to flop around or clutch at the stuffed owl that Mac gave him. Len is keeping an eye on him while he reads *Mr. Mercedes.*

Josh gurgles ecstatically as Mac crouches next to him. When he grabs her finger, clouds bloom in the sky and lightning flashes. Mac smiles and closes her eyes as she absorbs the thunderstorm Josh is brewing.

Len smiles and closes his book. “I want to have a baby,” he says.

Mac opens her eyes and looks at him incredulously. “What?” she blurts out.

Len shrugs. “I’ve been thinking about it,” he says. “I know now isn’t the right time, but when all of this…” he gestures vaguely with one hand, “…is over and we’re married I want to have a family.”

Mac shakes her head slowly as she uses her cane to get back on her feet. “You can’t be serious,” she says incredulously.

Len narrows his eyes at her. “I can,” he says in his smoothest voice, “and I am. I want a family. I want that with you. Why can’t I be serious about it?”

Mac gnaws on the inside of her cheek before she speaks. “I told you I’d never ask for you to stop doing what you love,” she tells him softly. “I meant it—I still do—but I have to live with the consequences of what you do for a living every day. Technically, every moment we spend together is a crime. I had my people destroy all the records of your criminal activities before you stole that diamond last month. I hack government satellites every time you leave the house so the F. B. I. and A. R. G. U. S. won’t find you. I’m happy to do it because I love you, but I’m not just protecting you from the danger you’re in because of Eobard. I’m protecting you from the consequences of your own choices,” she forces herself to look him in the eyes and holds his gaze as she adds, “and you can’t even take me out to dinner because of what you do. I don’t think a couple who can’t even go on an official date without possibly getting arrested for being together should be thinking about starting a family, do you?”

Len stands in one smooth movement and closes the distance between them before he cups her face in both hands. Mac bites her lip and puts her hands on his waist, holding onto him like she doesn’t want to let go anytime soon. Len swallows hard. After everything that happened to her yesterday, he should’ve known it would be selfish to bring up family planning with a woman who’s still too traumatized to hope for a future. “I’m sorry,” he murmurs. “I didn’t think of that.”

Mac shakes her head slowly. “You don’t need to apologize for wanting a family,” she says. Like she means it. “You just have to understand that what we have isn’t conducive to having a baby,” she exhales a soft whoosh of air, “not right now. Maybe not ever.”

Len sucks in a sharp breath instead of saying anything else. It occurs to him that if he’s serious
about having the future with her that he wants, things are going to have to change. Again.

Oliver texts Mac to ask if they can borrow a plot of land she owns to use as training grounds. There are not one but two decrepit buildings on her land, and she has plans to eventually tear those down—but first she needs to decide what she wants to build. Mac still manages to somehow meet Oliver at this previously undisclosed location before the fastest man alive does.

“Hey,” Barry says as soon as he arrives.

“You’re late,” Oliver snaps back. “Barry, how can you have superspeed and still not be on time?”

Barry shrugs and shoves his hands into the pockets of his jacket. “Sorry,” he mumbles. “I guess the super tardiness kind of neutralizes it. So,” he glances out at the expanse of grass and weeds scattered over the land, “how do we catch Bivolo here?”

“Oh, no.” Oliver shakes his head. “We’re not going to catch Bivolo here. We’re here to train.”

“What,” Barry says dubiously, “like Rocky?”

Oliver refuses to dignify that question with an answer. “I read Iris’s blog posts on the Flash,” he says, “and I visited all of the crime scenes you’ve fought at.”

Barry frowns. “Don’t you sleep?” he asks.

Oliver glances at Mac. “Last month you took on a man named Leonard Snart,” he says, “who only tried kill you because he thought you were someone else.”

Barry nods, a quick bob of his head. “We call him Captain Cold,” he clarifies, “and he’s on our side now. I think.”

Oliver sighs. “We can talk about you giving your enemies silly codenames later,” he mutters.

Barry snorts. “You mean like over coffee with Deathstroke and the Huntress?” he quips.

“Helena hasn’t killed anybody who wasn’t a child molester or a rapist with mob ties in months,” Mac interjects, “leave her alone.”

Oliver gives Mac a sliver of a smile. While he doesn’t approve of Helena being a killer, he’s happy she’s found a purpose and a place to belong. “Okay,” he says, “but my point is that Barry engaged Snart on a commuter train. Which he derailed.”

“Okay,” Barry retorts defensively. “There may have been some damage, but I got the job done. I was the hero.”

“Actually,” Mac ekes the sound out awkwardly, “I’m the one who stopped the train from crashing and killing everyone inside. After my once and future boyfriend took me fake hostage and told me that he loved me for the first time.”

“I knew it,” Barry mutters, “you’re too powerful. There was no way Snart could’ve taken you hostage for real.”

Mac shrugs. “I was the only person on that train who mattered to him,” she points out, “and letting him take me hostage meant I got a chance to chew him out for putting a bunch of people in danger over a big sparkly rock. I had no idea he was trying to kill you because he thought you were Eobard or that he was using the Kahndaq heist as a way to lure you into the line of ice.”
“It’s okay,” Barry tells her, “no one got hurt. Which is all that matters.”


After that, he abruptly turns and walks out into the field. Barry rolls his eyes behind the archer’s back and follows him. Mac hobbles out from under the canopy of metal sheeting that slants in front of the dilapidated building, fluxes the geomagnetic field, and floats up onto the balcony that protrudes from the second story to sit with her legs dangling over the edge.

“There is a difference,” Oliver adds, “between having powers and having precision. Mac taught me that.”

“When I came to you thinking about going out and helping people,” Barry says, “you said I could be an inspiration.”

Oliver nods, curtly. “I did,” he says as he grabs the compound bow he left on his motorcycle, “but talking to your sister this morning reminded me that living this life takes more than a mask. It takes discipline,” he nocks an arrow onto his bowstring and pulls without quite drawing, “and since you are probably as stubborn as I am…”

Barry eyes the nocked arrow warily. “What is that for?” he asks.

Oliver glances at Mac before he arches his eyebrows at Barry. Like a challenge. “Well,” he says, “you’re going to run over there,” he flicks his gaze to a hill a few hundred feet away from where they’re standing, “you’re going to come back at me, and you’re going to get hit with an arrow.”

Barry laughs in his face. “No,” he says, “I’m not.”

“Yes,” Oliver says calmly, “you are.”

Barry snorts. “Okay,” he says, “fine. I will humor you.” Then he blurs into motion and speeds up the small hill in the blink of an eye. “Ready?” he shouts.

“Ready,” Oliver murmurs as he draws back his bow and fires an arrow.

Barry speeds back to stand in front of him and snatches the bolt out of the air. “Nice try,” he quips. Wait for it, Mac thinks as two loaded crossbows loose a pair of arrows that hit Barry in the back.

“Gah!” Barry shouts indignantly. “Wait, you shot me?”

Oliver nods as Barry whirls haphazardly to see where the arrows came from. “I heard you heal fast,” he deadpans.


[384] I know you might be thinking, “they’ve been on three unofficial dates so why is this suddenly a problem?” Well, (a) their unofficial first and second dates happened in Part 1 before Mac stopped the falling satellite and became a local celebrity in a more conspicuously heroic capacity than buying a failing research lab, and (b) the movie date they went on during my rewrite of The Flash 1x03 (“Things You Can’t Outrun”) 21 October 2014 happened before Len became Captain Cold and stole a priceless diamond before derailing a train. It’s been six weeks since that happened. While the robbery itself is old news by now, the police investigation of the crime is still open and that makes Len a wanted fugitive.
Mac is a superhero without a secret identity who’s dating a career criminal even though she’s also in the public eye. Eobard isn’t trying to hide in plain sight anymore, either. Which is a recipe for disaster, imo.
Under the Rainbow (2) There’s Nothing Except What You Sense

Here is my hand, my heart, my throat, my wrist. Here are the illuminated cities at the center of me.

Richard Siken, “Saying Your Names”

Shock Value
Part 2
Myth Can Make Reality More Intelligible
Book II
Lightning Doesn’t Strike Twice
Chapter 57
Under the Rainbow
(2 of 3)

II
There’s Nothing Except What You Sense

Caroline stops by the precinct on her day off to see if Roy G. Bivolo has a criminal record—he doesn’t, and that’s odd, because most people without priors don’t wake up one morning and decide to rob a bank willy-nilly—and overhears Eddie trying to convince the captain to change his mind about the anti-metahuman task force before she leaves and drives to S. T. A. R. Labs.

Fact: There should be a special unit for investigating the crimes perpetrated by metahuman criminals.

Fact: Ordinary cops don’t stand a chance against people like her, or Barry, or Iris, or Mac, or any of the other people with powers that she knows.

Fact: Eddie is doing this because he’s jealous of the Flash, and that means Iris needs to either tell him the big secret or dump him before their relationship gets even more complicated.

It’s lunch hour by the time she arrives at the lab. Caitlin and Lily are sitting in the cortex with Felicity, eating pizza out of the box with grease-stained napkins. Caroline stops behind the desk to give Cisco a kiss on the lips and lingers to savor the feeling of his hands on her waist and in her hair until her stomach growls insistently. Cisco is grinning from ear to ear as she walks away.

“Hello ladies,” Caroline says before she flops into the empty seat to the left of the I. T. girl and grabs a slice.

“Hi,” Caitlin says warmly and smiles at her as she primly hands her a napkin.

“Hello,” Lily says and stretches the oh sound out into an ooh around a mouthful of pizza.

“Hey.” Felicity turns to grin at her before she turns back to the bioengineer. “Sorry, what was your question?”
“Have you heard of color psychology?” Caitlin asks.

“It’s the theory that changes in the color spectrum can affect emotion,” Felicity answers.

Lily smiles at her and nods. “Cait and I were thinking that if Bivolo uses color to induce temporary psychosis, we can use light and color to reverse the whammy,” she explains.

Barry speeds into the cortex with a flourish of kinetic energy that fizzles out when he slows down. “Hey,” he mutters.

Caroline generates a forcefield around one of the empty chairs in the cortex and ergokinetically brings it over so her brother can take a seat. Felicity arches her eyebrows as high as they can go while Caitlin and Lily shrug and keep eating because they’re used to Caroline honing her abilities by using them for mundane tasks like pulling up a chair. “How’d things go with Oliver?” she asks.

Barry heaves a sigh. “You know,” he says, “it wasn’t exactly the partnership I thought it would be.”

“Oh,” Felicity ekes the oh sound out awkwardly, “did he really do the thing with the arrows?”

Barry frowns and makes an indignant noise. “You knew he was going to shoot me?” he asks.

“Okay,” Felicity holds up her hands in mock surrender at the angry look on his face, “you know it’s practically impossible to tell if Oliver is making a joke. I didn’t think he was seriously going to shoot you!”

“Hey,” Cisco says urgently as the silent alarm goes off, “we just got a ping on Bivolo, a. k. a. Prism.”

“Where can I find him?” Barry asks.


“Okay,” Felicity says as she extracts a burner phone from her tiny purse, “we should call the Arrow and let him know.”

Barry shakes his head so fast he blurs from the neck up. “I can handle this,” he snaps at her, “I’ve done it before.”

Felicity looks taken aback by the rage in his voice. “Barry,” she says, “I really think you need to wait…”

Barry scoffs. “Felicity, I don’t need his help,” he retorts. Then he blurs into motion and puts on his suit before he runs off to catch the bad guy alone—where Oliver can’t steal his thunder.

Mac spends most of the morning in her office while she tries to find Eobard and fails miserably. There’s something that’s blocking her ability to sense the speedforce. Eobard must’ve found a way to hide himself from her, and she’s terrified of what he might do every second that he’s loose upon the world.[387] Luckily, a knock at her door stops her from spiraling and having another panic attack. Mac fulgurkinetically opens the door and sighs ecstatically as soon as she sees Len standing in the doorway. Loving him doesn’t fix all her problems, but it helps to see him and to know beyond a shadow of a doubt that she’s not alone in this anymore.

Len smiles at her in the soft way that he saves for people that he loves. “Hello sweetheart,” he
Mac smiles back and blushes hot because just the sound of his voice is enough to make her knees go weak. “Hi.”

Len walks over and puts a takeout bag on her desk before he leans against it. “I brought you lunch,” he tells her, stating the obvious smoothly. “I figured you were too frazzled to pack something, hmm?”

Mac opens the bag and moans as she inhales the smell of the cheesy bread. “You’re the perfect man,” she tells him softly.

Len smirks. “I know,” he murmurs before he leans in and tilts her chin up with one hand to steal a slow, lingering kiss.

Mac closes her eyes and wraps her arms loosely around his neck as she melts into the feeling of his lips on hers. “Wait,” she breaks the kiss and whispers breathlessly as something occurs to her. “Why aren’t you with Josh?”

Len presses his forehead against hers and sucks in a sharp breath through his nose. “Josh is with Olivia Reynolds,” he says, “one of Julie’s many sisters.”[388]

Mac nods and digs her fingers into the nape of his neck before she takes her turn and kisses him softly, desperately. Len grabs her by the hips and lifts her onto the edge of her desk as she delicately skims her tongue over the seam of his lips and licks into his mouth. Mac lets him take control, lets him slowly flick his tongue into her mouth and slip one hand under the skirt of her dress to tease her through her panties. “Wait,” she breaks the kiss and narrows her eyes at him behind her glasses, “this isn’t your way of trying to make me want to make a baby, is—ow!”

Metaphysical static rips through her mind so abruptly that Mac yelps and hunches her shoulders as her fingers snarl through her hair, the ricochet of pain red in tooth and claw.[389] Len cups her face in both hands and crouches to look her in the eyes. “What’s wrong?” he asks in a soft, deadly voice.

“I’m sensing a telepath,” Mac whispers, “a powerful one. I felt the same energy at the bank yesterday and I thought it was Bivolo using his aggressiokinesis, but…” she gnaws on the inside of her cheek and unsnarls her fingers, “…now I think it’s something else.”

Len frowns, the space between his eyebrows furrowing. “You mean something like another metahuman,” he deduces, “a metahuman powerful enough to stop you from sensing the Reverse-Flash.”

“No…” Mac shakes her head slowly. “No, that’s the thing. I don’t think it’s a metahuman. I think it’s Grodd.”

Len narrows his eyes at her as she uses her cane to get back on her feet and hobbles out of her office. “What the hell is a Grodd?” he asks.

Mac doesn’t answer his question until she activates the metahuman tracker Cisco invented and types in a code to narrow the search down to psionics in the Gem Cities. Caroline, Cisco, Caitlin, Lily, and Felicity crowd around her behind the triple desk until she generates a dense electric field that shocks them enough to get them out of her personal space.

“Grodd,” Cisco says as his forehead wrinkles in confusion, “like Gorilla Grodd?”
Mac nods as the computer searches for a simian telepathic signature. “Yes,” she tells him softly, “the particle accelerator explosion gave him bodyjacking and mindreading abilities.”

Cisco grins and showcases the adorable gaps between his teeth. “Gorilla Grodd!” he whoops. “Nailed it!”

“Grod is the reason I can’t sense Eobard,” Mac informs him, “and I think he’s the reason Bivolo robbed that bank this morning.”

“Wait,” Lily holds up one hand and raises her eyebrows skeptically, “you’re saying a rage-inducing metahuman is being psychically controlled by a telepathic gorilla?”

Mac nods, slowly. “Eobard is broke,” she points out, “he put all of his money into the company…”

…and he signed the company over to you,” Caitlin says.

Mac nods again. “I know he has some assets in his name,” she clarifies, “but he can’t liquidate them without me knowing.”

“Now he needs some fast cash,” Cisco adds, too worried about whatever Eobard is planning to appreciate his own pun.

Len makes a low frustrated noise in the back of his throat and folds his arms. “Barry went after Bivolo,” he murmurs. “What if that was his plan? Think about it. Speedsters at the top of their game can phase through solid objects, like the walls of a bank vault. Reverse-Flash could’ve stolen the money himself, but instead he went to all this trouble to orchestrate a bank robbery with a metahuman thief and get the C. C. P. D. on the case.”

Cisco looks at him, wide-eyed. “It’s a trap,” he says, “he wants Bivolo to put the whammy on Barry.”

Mac groans and makes a garbled noise as she flops into the swivel chair she keeps behind the triple desk. “I should’ve anticipated this,” she mutters under her breath. “I know Eobard. I know him of old.[390] I know the way his mind works. Why didn’t I see this coming?”

Len shakes his head slowly and gives her a sliver of a smile. “You’re only human, sweetheart,” he drawls. “You can’t possibly think of everything.”

Barry speeds into the cortex a few minutes later and breaks the awkward silence that ensues with a loud whoosh of air before he slows down. “I’m fine!” he shouts as everyone starts talking at once.

Caitlin still finagles him into a retinal scan. “No signs of macular damage,” she says as soon as she gets a closer look at his eyes. “Your retina and cornea seem unaffected.”

Barry nods, a quick bobble of his head. “I told you,” he says irritably. “I’m fine.”

“You said Bivolo whammied you,” Felicity points out worrisomely. “No desire to go M. M. A. on any of us?”

Barry shakes his head so fast he blurs from the neck up again. “No,” he says. “I mean, something weird happened with his eyes for a second and everything went red…”

“You were right,” Felicity whispers conspiratorially to Caitlin.
Barry shrugs. “Okay,” he says, “next thing I knew, Bivolo was gone,” he stands up and walks out of the med bay, “but obviously his powers didn’t work on me, so…”

“It was still pretty dumb of you to go after him alone,” Lily tells him matter-of-factly.

Caitlin nods abruptly. “You take too many risks,” she adds as she follows him into the cortex, “as fast as you are, that’s going to catch up with you.”

Barry turns on his heels to glare at her and his eyes flash red for a fraction of a second—to too fast for anyone but a speedster to see. “Caitlin, I’m not Ronnie!” he snaps at her. “You’ve gotta stop treating me like I am.”

Caitlin blanks so hard it must be forced. “You’re right,” she tells him flatly. “You’re not.”

Barry heaves a sigh in a futile attempt to shake the tension out of his body as she walks away. Felicity steps out of the med bay and her stilettoes click a nervous staccato against the floor.

“Ouch,” Len deadpans, “that was cold.”

[385] Roy G. Bivolo does ostensibly have a criminal record in show canon because his mugshot comes up onscreen during the scene I rewrote above, but I changed that because I’m doing my own thing and trying to flesh out all the villains.

[386] It makes no sense that no one tried to start a special unit like this until season two, especially since the Reverse-Flash killed a bunch of cops in *The Flash* 1x09 (“The Man in the Yellow Suit”) 9 December 2014. I know the people writing the show don’t seem to know how actual law enforcement works, but still: I am vexed.


Under the Rainbow (3) Anger or Hate Can Be a Useful Motivating Force

All power can be
dangerous:
direct
or alternating,
you, socket to me.
Plugged in and the grid
is humming,
this electricity,
molecule-deep desire:
particular friction, a charge
strong enough to stop
a heart
or start it
again; volt, re-volt—
I shudder, I stutter, I start
to life.

Daphne Gottlieb, “Inductance”

Shock Value
Part 2
Myth Can Make Reality More Intelligible
Book II
Lightning Doesn’t Strike Twice
Chapter 58
Under the Rainbow
(3 of 3)

III
Anger or Hate Can Be a Useful Motivating Force

After the computer pinpoints the location of the simian telepathic signature, Mac shuffles off to storm the sewers and find Gorilla Grodd. Len categorically refuses to let her go alone even though she generates an electromagnetic field that makes her immune to telepathy and she could give the anachronistic speedster a run for his money, figuratively speaking.

“How long has Mick been watching over me?” Mac asks as soon as the sliding doors of the elevator close with an innocuous ding!

“Since the morning after I told you that I love you for the first time,” Len informs her without bothering to concoct a pretty lie. “Mick didn’t like the idea of playing bodyguard, but he’s the only person I trust besides Lisa and you’ve been keeping my sister busy.”

“I love you too,” Mac tells him softly, “and I’m not mad. I mean, at least in this timeline you didn’t break up with me and then stalk me for my own protection.”
Len sighs. “I don’t think you can rib me for something that I didn’t technically do,” he points out.

Mac shrugs with one shoulder as the sliding doors open and steps out onto the ground floor of S. T. A. R. Labs. “I remember a lot of things I didn’t technically do,” she murmurs, “the memories still feel very real.”

Len cocks his head in concession. “What’s real to me is you,” he tells her softly and sincerely. “How I’ve always felt about you.”

There’s a Big Belly Burger that lurks across the street from S. T. A. R. Labs. It went in after the area was declassified as a hazardous zone. Mick is chowing down on a cheeseburger and doing a crossword puzzle in red ink. “You’re the one who’s been paying for Mark and Clyde’s medical bills,” he says.

It’s the closest thing to a thank you that she’s ever going to get from Mick, who likes to pretend he doesn’t care about anyone or anything but himself. Mac smiles at him before she steals a handful of his fries. “We’re going into the sewers to hunt a telepathic gorilla,” she says. “Want to come along?”

Mick shrugs and shoves the rest of his cheeseburger into his mouth. “Sure,” he says as soon as he finishes chewing and swallows. “I finished my crossword, so I’ve got nothing better to do.”

One problem with sewers: they smell like sewage and other detritus. Another, more significant problem with the sewers: Eobard is living in one of the underground tunnels with a telepathic gorilla and he tries to take a run at Len.

Mac glares at the blot of negative energy that is her ex and generates an electromagnetic pulse so powerful that it knocks him on his skinny ass. “If you touch him,” she snaps as her eyes spark and white out with fulmination, “I will **end** you.”

“You can’t kill me as long as the speedforce needs me alive,” Eobard says before he blurs into motion again so Mick can’t get a clean shot at him with his flamethrower.

“I don’t need to kill you to end you,” Mac retorts. “There’s no Malcolm Thawne[391] in the present anymore because you screwed around with the past. Eddie is the only present-day ancestor you have. If he dies, your future is over before it begins.” It occurs to her that because he changed the past, Eobard might not anything like himself underneath the façade of Harrison Wells. **Weird**, she thinks. “If you kill the man I love,” she murmurs in the most ominous voice she can muster, “I will make sure you cease to exist.”

Eobard sighs. “I won’t break my promise,” he says. It’s a pretty lie, but a lie is better than nothing.

Mac arches her eyebrows and stares at him with her eyes still fulminating until she feels the need to blink. When she opens her eyes, the Reverse-Flash is gone.

“Of course he spoke too soon, because Grodd galumphs out of the shadows in one of the sewer tunnels and slams him into the wall.

Caroline winces as the lightning scar in the hollow between her breasts aches. *It’s like Karen Smith’s tits,*[392] she thinks, the damn thing only knows when something has already gone horribly
“Okay. I’ll call you back later,” Felicity says in a frantic voice before she hangs up her phone. “That was the Arrow,” she informs the people in the cortex, “he says Barry is acting strangely.”

Caroline frowns at her as a visceral squelch of dread settles in the pit of her stomach. “Wait,” she says, “strangely how?”

“He’s been whammied,” Joe says as he steps into the cortex. “He was acting angry. It was scary, and his eyes…” he holds up two fingers and gestures to his own eyeballs, “…they glowed.”

“Barry’s hypermetabolism must be helping him fight off the effect of Bivolo’s aggressiokinesis,” Lily deduces, “so it’s hitting him slower.”

“When it comes to rage,” Joe says, “that’s not a good thing.”

Caitlin nods. “We saw that with Mac,” she adds, “the longer you suppress your emotions…”

“…the bigger the explosion,” Felicity says.

“Considering what Barry can do,” Joe murmurs, “how do we even stop him?”

“You know, the cold gun would come in real handy right about now,” Cisco deadpans. “I’m just saying.”

When she spends the night with Eddie, they carpool to work in the morning. Jitters is only a few blocks away from the precinct, and saving money on gas is always a good idea.

Iris has been writing freelance articles for *Central City Picture News* for months, but they don’t have any openings for fulltime reporters yet. Which is fine, because she doesn’t mind paying her dues. Iris is just happy they didn’t reject her for “overqualified” for an entry-level job—even though she has a hunch that “overqualified” just means they don’t want to hire a smart black woman. Missouri isn’t exactly a progressive state, even now in the aftermath of the riots in Ferguson.[393]

When she picks him up from the precinct, Eddie is distant and quiet. Almost like he knows the next words out of his mouth will start a fight, and he doesn’t want to fight with her. Iris keeps her eyes on the road in front of her while he fiddles with the radio before she bites the bullet. “Look,” she says, “I am not mad at you.”

“Good,” Eddie retorts and he can’t quite hide the irate edge in his voice, “because there’s no reason you should be.”

Iris sighs. If she could just tell him the truth, it would make her life so much easier. “Eddie,” she says, “both you and the Flash care about protecting this city. You would both give your lives for it. You’re more alike than you think, okay?” It’s actually kind of annoying how similar Eddie and Barry are if you scratch the surface: they both have a strong sense of justice and a tendency to run headlong into dangerous situations. “He’s not a bad guy.”

Eddie frowns and narrows his eyes at her. “How do you know so much about him, Iris?” he asks. Iris keeps her eyes on the road in front of her even though she can feel him staring at her with the focus of a detective trying to solve a tough case. “He got in touch with me after I started my blog,” she lies.
“Why didn’t you tell me about this?” Eddie asks, his voice pitching higher in distress.

Iris knows he’s just worried about her, but that only makes her angrier. Too many of the men in her life have been acting like they know what’s best for her better than she does. “Well,” she snaps at him, “given the fact that I think he’s a hero and you want to put him in jail, do you really need to ask that question?”

“How could you ever think I would be okay with this?” Eddie asks, but she doesn’t hear him because a surge of yellow lightning strikes and shatters the passenger side window and Barry throws him out of the car. Iris screams and slams on the brakes as her boyfriend hits the pavement and rolls with the force of the impact.

Barry looms over him in the middle of the street as Iris clambers out of the car and stares at him in horror. “I heard you’ve been looking for me,” he says in a voice that resonates with pure rage, “you’ve been trying to catch me, but I caught you first.”

Eddie winces as the pavement bites into his palm and tries to draw his sidearm as the other cars park at odd angles in the street and passersby stop to gawk at the hero that most people have only seen as a red streak and a flash of lightning before now.

Barry makes a derisive noise in the back of his throat. “Guess you haven’t read your girlfriend’s blog,” he says in the same dissonant voice before he blurs into motion.

“Mac,” Cisco says and static fizzles in her ears as she tunes into their specialized radio frequency, “facial recognition picked up Barry on a traffic camera downtown.”

Caroline scoots in her swivel chair and hunches to speak into the transceiver on the circular desk. “We need you and Snart to teleport to where he is and keep him contained so he doesn’t hurt anyone,” she adds. “I’d do it myself, but Shawna isn’t answering my texts—”

Mac exhales with enough force to flap her lips. “Okay,” she says as she fulgurkinetically accesses the camera feed to pinpoint Barry’s location, “do you still have the gold gun that you made for Lisa?”

Cisco nods before he remembers that she can’t see what he’s doing. “Yeah,” he says. “Why?”

Mac glances down at the six-hundred-pound telepathic gorilla she electrocuted into unconsciousness. Since they never repurposed the pipeline into a prison for metahumans, she doesn’t have anywhere to put Grodd or a way to get him out of the sewers without anyone noticing. If she’s not checking her phone, Shawna is probably in surgery with Dr. Claiborne. Lilith is the only other teleporter on her team, and she’s visiting her adoptive parents in Kentucky right now. There’s no other choice. “Cisco,” she says, “start picking up good vibrations. It’s time to see if you can open an intradimensional portal for longer than a few seconds.”

Felicity looks at Cisco with her eyes gone wide behind her glasses, because no one told her that he has powers too. “Mac,” she chimes in, “should we call Oliver?”

Mac snorts. “Felicity,” she says, “the Arrow doesn’t have a shot in hell at stopping a metahuman, no matter how many trick arrows he has in his quiver. Barry has no control over himself or his powers right now. If you call Oliver, he’s just going to get his ass kicked.”

“Hold up,” Cisco says incredulously, “the Arrow is Oliver Queen?”
Eddie puts his sidearm back in his holster and tries to throw a punch instead. Iris screams as the speedster blurs into motion and shoves him with enough force to crack all of his ribs.

“Who the hell are you, huh?” Barry shouts, “you think you can just come along and get to have whatever you want? What gives you the right?”

Eddie crawls on his hands and knees and tries to push through the pain in his ribs, his head throbbing as blood from a gash on his forehead oozes and trickles slickly down his cheek. “What the hell are you talking about?” he wheezes and grits his teeth around the words.

Iris clenches her teeth around a frustrated noise because people are recording the Flash hulking out on their phones and she’s not sure if she wants to out herself as a metahuman, especially since she’s still learning how to use her abilities. Mac hasn’t even taught her to fly yet because she doesn’t have enough control over her powers to walk on air. Which is the first step to flying, pun unintended. All she can do is an exercise in precision that Mac taught her: generating a tiny whirlwind in the palm of her hand and keeping it from spinning out of control. I’m a journalist, she thinks, I don’t fight with the wind. I fight with my words. “What are you doing?” she asks. “This isn’t who you are.”

Barry can’t bring himself to look at her. This is all her fault. If she hadn’t moved on without him after he got struck by lightning, he wouldn’t be so angry. It’s not Eddie he’s mad at, deep in the darkest part of his heart. “You don’t know me!” he snaps at her. “You never did.”

“'I know you’ve risked your life to help people,” Iris retorts, “to save them. Someone who does that does not suddenly turn around and want to hurt people! Please…”

Then an intradimensional portal opens in the middle of the street with a crackle of energy that booms like a thunderclap and Barry is struck by a cryogenic blast that knocks him down. Iris gapes as Mac steps through the portal with Captain Cold, Heatwave, and Golden Glider. Len grins, showing his teeth. “It’s time to chill out, Flash,” he deadpans.

Barry glares at him and his eyes blare a bright, eerie red before he speeds to punch Len hard enough that he smacks into a building three blocks away. “That’s for trying to kill me!” he shouts.

Mick shoots a lick of flame at him while Lisa bolts, running three blocks in heels to check on her brother. “Mac!” she screams, “he’s not breathing!”

Barry is still on the ground, frozen by the ribbons of ice that won’t ablate fast enough no matter how much friction he generates.

Mac doesn’t waste any time walking three blocks; she fluxes the geomagnetic field and flies, oblivious to the news crew from C. C. P. N. filming her. There’s no pulse because his heart was pulverized on impact, but she’s not going to let him die. Mac flops unceremoniously to her knees and splays her fingers over his heart. No, she thinks and tears prickle like thorns at the corners of her eyes, not again. I can’t lose him again. “Len,” she whispers as she pieces him back together cell by cell and uses her hand as a defibrillator, “open your eyes. Please—”

When he tangles his gloved hand in her hair, she shuts her eyes and sobs. Len kisses her hard and tastes the salt of her tears on her lips. “I’m fine,” he tells her softly.

Mac swallows thickly and swipes at her tearstained cheeks with the back of her hand. “I’m not,” she says as she uses her cane to get back on her feet.

Len flicks his gaze to the camera filming live and sighs. We just broke all of the rules, he thinks,
Barry glowers at her as she hobbles to stand in front of him, his eyes narrowing into slits of rage. There’s enough anger for everyone, but hers is nothing like his. Mac has been angry with Eobard for months, but that anger had fermented like wine kept in a cask in the dark. This anger is fresh and ferocious, and the air reverberates with the force of it as her gray eyes fade to white and electricity fulminates all over her bioluminescent skin in a shocking threat display. Mac holds up one hand before she fulgurkinetically generates enough force to break the ice and hurl Barry into the atmosphere until he’s so high up that his lungs collapse from the pressure, then lets gravity take over so the speedster falls back down to earth in a flash. When he hits the ground, she uses her powers to focus all of the impact onto Barry himself and breaks every bone in his body.

“What the hell did you just do?” Iris screams at her.

Mac turns to look at her with flares of lightning in the corners of her eerie pale eyes like galvanized tears. “Don’t worry,” she says as the sparks go out and her eyes fade back to their ordinary shade of gray, “he’ll heal.”

[391] Okay, so: in the comics, Barry has a twin brother named Malcolm Thawne. Nora Allen gave birth in the same hospital as Charlene Thawne—whose son was strangled to death by his umbilical cord during the delivery—and the doctor thought it would be kinder to tell Nora that one of her sons was stillborn instead so each mother would have a child. Which is spectacularly fucked up, but that’s comics for you. Malcolm has an evil talisman he uses to control blue flames and steal the power of the speedforce from speedsters. I hoped Eddie would get corrupted by the blue flame talisman in S1 before he died, but that never happened because he’s a good egg. I’m planning on doing something with Malcolm if I ever get to Flashpoint, but in the meantime: Caroline exists in the current timeline instead of Malcolm and that’s why Eddie is Eobard’s present-day ancestor instead of him.


[393] I’m sure you remember the protests and riots that ensued after Mike Brown was murdered by Darren Wilson in Ferguson, Missouri. The Flash 1x01 (“Pilot”) 7 October 2014 aired two months later. Since we’re a week into December 2014 at this point in the story and Iris lives in close proximity to where the riots happened, that hate crime is something that might’ve been on her mind.
Gods Among Us (Coda)

Now goddess, child of Zeus,
tell the old story for our modern times.
Find the beginning.

Homer, The Odyssey (tr. Emily Wilson)

Shock Value
Part 2
Myth Can Make Reality More Intelligible
Book II
Lightning Doesn't Strike Twice
Chapter 59
Gods Among Us
(Coda)

“It’s all in the story you tell. It’s all in the story you sell. Never trust the man with the microphone. Write your own ending.”

Kate Kane
DC Bombshells Vol.1, No.33 (“The Battle of Britain, Part 3 of 6”)
March, 2016

When she brings the unconscious speedster back to S. T. A. R. Labs, Cisco is waiting in the cortex with a souped-up strobe light he built to undo the whammy. Caitlin resets his bones so they don’t heal wrong before they administer a shot of adrenaline to wake him up and turn on the light.

Mac walks out of the cortex because she doesn’t have the spoons for this. After she brought the man she loves back to life and shattered Barry like a storm in a teacup, Iris asked her to heal Eddie and doing that siphoned the last spark of electricity out of her. Eobard is the one to blame for all of this, but she’s too drained to make Barry feel better about what he did under the influence of the once and future Rainbow Raider because the love of her life almost died…again. There’s enough kinetic energy flying around to help her recharge as she walks so she doesn’t black out in the hallway. Len puts an arm around her waist and lets her lean on him, and it takes all of her carefully cultivated control not to fall asleep on her feet while the warmth of his body seeps into her.

Iris catches up with her at the elevator before the sliding doors open. “Barry didn’t mean to hurt anyone,” she says.

Len glares at her with ice in his cold blue eyes. “Back off,” he says in his calmest voice, “now isn’t the time for this.”

Iris frowns and glares right back at him. “What he did to you wasn’t his fault,” she says.

“I know!” Mac snaps and gnashes her teeth around the words as veins of lightning fizz and frazzle all over the skin of her left arm. “I know that none of this is his fault, but I saw Eobard in the sewers tonight. I’ve been trying not to have a panic attack since then and watching my boyfriend die from blunt force trauma didn’t help,” she says as she clenches her jaw and lets her gray eyes
fade to white before she turns to look at Iris and clenches her fist to snuff the sparks out. “Len’s spine was crushed on impact,” she clarifies, “bone shards from his ribs shredded his lungs and pulverized his heart. I had to use my powers to piece him back together and defibrillate him. When his heart stopped, I could feel it from three blocks away. I felt him die. Barry did that, whether it was his fault or not. I don’t have the spoons to sit by his bedside and tell him that everything is okay, because it’s not. I’m not okay, Iris…” she gnaws on the inside of her cheek as her eyes fizzle back to their ordinary gray, “…I’m not.”

Iris swallows hard. After everything Mac’s been through, it doesn’t come as a shock that she’s not okay. Iris stuffs her hands in the pockets of her coat and glances over her shoulder at her father, who shoots her a look that says we’ve got bigger problems than how Barry feels right now without saying anything at all. “What am I supposed to tell Eddie?” she asks.

“What about Bivolo?” Joe wants to know.

“Bivolo was apprehended by the Gorgonites half an hour ago,” Mac informs him. “I’m going to have my telepath pick his brain to prove that he wasn’t complicit in what Eobard did to him before I do anything else. Metahumans are my jurisdiction, not yours. I have no plans to turn him over to you until I have all of the facts.”

“Who the hell are the Gorgonites?” Joe asks.

“Detective,” Mac sighs and muffles a yawn in the hollow of her palm, “the less you know about my operation, the better. Plausible deniability is the name of the game. Now, if you don’t mind, I’m going home. Goodnight.”

Mac holds a press conference on the steps of City Hall the next morning and sits behind a low podium in her wheelchair because she can’t stand up without seriously painful repercussions. Lois and Clark are representing the Daily Planet in the storm of reporters brewing on the street below her, and Bethany Snow of Channel 52 News is with her camera crew. Mac clears her throat awkwardly before she opens her mouth and speaks.

“I’m sure you have questions for me,” she says, “but first you’re going to hear me out. There’s a metahuman with the ability to induce rage in people who used his powers on the Flash, and that’s why he went berserk last night. I said as much in the official statement that I gave to the C. C. P. D. and if you want to know more about the particulars of color-based aggressiokinesis, read the ‘Metahuman Thesis’ on Rainbow Raider in the Central City Citizen.”

Mac forces herself to look at the cameras and winces at the flash before she changes the subject.

“I’m dating Captain Cold,” she confesses. “Apparently the footage of him kissing me has gone viral, and people are blowing up the internet with their opinions about me and my boyfriend. I’m going to make a statement right here, right now to everyone who seems to think they have a right to those opinions: my private life is none of your damn business.”

After that, people start yelling their questions at her until she holds up her hand and flicks her fingers. When lightning strikes the palm of her hand, they all shut up.

“There’s a reason that I have tried to stay out of the public eye,” Mac says, “as much as anyone with an obscene amount of money can. I’m not palatable. I’m not nice. I’m not here for your
entertainment. I don’t have the spoons to cultivate and maintain a persona in the public eye, and I’m not a hero on some crusade to protect our city. I have superpowers, but I believe that vigilante justice is often limited to punching crime in the face. Which is a way to fight the symptoms of injustice, but it doesn’t work if the criminals are turned over to a corrupt system—especially if the criminals are products of that corrupt system.”

Mac stops talking to take a sip of water from a bottle she stashed behind the podium. Commissioner Fells, who’s taken a lot of dirty money from Santini and other criminal organizations in the city whenever it suited him, is standing to her left. It’s a bad idea to condone what Len does for a living on national television and he’s past the point of being a victim of the corrupt system that she’s talking about, but that doesn’t mean she can’t throw shade.

“I’m sure people are scared of me,” she says. “I pushed the limits of my powers last night. Which is why I can’t stand up today, because incapacitating the Flash and bringing my boyfriend back from the dead took a lot of energy. I’m not going to lie and say that you have nothing to fear, but people with powers aren’t scarier than guns or bombs or weapons of mass destruction. Our powers aren’t good or evil by themselves,” she murmurs and slants her gaze to Clark. “How we use them is what matters. There’s an alien in Metropolis who photosynthesizes his powers, a man in Gotham who fights crime in a bat costume, an Amazonian princess who lives in Boston with her girlfriend, a dude in green leather who brings a compound bow to a gunfight and wins every time, a woman in black with a hypersonic scream who’s taken back the night. These heroes aren’t the first of their kind, either. There was a covert paramilitary group called the Justice Society of America that existed during World War II whose missions were sanctioned by FDR, a man with powers like mine who called himself Black Lightning and hasn’t been seen in almost five years…”

Mac sucks in a sharp breath and takes another drink of water before she looks at Iris, who’s standing with the news crew from C. C. P. N. and taking notes on the small yellow legal pad that she always carries around in her purse.

“…I’m not like them,” she murmurs. “I don’t have what it takes to put on a mask and become a symbol of truth, or justice, or the American way. This is who I am,” she flails one hand at herself to punctuate the statement before she adds, “I’m a fulgurkinetic metahuman. I’m disabled. I’m chronically ill. I’m autistic. I’m an information scientist. I’m a billionaire, and I spend my time redistributing my wealth in order to make our city a better place. I’m dating Leonard Snart, also known as Captain Cold…” she flushes bright and blotchy pink and exhales a soft whoosh of air before she says, “…so ask your questions. I have nothing to hide.”

Iris flips her notebook shut and speaks up. “Ms. Howell,” she says, “my sources at the C. C. P. D. have closed the investigation into the theft of the Kahndaq Dynasty Diamond perpetrated by your boyfriend. Was that because of you?”

Mac shakes her head slowly. “Dexter Myles dropped the charges,” she says matter-of-factly, “because the person who hired Len to steal the diamond was a member of the royal family of Kahndaq. When troops from the United Kingdom were occupying Kahndaq during the Arab-Israeli conflict in 1946, they attacked the palace and raided the Kahndaqian royal treasury. It should’ve been returned to them decades ago, but colonialism means that white people who steal things from the Middle East get to keep them like spoils of war. Cyril Rathaway donated the diamond to the museum, but he never should’ve owned the gemstone to begin with.”

Iris tries and fails to hide a smile that withers once she asks her next question. “Leonard Snart is still a criminal,” she says, “how can you condone what he’s done?”
“I can’t,” Mac admits, “but he’s served his time for every crime that he was ever convicted of, and my relationship with him doesn’t change what I’ve done for the Gem Cities or what I’m going to do in the future. I’m my own person, and I won’t be defined by who my boyfriend is. Truth be told, that isn’t the most interesting thing about me.”

After the press conference ends, Mac drives back to S. T. A. R. Labs to say goodbye to Team Arrow. If she wasn’t fulgurkinetic, it would’ve been an ordeal to get in her Mini Cooper and stow her wheelchair in the compact trunk. Luckily, she can fly—or, technically, she can use a dense magnetic field to help her stay on her feet while she folds up her chair and generates a pseudo-telekinetic electric field to put it away.

Barry, Caroline, Cisco, Caitlin, Lily, and Joe are standing in the cortex. Syd is sequestered in the research and development lab, Skyping with a biochemist at Palmer Technologies who’s developing a biostimulant to reverse paralysis because Mac is co-funding his research with Ray on the condition that Palmer Tech retains the sole property rights to any tech he makes.

Oliver looks even more like he swallowed a lemon than usual as he squares his shoulders in the middle of the cortex with his hands in his pockets, Diggle to his right and Felicity to his left. “I’m the Arrow,” he says in a flat voice with an implicit threat in the way he says his codename, “but my identity is a closely guarded secret known only to a few, and if it were to get out it would endanger my family, my friends, and embolden my enemies to retaliate at me through them—”

“Um,” Felicity interjects, “what Oliver is trying to say is that he had a lovely time working with you and getting to know each of you, and he can’t wait to do it again soon.”

Oliver exhales a quiet sigh as Felicity shoots him a look pointier than his arrows. “Right,” he mutters.

“You know,” Cisco says under his breath so only Caroline hears, “it didn’t sound like that’s what he was saying.”

Caroline snorts and looks up at her brother. “Come on,” she says, “we’re going to be late.”

“I may not agree with your methods,” Joe says and offers a hand to Oliver, “but thank you.”

Oliver perks up and a shadow of a smile unfurls in the corners of his mouth. “You’re welcome,” he says.

Iris has a shift at Jitters during the lunch rush. It dwindles in the middle of the afternoon, and brewing coffee from behind the counter gives her a chance to think.

Eddie walks in wearing his black duster with his hands in his pockets, his shoulders hunched in a nervous slump before he shrugs it off. “Captain Singh approved the anti-metahuman task force,” he tells her as she wipes down the counter, “you wanted me to believe the Flash was real. Now I do. I believe he’s dangerous, and I am going to take him in…” he gulps and looks down at her before he asks, “…how do you feel about that?”

Iris looks up into his eyes and smiles at him. “All I know,” she says as she takes him aside, “is how I feel about you.”

Eddie pulls her into his arms. There’s no doubt in her mind about looping him in, except for a niggling jolt of guilt because she thinks Barry should be part of this instead of sulking over at one
of the tables in the corner.

Iris grabs the lapel of his duster and uses the fabric to hide her other hand. “I need to show you something,” she whispers before she generates a small tornado in her palm and watches his eyes go wide. “I’m a metahuman,” she tells him.

Mac unlocks the door of her house and finds the king of the gods sitting on her floral print sofa in the form of a tall blonde woman[401] dressed all in white with striking eyes both gray and blue, like a sky full of stormclouds.

Zeus seems to tower over her even though he’s sitting down, and he smiles at her with an imperious twist of his lips. “Hello, θυγάτηρ,” he says.[402]

Hello, my daughter.

Mac sighs and kicks her shoes off before she hobbles into the den and flops into her papasan chair. “Hi, πατήρ,” she mumbles.

Hi, Dad.

[394] Diana of Themyscira, a.k.a. Diana Prince, a.k.a. Wonder Woman, sometimes lived in Boston with a Harvard professor named Julie Kapatelis and her daughter Vanessa, who is brainwashed and transformed into the villainess Silver Swan. I’m saying they’re girlfriends instead, because I can.

[395] I’ve pretty much either retconned all of Legends of Tomorrow or made those versions of the characters time remnants, and I’m planning to ignore a significant chunk of what that show did with the JSA because their appearance in Legends of Tomorrow 2x02 (“The Justice Society of America”) was a waste. Amaya is a great character, but otherwise the JSA only exists in the Arrowverse as basically plot fodder instead of characters in their own right. Which is boring, imo.

[396] FDR in the comics recruited Jay Garrick (the Flash) and Alan Scott (Green Lantern) in 1940 to covertly stop Hitler from using the Spear of Destiny to conquer Europe while America maintained its neutral stance because we were cowardly douchecanoes during WW II. Kent Nelson (Doctor Fate) recruited a bunch of other heroes—Al Pratt (the Atom), Carter Hall (Hawkman), Rex Tyler (Hourman), and Jim Corrigan (the Spectre)—and they all eventually joined forces to form the JSA, a team of heroes that first appeared in All-Star Comics Vol. 1, No. 3 (“The First Meeting of the Justice Society of America”) December, 1940. Their origin story as summarized above is the plot of Secret Origins Vol. 2, No. 31 (“The Secret Origin of the JSA”) October, 1988.

[397] Black Lightning 1x01 (“The Resurrection”) 16 January 2018. Jefferson says he stopped being a vigilante nine years ago in 2018, and it would’ve been almost five years ago in December of 2014. I know Black Lightning doesn’t take place in the canon Arrowverse and I’m glad it doesn’t, but this is a fusionverse and I do what I want.

[398] Cyril Rathaway is a professor at Keystone University who appeared in The Rise and Fall of Captain Atom Vol. 1, No. 2 (“Past Imperfect”) April, 2017. I’ve decided he’s related to Hartley Rathaway.

[399] Len is characterized as one of Central City’s most wanted in the first season of The Flash. Joe says he shows up every six months, pulls a job, and then gets away. Ostensibly he was doing jobs in other cities in the interim, because I doubt he would sit around twiddling his thumbs for months on end when he could be thieving. Len is canonically a killer, but I doubt he was ever charged with murder pre-canon—he’s half Black, and they would’ve locked him up for life. Just saying.

[400] Curtis Holt, who first appeared in Arrow 4x02 (“The Candidate”) 14 October 2015, invented a biostimulant that helps Felicity walk again (in heels, no less) in the aftermath of a shooting that cripples her—it’s the most ableist
MacGuffin in the Arrowverse, and I felt personally victimized by that storyline. I also think it’s bogus that Felicity wouldn’t think to mass produce it, if only because a device that literally cures paralysis would’ve saved Palmer Technologies from going bankrupt. Felicity is self-absorbed, but she’s not that self-absorbed.

[401] There’s a female version of Zeus who first appears in *Lost Girl* 5x02 (“Like Hell, Part 2”) 14 December 2014, portrayed by Elizabeth Helm. I’m basing my version of Zeus on her, but with the caveat that he took a female form in order to sire Mac. Zeus has turned into a swan, a bull, a dove (or pigeon depending on the version of the myth you read), a satyr, a shower of gold, and an ant for the purpose of seduction so the idea of him taking the form of a woman isn’t far-fetched at all—in fact, he turned into Artemis to seduce Callisto. There’s a mythological basis for this, is what I’m saying.

[402] θύγατηρ (phonetically *thúgatēr*) is one Ancient Greek word for “daughter.” πατήρ (phonetically *patēr*) is both an Ancient Greek word for “father” and an epithet of Zeus.

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