Winter On The Weekend
by Little_Red92

Summary

There seemed to be nothing left of him, he was broken inside, hollowed out, more so now than ever before. Evil had found. Evil had taken him. Taken by Zoom and trapped alone on Earth two and summited to terrible torture Barry doesn’t believe he’ll ever make it home, but he does only now home isn’t what it used to be. Plagued my memories of the man, the hero he used to be he struggles to move on from the pain that Zoom put him through. Out of everyone he knows the only people able to help him find a sliver of hope are Sara Lance Leonard Snart, it’s not going to be an easy road, carrying Zoom’s child and finding a way out of the darkness isn’t going to be easy.

Notes

Wow, it's been about two years since I last wrote a story so I apologise for being a little rusty. This story deals with some heavy topics and though I have not experienced these things I do hope to betray them the best I can. This story had been floating around in my mind for months so upon moving back to my hometown I decided to sit down and finally write it. This is still in the process of being written so if you have any suggestions or even events you'd like to take place I am happy to take them on board. I am also currently Beta-less so I apologise for any mistakes, thankfully I have a program that has helped fix some of my error's. Lastly, I hope you enjoy and please leave a like or a comment to let me know what you thought :)

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Archive Warning: Rape/Non-Con, Graphic Depictions Of Violence
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Fandom: The Flash (TV 2014)
Relationship: Barry Allen/Leonard Snart, Sara Lance/Lisa Snart
Character: Barry Allen, Leonard Snart, Sara Lance, Caitlin Snow, Cisco Ramon, Iris West, Joe West, Henry Allen, Oliver Queen, Lisa Snart, Wally West, Rip Hunter
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No one’s Here to Sleep

Here's the pride before the fall
Oh your eyes they show it all
I can see it coming, I can see it coming
As I rise up through each floor
Shit gets dark when you lose it all
I can hear it coming, I can hear the drumming

Behind every door is a fall, a fall
And no one's here to sleep

Naughty Boy feat. Bastille - No One's Here To Sleep

There seemed to be nothing left of him, he was broken inside, hollowed out, more so now than ever before. Evil had found him before; it had stolen away into his home, his heart, he’d found a way to overcome the darkness it had left behind, this time, this time, was different. The only way out of the darkness was to walk three steps and tip over the edge into oblivion. If they ever did find a way to him, to this God forsaken earth, it would be too late, not even the thought of his family and friends could keep him going.

It was all too much.

A strong gust of wind roared through the cave entrance, Barry’s hair whipped in the current; his dirty and torn clothes did little to shield him from the bitter bite of the icy breeze. Yet he felt nothing, not the ruffle of the wind in his hair or the cold air rushing against his face; he didn’t feel a damn thing. If only he’d felt something, anything, the smallest whisper of a touch, it might have changed his mind, it might have saved his life. There was nothing to be felt; he’d suffered through imaginable pain and felt grief and despair tear him apart, the numbness was all that was left.

He took a step forward; salvation was in reach, an escape to this hell was so close, just two more steps and he couldn’t hurt him anymore. Nothing would be able to hurt anymore. The world would go on, this one and his own. Iris and Joe would mourn him, so would Cisco and Caitlin and maybe even Harry in his own way, and he was sorry he was doing this to them, sorry he wasn’t strong enough or good enough to be a hero. With no speed, no way home, he was left at his mercy, and he’d tried waiting, hoping and praying that they would come for him, save him, but days turned into weeks and weeks into months, and he had to accept that they were not coming, there was no way home ever again.

Another step.

When Zoom first brought him here, he thought he knew what would happen: Zoom, Jay, Hunter, whoever the hell he really was, would kill him, slowly, painfully and the bastard would probably be grinning the whole time. He’d already taken his speed, bargained Wally’s life for it and of course, of course, Barry couldn’t just let him die, he was a big damn hero, after all, so he gave his speed to Zoom, let him have the only thing that had ever given his life meaning. The Flash was gone, and Barry probably could have found a way to go on, hell he could have found a way to get his speed back, but Zoom took him, as a prize, like something to possess. He thought he was going to die and it wasn’t long until he wished he had.

Zoom didn’t want to kill him; he wanted to own him. See he and Barry were alike; both lost, and
alone, both grew up without their parents, both given the gift of speed and the power to be a hero or
a villain. That first day, when he was chained to the bed, shaking with rage and terror he screamed
that he was nothing like him, he had been a hero, Zoom was the monster and had killed innocent
people, destroyed countless lives just so he proves he was the best, the fastest. Zoom laughed at
first, an empty hollowed out sound that escalated into a manic chuckle that was cut off suddenly by
a fist striking Barry across the face. It happened so fast that it took the pain a moment to blossom,
blood streamed from his nose, or it could have been his lip, he wasn’t sure, but he remembered the
taste of copper.
Zoom’s rage was insatiable, and Barry suffered it endlessly

Monsters do monstrous things after all.

Taking another step, tips of his shoes teetering over the edge, shaky breath exhaling tired lungs,
Barry knew he was ready. Peace awaited him; maybe he’d find his mother in the afterlife, if there
were one, perhaps they would be nothing, just darkness as far as the eye could see. That would be
fine. As long as he was free from Zoom, from all the evil that had followed him throughout his life,
he’d be at peace; he’d be safe at last. Raising his arms, as if to embrace death, he tilted forward,
felt the earth disappear from under his feet; freedom was close, so damn close. The world rushed
away and his back collided with a solid surface, hard, hard enough to rattle his bones, to make him
taste the all too familiar copper. This wasn’t right; he should have plummeted through the air,
landing face down on the rocky terrain below.

“What the hell are you doing?” He couldn’t open his eyes; he had escaped, he was ready; he had
been so near to freedom. A fist strikes him across the face, another bruise to add to the collection,
he is hauled away from the wall, dragged to the cot and handcuffed once more. “Answer me,
Barry?” Zoom’s breath is hot against his lips, yet Barry refuses to open his eyes if he does he has to
accept that he has not been able to escape from this nightmare. “I swear Barry if you don’t open
your eyes by the time I count to three I will break your god damn fingers!”

He’s not bluffing; Barry knows that he’s broken them before, he’s hurt Barry in so many ways,
some so very intimate. Slowly tired eyes open to meet rage-filled ones, he doesn’t speak, he has
nothing to say, but he’s complied with Zoom’s order. It doesn’t stop his rage, he breaks Barry’s
finger anyway, as punishment for what he almost did or maybe as a warning not to try it again. A
cry climbs up Barry’s sandpaper throat and when it breaks the silence that had followed the sickly
snap of broken it makes Zoom smile.

“You have lost your privilege to roam free; I hope you know that.” He rattles the chains for good
measure as he stands, looming over Barry, forcing him to look up to meet cold, empty eyes. “You
could have killed yourself, and our baby and I told you” hands grasp at Barry’s hair, yanking his
head back, making him bare his throat in a show of mock obedience, “If anything happens to our
child I will go back to your world and kill everyone you love.”

“I just want to go home” he doesn’t know what possessed him to speak, the words had left his
tongue before he could reign them back in. “Please, I just want to go home” his voice breaks, what
he just tried to do hits him like a truck. He was so close to ending it all; to giving up hope. If Zoom
hadn’t returned when he did, then Barry would be a corpse at the bottom of a nameless waterfall,
on some other earth and very, very far from home. Tears threaten to spill over bruised cheeks;
crying won’t help, he’s cried enough for a lifetime. Guilt is a lump lodged in his throat and regret
is nausea in his stomach, he is sorry, God he is so sorry that he gave up. Home was all he wanted,
Iris, Joe, Cisco and Caitlin were waiting, and he had to keep enduring so that one day he could
return to them.

“I used to measure my success by how many cities I destroyed” had he been talking long? Barry
wasn’t sure, too lost in his own suffering to notice, he quickly tuned in, to not listen would equal punishment, “maybe now I can measure it by how many worlds I can conqueror.”

Sick realisation settled over Barry like a dark cloud.

He had gotten his wish.

He was going home… only at what cost?

XxX

There was always a cost, a price for everything; at least it seemed that way for Len and Sara. They defeated Vandal Savage, freed themselves from the strings of the Time Masters, by all accounts they should be celebrating, they had saved the world, by all definitions they had become heroes. Len didn’t feel like a hero, he wasn’t one, the hero would have saved his friend and somehow pulled off a miracle and saved Laurel as well. Isn’t that what heroes did? Pull off the impossible and save a cat stuck in a tree while doing it? Len never really believed in the impossible, well not until the particle accelerator created The Flash and all those other meta-humans, maybe, just maybe the impossible didn’t exist for people like him.

It’s not like he was a stand-up guy, he’d killed people, he’d stolen and destroyed so much, so why should he get to save his friend? His penance came in the form of Mick’s life, sure the bastard chose to stay behind, to sacrifice himself for the team, for the whole goddamn world, but Len still blamed himself. He blamed Rip too; he brought them on this insane mission, with promises of being legends, with the promise of being something more than a petty thief and a murderer. He wouldn’t have gone along on this joy ride if it hadn’t been for Barry Allen telling him that he had good in him, how dare the speedster have the audacity to tell Len, of all people, that he had some good inside him, that he could amount to something.

Damn himself for believing it.

“I can feel your pain from here” Sara was sitting at the other end of the bunk, eyes red and puffy, a bottle of whisky resting between her outstretched legs. “You didn’t kill Mick; he chose to give his life up for us, don’t beat yourself up. It would make him pissed.”

“And you couldn’t have saved your sister” he shot back, snatching the bottle from between her legs. He took a swig, the liquid burnt pleasantly; the taste, on the other hand, was God awful. “We’re both sad and bitter, let’s get drunk, and maybe we could fuck for comfort, but I’m not pushing you, I never want to get on your bad side.”

“You sure as hell don’t” Sara ripped the bottle from his grasp “and maybe.” There was a small smirk there, yet it didn’t quite reach her eyes.

“I hate to interrupt this pity party.” Len turned his gaze toward Rip Hunter, he stood tall and sure in the doorway, “and I know you two have both just suffered great losses and I know what that does to a person, trust me, I have felt this despair and the only thing that helped me get through it was going after Savage and-”

“-Not to be rude. Actually, I might mean to be rude, but where are you going with this?” Len demanded, not in the mood for one of Rip’s long talks. “Savage is dead; the Time Masters are dead, job done and dusted. Now it’s time to get stupid drunk unless you have a better solution to our grief.”

“Well Mr Snart, Miss Lance, I am afraid I cannot lessen your grief, it will have to pass on its own
Len was going to tell him to shove it, he and Sara had deserved some downtime, they had a right to this ‘pity party’ but the look in Rip’s eyes had him remaining silent, and he wouldn’t admit it, but he felt his gut twists. There was something wrong, something had happened, and maybe Rip knew this was coming or maybe this was a result of them destroying the Oculus or all the time travel, whatever it was, Len knew it was bad. “Spit it out or would you like a drum roll?” The sarcasm fell flat, Rip’s expression seemed to be more pained, and even Sara started looking worried.

Rip Hunter sagged against the doorframe, heaving a breath before finally speaking. “Before I tell you this, I need you both to understand that this cannot, cannot be changed,” Pausing he took another deep breath “it… it’s a fixed point and time and thus rendering it impossible to change.”

“You’re scaring me Rip” Sara slid closer to the edge of the bunk, all traces of being intoxicated gone. “What’s happened?”

Rip looked at Sara, moving closer so that he was by her side, a comforting hand resting upon her shoulder; it, however, was the look he gave Len that spoke volumes of how dire this situation was. “Barry Allen has been taken by Zoom.”

Len jolted forward; he’d heard that Central City had been plagued by a new speedster, but he assumed Barry would handle it, he’d run or science his way to victory, all with a smile on his face. “Then let’s go rescue him!”

“This isn’t about rescuing him from Zoom, Len,” Rip explained, voice calm and measured “he will escape from him, I know that. It’s the aftermath…” he paused, looking more troubled by the second, “it’s in the aftermath that he’ll need you and Sara for. This is your new mission; maybe it will be the most important thing you ever do.”

“How are we qualified to handle this?” Sara demanded, freeing herself from Rip’s hand as she jumped to her feet to pace the limited space. “I am mourning my sister, Len is mourning Mick and you want us to go coddle the Flash because he got kidnapped by a bad guy? News flash, we’ve all been kidnapped at some point, not to mention we’ve just been through hell on this mission, but there is no one here coddling us or making us ‘get well’ soup!” She was shouting now, voice hoarse from hours of crying and half a bottle of whisky. “We have to claw our way out of this grief on our own.”

“Sara, I know what I am asking you is huge, and it’s the worst possible timing” he went to reach for, she swatted his hands away, and he quickly drew them back, wise man. A deep frown creased his brow, lips setting in a hard thin line. “I’m sorry, but you have to do this!” Len watched Rip stand tall again, hands on his hips and chest puffed out like he was ready for a fight. “Barry wasn’t just taken by Zoom for a few hours. He has been gone months, he’s been subjected to torture and” his jaw clenched at the same time Len’s gut did summersaults; he has a horrible feeling he knew where this was going. God he hoped Rip wouldn’t speak again. Len never got things he truly wanted, though. “And he’s been raped, forced by Zoom to bear his child.”

Sara stopped dead still the moment Len lunged at Rip like a wild animal ready to kill. All he saw was red as he forced Rip to the wall, he could distantly feel Sara pull at his arm but his grip was too strong, his rage too raw. “You knew this was going to happen?” Rip only nodded, Len shoved him against the wall, twice three times then let him go, stepping back to take a deep breath, trying to soothe the fire in his lung, the rage in his gut. “How can you live with yourself? The kid has been through enough, but you want us to let this happen to him?”

“It already happened!” Rip shouted “It already happened when we were in the past, it had already happened when were in the future and it had already happened before we even left two thousand
and sixteen. This is unchangeable, it will happen infinitely, and no change to the timeline will stop it from coming to pass."

Len felt sick; he felt dirty, he wanted to break something, he wanted to unravel time and stop this before it can ever begin. He can’t though because he can’t do the impossible and re-writing time when it won’t allow you to rewrite it is the impossible. He can’t do a damn thing, he can rage for days and break everything in this God-forsaken ship, but the results will be the same, Barry suffered, and Len was and will forever be unable to do a thing to change that. "What can I do?" His voice quivered when he spoke, a quick glance to Sara revealed that she had tear-stained cheeks; she nodded, all the same, letting him know that she was in. Len pulled back his shoulders, dropped his hands at his side and puffed out his chest; he was ready for a fight, mirroring Rip’s earlier stance. "What can we do?"

"I need you to save Barry Allen’s life."

XxX

When the bright light faded and the dizziness loosened its hold on Barry the many faces of the Central City precinct came into focus, they all stared up at him with wide eyes and gaping mouths. Among all those familiar faces was one he had ached to see, a face he had been sure he’d never get to see again. Joe stood among the officers and deputies; he did not wear the same look of shock or fear, it was a relief, at first anyway, after that his eyes flickered with so many emotions that Barry could not possibly catalogue them all at this point of time. Two stood out among the many; horror and guilt, the guilt was obvious, he blamed himself and Barry so desperately wanted to tell him that this wasn’t his fault, that he would never blame him for Zoom taking him. The expression of horror was worse; cold filled Barry’s chest as Joe’s eyes roamed over him, taking in his too pale skin, frail frame and many cuts and bruises.

Barry wanted to cry, to run for Joe and have him carry him out of this place like he was a child, to wrap him in arms and tell him he was safe now and the monsters couldn’t get him. It wasn’t going to happen, though, Zoom had sunken his claws into Barry, he’d woven himself into him, marked him and calmed him. He’d never be any ones again. He was his prize, his pet; he’d break him and beat him and fuck him and not a damn soul could stop him because Zoom was too strong and too fast. He would forever be Zoom’s

Chaos suddenly erupted around him; the world had faded away to just him and Joe, now it was back bright and loud and crashing down around him. An officer had fired at Zoom, without a moment’s hesitation the speedster had jumped down from the balcony and landed among the gathered crowd below. The foolish officer, James Bell, his name was, had his neck snapped. There was a moment of stunned silence that swiftly ended in more gunfire, shouting and lifeless bodies falling to the fall. Legs failing him, Barry collapsed to the ground, folding in on himself as the sound grew deafeningly loud, if only he were strong enough to tell Zoom to stop, to please spare them, strength had long since left him. So he clutched his hands over his ears and sobbed.

"Barry, hey Barr, look at me."

Whipping his head up, blinking away the fog of tears he saw Joe crouched low in front of him, trying to hide his body behind the barely there rails so Zoom would not see him. “J… Joe” his name felt heavy on his tongue, he wanted to throw himself into his arms, to be filled with relief, but just because Joe was two feet away from him, it doesn’t mean he’s saved.

“Please go. Run before he gets you.”

“Not a chance in hell. I am bringing you home” he sounded so sure like he truly believed he could
just carry Barry out of here and Zoom would not notice, would not hunt them down to the ends of the earth.

“I can’t” he couldn’t believe he was saying this, after months of wanting nothing more he couldn’t believe he was telling Joe, his only hope, to leave. Running now would equal Joe’s death; it will equal everyone’s death.

“Barr let me take you home.” He was pleading now; eyes brimming with desperation, Zoom would notice them any moment now. The chaos down below had grown quieter, the sound of screams and gunfire fading out as Zoom tore them apart like ragdolls.

“He is not going anyway!” Joe was torn from Barry’s side, dangled by the collar of his shirt over the edge of the balcony. “He IS mine! THEY are mine! THIS WORLD IS MINE!”

“Jay, please” Barry had called him by his alias only a handful of times and each time he had been pleading, pleading for him to stop, to stop hurting him, to stop breaking him, to stop tearing him apart. He was pleading now, God he would get on his knees and beg if it meant saving Joe’s life. “If you care about me at all” he paused, eyes flickering from Zoom’s masked face to Joe’s terrified one. “If you care about us at all you won’t do this.” Zoom wavered. He could do this; he was just sorry that Joe had to know what had been done to him. “Losing Joe, my father” and he was his father, as much as Henry was “I don’t think I could handle it, the grief would destroy me, it would destroy us.” Placing a hand on his stomach, he flicked his gaze back towards Joe for the briefest of moments; it was long enough to see the realisation burn in his eyes.

“Fine” Zoom didn’t exactly ease Joe back to safety but throwing him to the ground was better than dropping him to the foyer below. “Leave now before I change my mind.”

Joe stayed put, wide eyes blazing with anger, hands balling into fists, he was going to attack, and Barry would have to suffer his death all the same. He did the only thing he could do, something he hated to do; it made him feel sick to his stomach, disgusted with himself on so many levels. He planted himself between Joe and Zoom, his captor, the monster that had hollowed him out and forced him to carry his child. “I will be okay” it took all of his strength not to cry, to not break down and beg Zoom to just let him go home. “I am okay.” He wasn’t, he was a thousand miles in the opposite direction of okay, and he’d honestly never be okay again, even if he was somehow saved from this nightmare. Joe would be okay, if he left now, he would be fine, and that’s what mattered “Just go.”

Joe did not believe his words; Barry could see that it killed him to stand up and walk away, it killed Barry too. He walked away with his life though, and Barry felt grateful for the first time in months, Joe may be walking away, downstairs may be littered with the dead, but Barry would not give up hope. Because the last look Joe gave him said ‘I am coming back for you, we all are, I love you and I am going to save you.’ Joe disappeared into the elevator and Barry did not stop staring at it, even after Zoom had dragged him away and handcuffed him to a desk. The hopelessness that had led him to try and take his own life this morning seemed miles away; it was left behind in that God-forsaken Asylum.

Hope was an ember in his chest and it would either spark a flame or fade away to ash.

He prayed for a fire.

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Tucked beneath a desk, in a forgotten box was a spark of silver hope. Clutched in trembling hands, Barry desperately waited to see if the cell would blink to life and when it did he nearly wept for joy. When he received the first message back from Cisco, he did weep. He only had a short
window of time to inform his friends of what Zoom was planning; the speedster had returned to earth 2 shortly after arriving, he reappeared from the breach with an army. He was ready for a war and Barry was chained, broken and unable to help. He wasn’t entirely helpless, with straining ears he overheard parts of Zoom’s master plan, he fired off a text after text to Cisco, revealing every detail that he could hear. For the first time in months he felt useful, he felt like this nightmare was coming to an end. He kept his conversation business-like with Cisco; it’s why he chose him to text, he would understand that now was not the time for them to deal with what had been done to him, now was the time to take down Zoom for good.

Unknown number: We’ve got some ideas. Hang in there; we’ve got our eyes on you. The cavalry is coming.

The cavalry is coming; they are coming, he was going home, oh God he was going home… but what happened after that? What happened after the nightmare ended? There was no waking up, this was not a dream, there was no fade to black and flash forward to when he was better, all shiny and new. How was he supposed to be okay? How was anyone going to be able to go on with their lives after this? Everything had changed; Barry was broken beyond repair and how could he return to his friends only to burden them with that? They would be okay; they did not endure his torment, they could wake up in the morning without the memories, the scars or a life feeding off them. They came out unscathed while Barry was marked for life.

This is why he tried to end it all, to save not only himself the pain but his friends as well, it would have been better for everyone if he had died this morning. No, it would be worse if he died, Joe would blame himself for the rest of life and Iris would have lost him, her mother and Eddie, not to mention that Cisco and Caitlin had already lost so much in their quest to help him. He owed it to them to stay alive; he owed it to them to be alright again, they saw him as The Flash so how could he show them that he was anything but. No matter how hard or how long it took he would redeem himself, his friends deserved better than a broken a hero, so he would get some tape and glue and piece himself back together again, and he’d do it alone, so no one else had to be tainted by his darkness. Even if he was never completely fixed on the inside he would wear a mask; he’d smile and do his job and be the good son, the good friend, he would not let them down again.

“Are you happy to be home?”

Startled, Barry craned his neck to look up at Zoom; he was smiling down at him with a sick fondness. “It’s warmer than the cave.” It was strange; sometimes he had almost normal moments with Zoom like he was a friend, not his captor. There were moments when it was almost like Zoom meant it when he said he cared for Barry, he knew better, though, Zoom’s feelings are warped and twisted, he did not feel love for him, no it was an obsession. Wanting to own someone was not love, this monster was not capable of such emotions. Yes, the speedster was obsessed like Eobard Thawne had been, only this was worse, Thawne had wanted to be the fastest man alive, Zoom wanted Barry all to himself.

He’d succeeded in that too, he’d taken Barry apart in ways that The Reverse Flash could only dream of doing, he was the better villain and yet there were whispers of Jay, or perhaps it was his true identity, Hunter Zoloman that Barry caught brief glimpses of. It was there when he brought him food and water; it was visible when Barry started getting morning sickness, Zoom would rub his back soothingly while he emptied what little had managed to get down into the offered bucket. It was in those moments that Barry thought he could reach out to the ghost of goodness in heart, especially on the first day the wave of morning sickness overtook him. He saw Zoom beam, pride shining in his eyes; he had succeeded in getting Barry pregnant, something Barry had stupidly be
unaware that he had been trying to do.

The sickness that washed over him was of a different kind; he’d gripped the bucket in fear of lashing out, the sob that tore through him was gut-wrenching. All he wanted to do was purge himself of the vile inside; he could not do this, he would not do this. Throwing the bucket away he swore to Zoom that he’d find a way to terminate the pregnancy, he would not bring another monster into the world. It was the first and only time Barry threatened the life of the child, the punishment he took for threatening such a thing was brutal. Zoom broke three fingers, split his lip, blackened his eyes and handcuffed him to the bed with the cuffs so tightly they left bloody welts. Barry would never forget that the monster inside was stronger than the ghost of the boy.

“That it is.” Zoom bent over, freeing Barry from his chains before heaving him to his feet. “I will take us someone nicer, I promise, I just need to make sure this city knows who is in charge. I’ve sent the meta-humans out to show the locals, shall we say, a good time?” lips twisted into a wicked smirk “in the meantime, let’s find a way to occupy ourselves, hmm?”

A leather-clad knee is shoved between his thighs, sickening fear turns his stomach, he knows where this is going, and as always he has two choices: Lie still and give himself willingly or fight and be bruised and sore. The fight had long since left him after he became pregnant the rapes happened less, and Zoom had never been as violent and as brutally as he was the first dozen times. The first would always be the worst; he’d fought tooth and nail that day, he screamed and pleaded and cried and bled. Sadly time had taught him that fighting only equalled more pain, resisting was useless and to anger or deny was foolish.

So Barry let Zoom manhandle him onto the desk, he let Zoom strip him of his worn out jeans and underwear, he gave is unwilling body to his captor, and he tried to stop the broken sobs from escaping passed closed lips as Zoom eagerly entered him. He let the monster use and take while his mind tried to wander off to better times, to forgotten days, he had nearly lost himself in the memories if it weren’t for the blinking red dot of the camera fixed to the wall at the end of the room.

We’ve got eyes on you.

They were watching.

Joe, Iris, Cisco and Caitlin, oh God they were seeing everything. Suddenly he pulled away from Zoom; he reacted the way he should of when Zoom first pressed his body close. He managed to free himself from his grasp, managed to rid his body of Zoom’s cock, he had scrambled halfway off the desk when strong hands yanked him back by his bare legs, Zoom forcing himself inside him once more. A cry of anguish pierced the empty building; it only made Zoom thrust harder, how he loved the sound of Barry’s pain.

“Where are you trying to go Barry?” hot breath ghosted against his face, sharp teeth nipped at his ear “did you just realise you were putting on a show on for your friends?”

A sharp thrust had Barry arching his back; blunt fingers clawed at leather, it was no use, there was not enough strength left in these bones. Sobbing was all he could do; everyone had already seen that he had easily allowed Zoom to take what he wanted, the fight washed away in pain and tears. He only hoped that his friends had not been around to see him be so weak, so disgustingly weak. Only he had a terrible feeling that they had been watching this whole time, that Zoom had somehow made sure that they had seen the show.

And what a show it was.

XxX
Len, Sara and Rip made their way through Star labs at a hurried pace, the sound of commotion echoed to them from the heart of the building, no doubt Barry’s friends were working in overdrive trying to bring him back. Len was bitterly jealous that they currently had no clue as to what Barry had been put through, Rip’s words were on repeat in his head and the more they looped around, the more his anger grew. He would kill Zoom; his anger was fire in his veins and the only way to extinguish it was to find the bastard. Len preferred to run cold, burning up with rage was more Mick’s thing, Len always had a cool, aloof approach to most matters, if you started a fire in the heart of a man made of ice then you better run for your life. Zoom was damn lucky he was fast, but he would never outrun Len’s need to kill him.

Not that Len had a damn clue as to how to kill a speedster, Barry always healed impossibly fast, and even the cold gun was barely a match for him. Len was clever, though, he’d cut the bastard into a thousand pieces and bury them at the furthest corners of the earth if he had too. Perhaps Len should not have let himself get so attached to the Flash; he had outright hated him at first. He had tried to kill the kid, yet his icy heart thawed the more he saw Barry, not the Flash, Barry, the kid beneath the cowl was the one who wormed their way into Len’s life. Once you were in his life, then you were in it for good, so of course, when Rip said Barry needed his help he was willing to throw up his hand and say sign me on.

This wasn’t the help he had expected to offer, though; he could punch and ice a few bad guys but fix someone? He wasn’t sure he could do that, he was thirty-five, and he was still broken from his childhood and hell, his adulthood wasn’t a picnic either. He was sure as hell going to try, since apparently they, he and Sara, are the only ones who can really help Barry through this ordeal. Rip is from the future so who is Len to argue, in a strange way they have already helped Barry get better, and he finds that comforting. Even though he has no idea how the hell how they managed to do so, only time can tell. Currently, there seems to be mass panic happening in the control room so he figured now is as good as any time to step out of the shadows.

“Hate to interrupt the hysteria, but help has arrived.” Casually leaning against the doorframe, he watched as all the heads swivelled in their direction. They all paused for a moment, most people wouldn’t have even have noticed, but Len is trained to observe every little thing. A flurry of motion followed, Joe drew his gun, Cisco and Caitlin rose to their feet and the earth 2 Harrison Wells just looked slightly confused at the reactions of everyone else in the room. “Now, now no need for alarm, I sincerely mean it when I say I am here to help.” He held up his hands in a sign of peace “Rip has already informed that I must, or rather that I do, so ta-da, I am at your service.” He would never admit how hard it currently was to keep up his sarcastic and detached air. No one needed his emotional baggage right now or to hear that he was sorry he was unable to change things.

“I think what Snart means is that we are here to offer our help and support.” Rip said stepping out from behind Len “we have not been formally introduced” he walked over to Joe, offering him his hand to shake “I am Rip Hunter, I’m not exactly from this time, but I can assist in the rescue of The Flash, well sort of, I have rules to abide by.”

“You’re the guy with the spaceship?” Joe does not shake Rip’s hand, and Len can see where this is about to go, he should speak up now and save the poor guy the trouble of asking. He really doesn’t want to listen to the ‘this is an unchangeable event’ speech again.

“Actually, it’s more of time ship” Rip explained, Joe wasn’t listening; he was already aboard the ship, jumping back in time to save Barry.

“Whatever it is it can take us back to the moment before that monster took Barry, right?” Joe asked eyes wide and wet with tears.
“Mr West I wish I could do that but I am afraid I cannot” He explained calmly “I shouldn’t even really be here, I thought Barry would have escaped from Zoom by now, but that clearly no one has figured how to slow Zoom down yet.”

“Wait” Cisco rushed out from behind the desk, eyeing Rip cautiously “we can slow Zoom down?”

“Well, you will.”

“But how?” Cisco demanded, arms failing in frustration.

“I don’t care how we defeat Zoom” Joe bellowed, it stunned everyone in the room. “You are taking me onto that damn spaceship and taking me back to save Barry.”

“I can’t and if you just let me explain-”

“I don’t want you to explain anything” his voice had grown strangely quiet, it unnerved Len more than the shouting “I just watched my son get raped” his voice broke, it took a few moments to compose himself “so please, please take me back so I can save him.”

Len chose to not listen to the rest of the conversation, his heart was already breaking, too bad he was a fool and a sucker for punishment, that’s why he snuck around to the desk to see for himself the agony Barry was suffering. By the time Len reached his destination the assault on Barry was over, Zoom was out of the picture but Barry, oh poor Barry, was frozen in place, perched half-naked on the edge of some officers desk, cum and blood staining his inner thighs and tears making tracks down his ashen face.

“I’m coming for you, Scarlet” Len vowed “and I promise you, Zoom is going to pay for this.”

XxX

By late afternoon, the city had erupted into chaos. Zoom’s army of meta-humans ran rampant in the streets, the police offers that had survived this morning’s massacre were now being slaughtered as they desperately tried to fight for the city, for their lives. The city needed a hero, it needed The Flash to race in and save the day, well they’d need a miracle if they wanted The Flash to return, he was gone, long live The Flash. Barry could only watch as his home was torn apart. Guilt was making itself known in his gut, he felt partly to blame for the chaos unfolding, he’d begged Zoom to bring him home if he hadn’t then the city wouldn’t be falling apart at this very instant. Accompany the guilt was a deep rooted sickness that had overcome him ever since he’d been informed that his friends had witnessed his assault. Apparently, Zoom had been expecting them to hack into the security feed; he’d been proven right when he’d gone to Star labs, so he returned with a wicked plan in mind. As awful as the thought of Zoom being in the same room as his friends were it was still better then him having discovered the phone Barry now coveted.

After Zoom had finished with him earlier he’d left to clean himself up, leaving Barry a few precious minutes to retrieve the cell again. Admittedly he’d nearly wasted the time, frozen on the desk as shock rippled through him, if it hadn’t been for the phone beeping at that moment then Barry might have stayed there, feeling sick and forlorn, for hours. Hastily he’d rushed toward it, not even bothering to redress himself, trembling hands freed the cell from its hiding spot and he quickly read the message, then re-read it, because Captain Cold was the last person he expected to hear from. It was not unwelcome, though, Snart informed Barry that he was going to come for him tonight, he told him to hang in there just a little longer and stay by the cell as much he could. Hearing approaching footsteps, Barry muted the phone and returned it to its hiding place. By the time Zoom had re-entered the room he was sitting on the desk again, redressed and breathing hard.
Hours passed, and still he stayed perched on the edge desk, every muscle felt tight beneath his skin, he’d been unable to reduce his heart to a steady speed, the promise of being saved was just too much. Even after the sun set and the city began to fall apart he kept sitting there, eyes flickering from Zoom to the precious box. If a text came through he’d be able to see the glow of the light through a small almost unnoticeable hole at the bottom corner, he just needed that light to come, it was his lifeline, and he wasn’t sure he could handle it if he didn’t see it again soon.

Finally, not a few moments later, he saw it, every part of his body tensing, with bated breath he waited to see if Zoom had noticed; he was too busy admiring his work. Ever so slowly Barry crept toward the box, once seated; he waited another few minutes to see if Zoom would turn to him, luck was with him. What a funny thing to think, luck was something he certainly hadn’t been dealt. Lately, it was wrong to use such a word in a situation like this, but maybe the tables were turning. Hope was here, in an old beat up box and the fire in Barry’s chest sparked again.

**Unknown Number: We’ve found a way to take the meta-humans down. In five minutes Zoom will be knocked unconscious, run out then, Captain Cold and Sara Lance will be waiting to collect you. Don’t ask; we’ll explain once you’re safe. Be Safe Barry.**

Five minutes, five more minutes and this nightmare would be over. It took all of his strength not to cry, relief filled his shaking body, fanning the flames into a full-blown fire. An urge to know, to finally understand why Zoom had taken him overwhelmed him, these would be the last five minutes he ever spent with him, and if never knew why Zoom had done this to him then he might never be able to heal. Breathing in and out, unsteady legs carried him towards his captor; he was still so lost in the madness of the streets below. What did destroying this earth gain him? Was it just for fun or to show he could? It was a good question to start with; it was also a way for Barry to build courage for the most important questions.

“Where are we supposed to go if you destroy everything?” He sounded strong, stronger than he had months; he had four more minutes to be strong, after that, well Barry wasn’t sure what happened after. Would he still feel so strong? Would the fire fade out and desolation consume him once more? If anything the last few months had taught him it was that his moods were as ever-changing as the tides. He’d hold on tight to this moment of bravery, and whatever may come may come.

Zoom didn’t look away from the window at first. “I am not going to destroy the whole world, Barry; I am merely taming it for us” Slowly he turned to face Barry, walking lazily towards him. “We shall be kings and this city our kingdom.”

“I don’t understand” Barry blurted out, bravado seeming to wane with just one look of those cold, cruel eyes. “I don’t understand any of it! I don’t get why you took me or why you hurt me yet say you care for me and I don’t understand why you are forcing me to have your child. Why do you want a kid? A baby? I have been trying to figure you out for months, and I am just so confused.” Barry wasn’t sure when he started crying, the tears wouldn’t stop, his body shook with repressed sobs, and still, he pushed on, even though every word felt like shards of glass in his throat. He just needed to know, to make sense of it all so that maybe one, one day far off in the future, he could be okay again. “Is this about what happened to you? Please just help me finally understand.”

Three minutes left and Barry was tumbling down the emotional rabbit hole into wonderland.

“Hey, shh” Zoom closed the distance between, taking both of Barry’s trembling hands into his own, being mindful to avoid the finger he had broken not twelve hours ago. “When I first met you, I just wanted your speed, that’s it, but then I got to know you, and I saw how extraordinary you were, so smart and brave and strong. Then I learnt about what happened to your mother, and I
knew at that moment we were the same.” A glove-clad hand traces gently patterns up Barry’s arm, running over fading bruises and healing scars. “I fell in love with you Barry” he looked so sincere, not a trace of the monster was to be seen, Barry could almost believe him. “I took you because I had to show you that we belonged together and I know I have hurt you and forced myself on you, but it was all to show that you and I were alike.” Pausing, he leant into place a fierce kiss against Barry’s lips; he stayed ridged until Zoom broke away. “See, you were too pure, too full of light, I had to break you just enough, just enough for us to fit together perfectly.”

Hatred wasn’t a strong enough word for what Barry was feeling right now; there would never be enough words to explain how he felt in that moment. Actually, no, there was one word that came to mind: clarity. He could see how deranged Zoom was, he was broken beyond repair, there was no good left inside, no ghost of innocence or mercy; he was past saving. Barry was not like Zoom; he could never hurt someone like this and call it love, they were not alike, had never been. Zoom could break Barry all he wanted, but their pieces would never fit together.

“So you did all this because you love me?” The words were barely above a whisper.

“Yes, I love you, Barry.”

For a split second, Barry thought he was going to lean in for another forced kiss, but his expression changed, it seemed unreadable for a beat then it crumpled in pain. Freezing for a moment, all Barry could do was watch as Zoom clenched at his head in pain, scream after scream tearing from his lips. It’s time funny the voice inside of his head sounded like Len’s, run, Barry, run! Shoving Zoom away with brutal force, he did as the voice told him, he ran, he ran like hell. Shoving Zoom away with brutal force, he did as the voice told him, he ran, he ran like hell. Vaguely he could hear Zoom telling him to stop, to come back but whatever was happening to him was enough to stop him from using his speed, with one last look he saw the monster that changed his life forever disappear into a breach, it had Barry stumbling, nearly freezing once more. He was not completely free, he would not be free of this nightmare until Zoom was dead, right now he had to run, and if they couldn’t kill Zoom, he might never be able to stop.

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The rush of cold on his face as he burst out of the front doors to the precinct, felt like nothing more than a tickle, numbness seeped through his bones like a deadly disease and distant voice registered that he was going into shock. The world around him seemed too large, too loud, his vision blurred around the edges and all he could do was stumble forward, he could not stop. It was impossible for him to get very far, he felt like the world was caving down around him; unsteady legs threaten to buckle beneath him.

He envisioned his moment of freedom differently, he imagined it would feel like a weight had been lifted, he’d run towards freedom with a grateful heart and relief pulsing through his veins. He felt none of that; he felt more terrified then he had just days ago, maybe it was because Zoom was still alive and able to return and capture him again or maybe it was because now was the hardest part.

The most challenging part was moving forward and finding a way out of this darkness, it was going to be a hell of a lot harder than being claimed by it. Uncertainty filled him, all he wanted to do was sit down and wait for it to be over, for the darkest hours to pass so that he could wake to a brand new day and find himself whole once more.

Colliding with a solid surface shattered all hope Barry had of freedom, the fire was doused beneath the heavy weight of acceptance, he would never be free. The solid mass was shaking him; voices echoed far off, hands pulled at him, dragged him away and away. Something warm settled over his shoulders, the voices grew clearer, they seemed panicked. Even if he had escaped Zoom he’d never truly be rid of him, the scars he left behind were more than skin deep; the thing growing inside of
him would be a living ghost of the past, of the abuse he had suffered. Perhaps it was better Zoom had returned for him, maybe he should just let him shape him into the person he wanted him to be, then maybe, just maybe he might not hurt so much anymore.

“Scarlet can you hear me?”

Everything came piecing back together, not all at once, rather slowly, like a jigsaw puzzle gradually being formed by someone who had all the time in the world; only after the pieces were snug together did everything become clear. The roar of an engine, the vibration of the road, the warm air pouring from the A/C and the heavy jacket wrapped around his shoulders. Len’s face was such a welcome sight, even after all the strife they had been through Barry knew that he was safe, even if it were only for a few brief moments. Driving the car at an alarming speed was a blonde haired woman that reminded him a lot of Laurel Lance, it took him a moment to remember that she had a sister and she was the one currently driving the getaway vehicle.

“Where are we going?” The words felt strange; everything seemed a little dreamlike, he gripped the parka, which he now realised was Snart’s, tight between his fingers.

“Back to Star labs” Len replied, easing back to give Barry some space, he only now just realised how close he had been. “We’ve got to get all of Zoom’s other buddies after that.”

“We can’t go to Star labs!” No, he really couldn’t, that would be the first place Zoom would look for him, and he couldn’t put everyone in danger like that, but he couldn’t stay out in the open and wait for Zoom to strike either. “Zoom escaped through a breach and when he returns he’ll go their first. Please, I can’t… I just can’t… I am so tired please; I just want to be safe.” His voice hitched with a sob, words stuttering and tangling together. “Len please take me somewhere else. I can’t be taken again, please.” All that bravado from before was gone, in truth, it had faltered as soon as Zoom had turned his gaze towards him, he thought he could at least stay strong long enough to make it until dawn. Perhaps it had just been a placebo effect; he’d tricked himself into thinking he could be brave once more when really he wasn’t sure he could ever be brave again.

“It’s ok, Scarlet” Len’s tone was soft, soothing “we will go somewhere he can’t find us, okay? You are safe, and he is not going to take you again, I swear on my life Flash.”

Scarlet, Flash, names he no longer deserved. If anyone else had spoken them he would have felt sick with shame at no longer being the hero dressed in scarlet, but Len spoke them differently, like adoring pet names and he felt himself relaxing, if only slightly.

“Sara, head out of town, I know a place we can stay awhile.”

“And are you telling everyone back at the lab about this detour or am I?” Sara glanced over her shoulder, giving Len a serious look. “They are not going to be impressed. Not that I mind the change, Barry, your needs come first.” Offering him a quick smile, Sara looked away and focused back on the road. Barry had already decided that he liked her.

“Do you want to talk to them?” Len asked, gesturing at his ear comm “are you ready to? I will buy you time if you need it.”

Was he ready? No, he didn’t think so, he still felt like he was in a dream, no matter how hard he hugged the parka to himself. “I… I can’t… I need to feel more real.”

Len didn’t reply, he put in the ear comm and called out to the team, Barry was only grateful he couldn’t hear them because it sounded like Len was having a hard time trying to convince them that running was the best plan of action right now. They just wanted Barry back, he could
understand that, he wanted nothing more than to be home, safe in his bed, waking to find that this was just a truly awful dream, but that would never happen, just like Len would never give in and take Barry to the lab. Len and Sara gave Barry a voice, a chance to be heard and after months of every plea and beg being unanswered it felt nice to be given a choice.

In a way his friends were being selfish, they wanted Barry back to soothe their own guilt, once Barry was home safe they would go on with their lives, they didn’t have to live with the scars like he did. A part of Barry felt like Len and Sara were here to help him carry his burden, he wasn’t sure why they would, Sara didn’t even know him, but he found the thought comforting all the same. The conversation ended when Len took out the earpiece and stuffed it into his pocket; he let out a long sigh. Barry didn’t want to know what everyone else had wanted for him; he hoped they came around and saw that this was the best thing for him, he had to run and run and run and never look back.

“Are you doing okay, Scarlet?” again Len’s tone was gentle, it wrapped around him like a reassuring hug.

“I just want to know I am not dreaming.” Folding in on himself he felt the familiar tug of anxiety luring him down into its murky waters. If he sank now, he wasn’t sure he’d find the strength to fight his way back to the surface.

“Take my hand.”

Barry startled, the inky black waters of anxiety coiling away at the sound of Len’s voice. Looking over at him Barry saw that his arm was outstretched towards him; he was offering him his hand, tentatively Barry took it in his own trembling one.

“Do I feel real?”

Nimble fingers glided up an open palm, feeling the rough callouses beneath cool skin; he traced every line on Len’s palm before working his way up his fingers, feeling ever scar, every joint and fingertip. This was flesh and blood, warm and alive and right before him, this was a real car speeding away towards safety with a real person behind the wheel. “It’s real, it’s real” he chanted in a whisper, “it’s real.”

“And you’re safe” carefully, as if not to frighten him, Len laced his strong fingers through Barry’s “I am your anchor Scarlet; take my hand whenever you need it.”

Barry grasped his hand tight, leaving no space between palms and finger, slowly, slowly, the feeling being to fade. “Where are we going?” he asked after a few moments, hand still gripping Len’s tight.

“First star on the right,” Len smiled at him, soft and warm and safe “than straight on ‘til morning.”

XxX

At the edge of some small no-name town, inside a motel with a broken vacancy sign, Barry, Sara and Len waited. The clock struck twelve, the witching hour had begun, and surely they would have to face some demons before the sun rose and banished them from their lives. Sara felt haunted, plagued by Laurel’s death, by the things she had never revealed to her, only now she felt like she should have opened up to her when she had the chance. It wouldn’t have made much of a difference if she did tell her baby sister about what had happened to her. It would have only hurt Laurel and God knows she’d hurt her enough. She felt stupid, lying here in some old, musty motel room, revisiting the past she had long ago conquered.
What had happened to Barry was a terrible reminded of the awful things she had endured; it had plucked them from the deepest corners of her mind and laid them bare for her to see. It happened after the second time she’d been taken by the sea, washed up ashore and miles from home she was found by a young man, he seemed nice, she thought she was going home, she had been wrong. Not wanting to remember anymore, Sara rose to her feet and made her way to the small mini fridge and retrieved the tiniest bottle of vodka she has ever seen. She gulped down the whole thing; Len didn’t ask if she was okay or ask her to spare him any. Barry is in the shower, and she’s glad of it, she’d feel even more of a failure if she lost it in front of the person she was meant to be protecting.

Dropping the bottle in the trash can, she goes looking for another, only all she can find is milk; tea it is then. This time, she does offer Len a drink, and he accepts, smiling cautiously at her from the only bed in the room. Sara should want Laurel right now; her baby sister had always inspired her to be strong, to push on even though she was ready to give up. It wasn’t Laurel who helped her through the aftermath, though; it was Nyssa, beautiful, strong Nyssa, the woman who saved her, not just by rescuing her from him but by teaching her to fight, to protect herself from anything like that ever happening again. Nyssa saved her with her love and wisdom, and she could really use some of that right now.

She wasn’t exactly the world’s best person, hell neither was Len, so the fact that they apparently help Barry through this seemed ludicrous to her. They were both so messed up, even more so now that had both lost the people they loved and cherished the most. Len seemed strangely sure of himself, he’d managed to calm Barry down before, and the display in the car showed Sara that Len might actually be able to help Barry, but what did she have to offer? She could teach Barry to fight, to channel all his pain and rage into his fist; he could take a giant swing at the world and knock it down for all that it had done to him. She felt like that wouldn’t work for him, from what Len had told her about The Flash he was a ball of sunshine, full of hope and trust and one hell of a hero. Hadn’t Sara been similar, bubbly and sweet, wild and flirtatious and ready to take on the world? Maybe, in the end, everyone falls apart the same way, how they get pieced back together was a different matter.

“He’s been in there awhile.”

Sara only now realised she’d zoned out; the steam from her tea was no longer visible. “What?”

“Barry has been in the shower a long time,” Len replied, getting up to rescue the tea. “Maybe you should check on him?”

“It’s normal” she stated, “he’ll come out when he’s ready.”

“Worn his shoes have you?” Len inquired, words laced with sadness, but not pity, thank God it wasn’t pity.

Snatching the mug from Len, Sara stomped toward the microwave “Are you heating yours up or let me guess, you like it cold?”

Len moved to stand beside her, holding out his mug for her take “lukewarm tea is not my favourite, it’s gotta be ice cold, but I can stomach some hot things.” The corner of his lips twisted up into a half-hearted grin.

“How are you so… you” she gestured at him, annoyed that he was still so calm and collect while she was whirling with emotions “right now?”

“Fake it til’ you make it” this time he did smirk, cocky and assured, Sara was too bothered to notice the true emotions dancing in his eyes.
She groaned, God she wanted to punch the jerk, instead, to keep her hands busy, she started the microwave. “Okay, let’s fake it, I am fine, you are fine, Barry isn’t fine, so let’s focus our attention on him.” This was said with her back to him, the ghost of a touch had her relaxing slightly, but Len knew better than to coddle her.

“We can break down later Sara” his breath ghosted the back of neck; it was oddly comforting “after we’ve killed Zoom and gotten Barry home.”

Sighing once more, Sara spun around to face Len, tea in hand. “I get the feeling we are supposed to stay even when Barry is home and Zoom is gone.”

“We can decide that then” he was just about to take his tea when a heavy thud came from the bathroom. Quickly Len rushed to Barry’s aide, Sara heisted, unsure if her presence would be welcome, a little voice in her head, one that sounded like a mix of Laurel and Nyssa, told her to go, she was needed. Tea forgotten, Sara made her way to the bathroom, finding Len helping Barry to his feet, a trickle of blood ran down his forehead, with one last weary sigh Sara headed in to help.

No one was here to sleep tonight.
Feels Like Coming Home

Chapter Notes

Hi, first I am so sorry because I did forget to mention in the first chapter that mpreg is normal for this universe so that’s why no one was questioning why Barry was pregnant. Second: someone pointed out that Sara was in fact the younger sister when I had gotten it into my head that she was the oldest, silly me. Third: This story is a work progress, so there will be more, hopefully, I can update once a week for all you lovely readers. In the meantime, here is chapter 2 and I hope you enjoy.

PS: I alerted the scene where Barry escaped from Zoom but only ever so slightly, not enough to change any events in the story. I just wanted to inform you lovelies :)


It's hard for the dreams when the city's never sleeping
But we’re gonna make it, though we don’t know how
I pay a high price for the joy of the free ride
‘Cause I got you, and now that’s all that counts

Room 105, at the back of the alley
You’re wearing my coat while sleeping

Jetta - Feels Like Coming Home

Real…

This was real.

The hot water falling down around him, the grime-stained tiles beneath him, the steam billowing around him, the motel on the edge of a quiet town, the people in the room just outside, the very room around him was real. Zoom was not here, the bathroom was empty apart from him. Safe, he was safe here. That was real. So why did he feel like those cold eyes were still watching him? Why was it that even though he scrubbed his skin raw he could still feel those powerful hands taking him apart? Perhaps he felt this way because every time he looked down at his body, bony, weak and marked by scars, he was reminded of Zoom. How could he not be? His body was a map of places Zoom had been.

Thick scars marred his wrists, left behind from ill-fitting cuffs, fresh bruises the shape of cruel fingers tainted his thighs, scars were scattered over him, each accompanied by a painful and clear memory of how they came to be. The clearest reminded was the small bump forming in his abdomen. Feeling sick, Barry shut his eyes, turning the faucet so that the hot water could wash away every memory, every trace of Zoom, he scrubbed at his skin like doing so would erase all that had been done to him. Sadly this depleted motel did not offer enough hot water for Barry to cleanse himself with and he could only take the burn of vigorous scrubbing for so long, it was all pointless in the end, there was not enough water or soap in the world to rid Barry of the damage Zoom had done to him.

Tired and sore Barry turned off the water, fumbling with the shaky hands for the towel he left
hanging over the stall wall, he longed for sleep, he doubted he’d get any this night. Finally, he emerged from the shower, finding the room blanketed in a cloud of steam, the mirror he had painfully avoided before was fogged over. It was a quick decision that made him head towards the basin, he hadn’t seen his own reflection in months and he wondered if he looked as hollowed out as he felt. Hesitantly he wiped the condensation from the cool glass, keeping his gaze averted until he found the courage to look, to see the thing Zoom had created. Hands gripped tight at the sides of the stained sink, taking a deep breath he slowly lifted his head, what he saw was worse than he imagined.

He was unrecognisable. Once bright eyes were dull and as lifeless as the china dolls that his grandmother once owned, his already thin face had hollowed out, his skin, which was always kept clean shaven as Zoom liked his boyish features, was ashen and the dark circles under his eyes seemed as black as night. There was no trace of Barry Allen staring back at him, no reassured smile or confidence, no light dancing in his eyes, Zoom had taken everything from him, he had ruined him. Sickness overtook him, hands tightened against porcelain as he tried to calm himself, to push it down and pull himself together. It wasn’t working, he wanted to smash the boy staring back at him, he was not Barry Allen, he was not The Flash. He was a victim. He was Zoom’s victim. He’d been beaten, tortured and raped, the person in the mirror was the new Barry Allen, the broken and tainted and ruined version.

"Broken perfectly” Barry froze, every muscle, every nerve turning to ice. Behind him; just visible in the fading steam was Zoom’s masked face, appearing in the fog like a demon straight out of hell. “You’ve finally realised it. Realised that I broke you, moulded you into what I wanted you to be, what you were always meant to be!” He was right behind him now, shouting in his ear, the rest of the world had faded away, it was just them. “My father killing my mother before my eyes was the first crack in my soul and when you lost your mother that same crack appeared, linking us, even between earths.” Barry flinched as Zoom shifted closer, pressing up against his back, invading his space, his lungs, his head.

“You are blood stained and haunted, Barry and soon the rage will consume you and you will return to me” he whispered, caressing his cheek in a manner that was both possessive and tender, it made his skin cruel. “Then we will claim this world as our own.” Sharp teeth dug into the soft flesh of his ear, Barry jerked away and in doing so he fell, hard and fast onto the tiled floors. Stars burst behind his eyes as he temple made contact with the tiled floor, whimpering, he rolled over onto his back, finding Zoom hovering over him, a satisfied grin on his face. “We’re broken just the right way now, Barry.”

Everything seemed to rush away like the floor had given in beneath him and he plummeting down into the darkest parts of the earth, he would have screamed, thrown his hands out to latch on to something if the room hadn’t rapidly come back into focus as quick as it disappeared. Gasping for air Barry gazed up at the place Zoom had been just moments ago, in his place was Len’s concerned face. Panic rattled his bones; heart pounding away in his chest like a freight train. Zoom had been here. Zoom was back and he’d take Barry away again at any moment. Why hadn’t he taken him already? Had he just imagined him, was he going crazy? Without thinking, he grasped Len’s hand tightly in his own, warm, strong, real, safe. Zoom had felt oh so real, the breath ghosting along his neck, the fingers stroking the side of his face, the sharp sting of teeth.

Broken, blood stained, haunted, those words reverberated through his brain, weak, not good enough, bad, wrong, evil, just like Zoom. Broken just like Zoom. Everything was becoming too loud, voices screaming in his head, words overlapping and looping until he felt like he was going to lose his mind. The world was too loud and in the immensity of the rising screams Barry felt so small, so lost and alone in his own storm of emotions, a ship ready to sink, lost forever to the cold black waters of the sea.
“Barry, do you like space?”

A voice, a light beam full of hope shining in this distance, showing him the passage to shore, he allowed it to bring him to safe harbour. Upon opening his eyes he found he was no longer in the bathroom, instead, he was sitting on a hard chair, towels draped over his waist and shoulders, Len at his side, holding a cloth to his face and Sara kneeling before him. Her small hands held firmly to his forearms, her eyes bright with the reflection of the fluorescent light. Safe, real.

“I m… I saw… Zoom” he stuttered, breath hitching as his lungs ached for air “In t…the… bathroom.”

“It’s just us three here, Barry” Sara reassured, rubbing soothingly at his arm. “You are really tired; it was probably just your mind playing tricks on you.”

God, he was so tired, he hadn’t slept a full night in months, but it was more than that, he was tired deep in his bones, in his soul. Weak was another thing he was, a feeble body carrying around a broken heart and far too many burdens. “I… I feel like I am going crazy… I let Zoom use me, I let him win and I am so sorry that I’m so weak and broken.” Sobs wracked his tired frame, the inky black water swirled around him, eager to take him back into its clutches. “I failed everyone, I failed myself.”

“Hey, no shh” Sara clutched his hands, using all her might to ground the breaking boy in front of her. “You are not broken or weak, Zoom hasn’t won, but if you give in to the pain inside you, if you surrender to the darkness then he wins! Then he gets to say he broke you but we are not” she looked at Len, who squeezed Barry’s shoulder comfortingly “going to let you fall apart. So take a deep breath and tell me if you like space?”

Looking at her, Barry could see the tears in her eyes, he felt her hands tighten around his but her grip was not painful, she was telling him to fight, so he damn well would. “Yes… yes, I like space.”

“Good” she smiled encouragingly at him “now tell me the name of the planets in our solar system?”

He had no idea why she was asking him this, it was such an odd question, especially at a time like this. He trusted her and the more he looked into her eyes the more he could see, she had been in Barry’s place once. “Mercury, Venus, Mars,” slowly, Barry felt himself relax, heart settling into a steady rhythm and tears drying up “Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, Neptune.” The room had gone silent; he felt heavy, longing for a warm bed and a place to rest his head “and Pluto, just because I think it’s not right it got demoted.”

Sara laughed softly “I had a feeling you would like space, I bet you could tell me all the constellations.”

“And then some” Len added with a half-hearted grin. “I should patch this wound up so we can all get some rest.”

“I’ll get the first aid kit” Sara rose but Barry kept a firm grip on her hand.

“What about Zoom?” He’d bitten his ear, hard, hard enough to leave a mark for sure. “I know he was here” shooting to his feet, Barry rushed to the bathroom, holding onto the towel around his waist with one hand and Sara’s in the other. When he reached the mirror he angled his head to the side, there was no blood or even the smallest sign that Zoom’s teeth had sunk into the soft flesh of his earlobe. Deflating, Barry turned away from the mirror to face Sara, “I feel like I am going
“You’re not going crazy” Sara reassured, “you just need rest, we all do. Then we’ll be more equipped to come up with a plan to take care of Zoom, but first, let us patch you up okay?”

Barry nodded, allowing Sara to lead him back towards the chair, he collapsed onto it, he was so tired, worn down and wrung out, wavering on the edge of passing out. Sleep was a far off dream tonight, Zoom would return and when he couldn’t find Barry he would come looking for him and there wouldn’t be a single place on this earth, on any other earth, that he would be safe. Zoom would never stop hunting him, he would chase him to the end of the world and then some, so despite the crippling fear, the fatigue that weighed him down, he would face Zoom, he would slay the monster so he could go home, so that finally, finally he could be free.

He just had to be brave one last time.

XxX

There is always a strange quietness to the early hours of the morning like the whole world had stopped, everything is suspended in the darkness, then an owl will hoot or a dog will bark and the stillness will shatter and just like that the world will start turning again. In this tiny motel room, silent and musty, it feels like the world will never start spinning again, this is their safe haven and as long as they stay here, hidden away, they will continue to be safe. It would be lovely to just stay here for a while, give their weary bodies time to rest, let their broken hearts heal, allow them to feel safe, even if it were false. It would be ideal to just shut away the world and all its madness, lock out the monsters and throw away the keys.

They can’t do any of those things, Sara wishes they could, but there is still a threat at large and you don’t run and hide when lives are at stake. She has been trained for this, she can compartmentalise, square her shoulders, hold her head high and go out there and kick ass. Len can hide his pain behind a smirk and quick wit; he’ll put on his parka, holster his cold gun and strut onto the battlefield, looking like he could take on the world. Barry was different - he may have spent the last two years being The Flash and Sara doesn’t doubt he could hold his own in a fight - but right now he didn’t have the strength to mask his pain. The slumbering boy next to her wasn’t The Flash, he may still have the heart of a hero but right now it was in pieces.

He is not fit to be anywhere near any form of fight, she would never say this aloud, but right now he’s just too damaged. Emotionally he would be compromised, physically he is weak, starved, wounded, God, there are so many bruises and scars covering him, Sara’s heart aches at just the sight of them. Rest and safety are what Barry needs above all else, if Star lab calls to let them know Zoom has returned she would not allow Barry to go back, they can take care of Zoom without their help, once he is gone they will return.

It’s not just about wanting to keep Barry from harm, she always wants to protect Len, it’s selfish of her to hide from a fight when she is physically able to help but she’s just lost Laurel and she is not about to lose Len. Len would do something stupid, she can see it happening already, his feelings for Barry would make him careless, he’d rush in, cold gun blazing and end up dead and Sara couldn’t do this on her own. What help could they offer, Zoom was faster than Sara, faster than Len and faster than the cold gun, they would be defenceless against him and Sara hated feeling defenceless.

“Penny for your thoughts?”

Sara squinted through the dark, only able to make out the part of Len’s face that was visible in the moonlight. She could pretend to be asleep, that wouldn’t work, Len wouldn’t have asked her a
question if he wasn’t certain she was awake, he was too good at picking up on his surroundings. “I feel defenceless” she confessed, “we are no match for Zoom and I am not in the position to handle losing anyone else right now.”

“That makes two us” Len replied, voice thick with fatigue “which is why the only person dying will be Zoom. I am going to turn him into a Popsicle and crush him to dust beneath my boots and I won’t feel bad doing it.”

“He’s too fast” Barry stirred, he’d been resting silently between them “we need a way to slow him down otherwise we’ll never stop him.”

“Barry, this isn’t your fight” Sara looked down at him, the gauze covering the gash on his temple was almost luminescent in the pale moonlight, the rest of his features were hidden in shadow. “You’ve already won your battle, it’s time to heal.”

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“You survived. You made it through months of hell and when you finally had the chance, you escaped. You’ve already won Barry.” A quite sob stirred the darkness; Sara fumbled around in the dark until she found Barry’s hand.

“I… I didn’t think I could,” he choked out “I tried escaping in the beginning but I eventually gave up. I tried to believe that they would find a way to rescue me and when they didn’t come I thought I’d never get home… I gave up. I let Zoom do what he wanted to me” sobs grew stronger, Sara held his hand firmer “I just lost all hope and th… this m… morning I was going to…” his voice hitched, Sara’s heart ached for him “to end it. Zoom came just before I could and I” he began to ramble, words lost to his grief.

She didn’t know what to say, there were no right words to offer, nothing would ever make up for the horrors he had endured and there wasn’t some magic potion or perfectly formed sentence that would make it okay. He suffered so much that he saw death as his only way out; you don’t just get over that. “You’re still here” she whispered, “you didn’t take your life this morning, it’s okay that you wanted too, I understand but you are still here. You got out.” Pausing, Sara allowed her words to sink in “You made the escape all on your own, Barry. We were just the getaway party. So whatever life throws at you next, remember, you got out.”

Barry finally squeezed her hand back, sniffles fading away to laboured breathing “Please don’t tell anyone else, I don’t want them to know. I… it would hurt them too much.”

Ever the hero, he was still trying to spare the people he loved from his own pain, he was so much like her, it brought a sad little smile to her face. “Our lips are sealed.”

A comfortable silence fell over them, Sara thought they might get some sleep tonight, but fate has other ideas. Len’s ringing phone shatters the bubble around them, Zoom is back and he is holding everyone hostage and they have until sunrise to deliver Barry to Star Labs or else everyone dies. Being big damn heroes that they are, even though they are tired; wounded and broken they march out into the early morning, a warrior, a criminal and broken hero, here to save the day.

XxX

Len liked plans, he liked knowing every detail, every possible outcome, he liked having a plan B and a plan C and even a plan D but if wasn’t foolproof after that then Len would refuse the job, he played it safe. Right now Central City is glowing in the distance, they’d be there soon and Len didn’t have a plan, he didn’t even have a half a plan. Every fibre in his being screamed at him to
turn around, telling him this was going to fail, this was a doomed mission and he was going to get himself and Sara killed and poor Barry would most likely have to watch his family and friends die before he was once again taken by Zoom. Len could not allow that to happen, Barry trembled from his seat beside him, hiding within Len’s parka, looking lost, scared and like his world was going to fall down around him. Again, Len might add.

Running in guns blazing wouldn't cut it, he may have hit Barry with the cold gun in the past (right now the memories make him sick, he would never harm Barry again) But Zoom was faster than him and could snap his neck even before he unholstered the damn thing. They had to slow the bastard down; enough so that Len could use the cold gun on him, they, however, had nothing on them that could slow a speedster down. Rip, however, might. Surely that ship had something they could use. He’d beg Rip if he had too, this time, the Time Master wasn’t going to get away without helping; Len would make damn sure of it.

“Sara, I have a plan.”

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His plan better work, the formula Rip gave them better slow the speedster down or else Len will personally hunt Rip down and shove his cold gun where the sun doesn’t shine. Right now he had more pressing things to worry about, Sara, Barry and he were currently sneaking their way through Star labs, if nothing failed they’d keep Zoom distracted while Ray snuck up on him and injected him with the serum, once that took effect Len would ice him, they’d all shout for joy and pop champagne, hooray. If only their happy ending could start there, killing Zoom was just a chore, something that had to be taken care of so the real work could begin and the real work made this look like a piece of cake.

Fixing someone who was broken seemed an impossible task to Len, he had been broken in his childhood and all the kings’ horses and all the kings’ men couldn’t put him together again, so what hope did Barry have? Especially since it appeared the already broken people were supposed to fix him and that was like the blind leading the blind. When the sun rose the monster would be slain and the fight for Barry’s life would begin. He hoped they could save him, that they could somehow piece him back together, little by little, day by day.

Right now he had two clear objectives: kill Zoom and prevent anyone from dying. Not an easy job, but he’d be demand if he let Zoom take Barry again. Len glanced over to where he walked beside him, huddled in his parka and skin almost luminescent under the lights, he marvelled at how incredibly brave. Walking right back to your tormenter was the hardest thing anyone could ever do, walking back to your tormenter and knowing they could take you again, well that must have felt like hell. It wouldn’t happen, their plan, half-assed as it was, would work and by morning, the world would be rid one more monster.

Finally, they reached the cortex, surveying his surroundings Len counted six hostages, all bound to chairs by thick rope. Zoom stood tall and menacing in the centre of the room, clad from head to toe in black leather he looked the perfect villain. The claws on his suit and the cowl covering his face gave off a monstrous look; he did not feel fear at the sight, only rage. Hands balling into fists at his side he resisted the urge to grab the cold gun, it wasn’t time yet, he had to wait for the perfect moment to strike.

“Nice to meet you” Len smirked, tone lazy like he had all the time in the world. “I’ve heard a lot about you. Can’t say they’ve been good things and I’m a wanted criminal, so that really says something, don’t ya think?”

“And I can’t say I’ve even heard the faintest whisper of you” muffled through the mask his voice
sounded demonic, a trickle of fear ran down Len’s spine. “We will never have the chance to exchange stories, I’m afraid, my patience is worn thin!” When he shouted Len felt his voice reverberate throughout his body like a tremor from an earthquake, he stepped closer to Sara and Barry protectively. “It’s time for Barry to come with me if you want to live that is.” He could hear the smirk, it made his blood boil.

“Sorry, buddy, Barry isn’t going anywhere with you” Len raised the gun, just for show, Ray still hadn’t shown up “ever again.” As if on cue he spotted Ray, you could be fooled into thinking it was a dust mote or an insect but there no mistaking The Atom suit. Len held his breath, counted backwards from ten, still nothing happened. Shit, Ray couldn’t find a way into the suit, fuck, he was going to have to improvise and he hated improvising. “Why don’t you show us your face?” He challenged, grip on the cold gun tightening, making his fingers ache “or are you too much of a coward.”

“He seems like a coward” Sara belittled the smallest of quiver in her voice “hiding behind a mask instead of facing us.”

Zoom bristled with rage, Len swore he could see lightning skittering across the suit; this was like taunting a great white shark, stupid and suicidal. If Ray wasn’t able to inject the formula then they were dead, oh they were so dead and so was everyone else.

“You always were a coward” every head snapped towards Barry, he inched even closer in a show of his support and in hopes of offering some form of comfort. “That’s why you needed to be the fastest; you had to prove you were worth something to the world, to yourself, but YOU’RE NOT!” Barry bellowed, face going red with anger, eyes glistening with unshed tears “you are worthless, you had to break me down just so I could be on your level, but you failed at that too, I am not on your level, I will never be! I survived you, Hunter. I survived all of what you put me through and I can stand here and look you in the eyes and tell you that I hate you! That you are pathetic and you will never win!”

Zoom charged, it happened so fast, faster than the blink of an eye, faster than a blast from the cold gun. Everyone seemed to collectively shout Barry’s name, Len turned to face Zoom, who had come to a halt where Barry had just stood, confused and angry he rounded on them. Barry had vanished; he’d never actually been here in the first place. Len and Sara had left him aboard the Wave Rider, using some form of technology to make it appear that he was here the whole time. It had been a too greater risk to bring Barry into the lion’s den but if they showed up without him there was no telling how Zoom would react, not to mention Barry argued that he had to do this, he was strong enough to face Zoom one last time. Len could also see how important it was for Barry to do this, he needed to prove to himself that he could do it, even if he wasn’t physically there, Len would allow it, Barry was owed this much.

Zoom tore his of his cowl, roaring “WHERE IS HE?”

“Somewhere you’ll never be able to get to” Sara snarled, lips twisting into a satisfied little smirk “somewhere you’ll never be able to hurt him.”

For half a heartbeat Len thought he was about to charge again if he died for Barry then he was okay with that, he was worth dying for. Tonight was not his time. Zoom surged forwards, his movements had gone sluggish, he didn’t even make it three feet before collapsing to his knees, at Len’s mercy. Len didn’t have any mercy for him, not now, not ever, slowly he lowered the cold gun, resting against his crotch, he couldn’t hold back the devilish smirk at the mortified look that crossed Zoom’s face. “You’re not going to hurt anyone again” he didn’t deny himself the satisfaction when he pulled the trigger, the scream tearing from Zoom’s throat was painful to his
ears. Len raised the gun, aiming at his head “I hope you enjoy hell you bastard” with the squeeze of the trigger it was over, Zoom fell sideways to the floor, head smashing into pieces, the monster was slain, the sun started to rise.

XxX

Fear is something Barry has felt a lot of in his life; it was something he had faced and conquered time and time again, as Barry Allen and as The Flash. For the last few weeks of captivity, he’d been suspended in fear, it was there when he woke up in the morning and there again when he fell into a fitful sleep at night. Nervous energy had pulsed in his veins, panic had crept into every nerve ending, every fibre of his being, becoming all he that he knew. It even followed him into his dreams, his nightmares; there had been no escape from it, no escaping the agony, no escaping the monster tormenting him. Well, sometimes there was an escape but in all honestly he wasn’t sure it was any better, the numbness that overtook him made all the suffering go away but it left him feeling like a ghost, watching unattached from a far off place as Zoom hurt him.

Today Barry was going to face his fear, he would face it all, slay his demons, though he was utterly terrified even from his safe place on the Waver Rider. Rescuing his friends and family, facing Zoom once more is something The Flash would do and he owed it to that part of himself to try. He was physically incapable of being harmed, of being taken, it offered a small comfort, still, his heart was a freight train beating in his chest, fear was a hungry monster filling his stomach with bile and turning his blood to ice.

“If you can’t do this, just say” Rip Hunter stood before him, despite the fact he’d never met this man he felt secure enough on his ship. When he met Rip eyes he saw genuine concern for him, Len had informed him that not long ago his family had been kill by Vandal Savage and somehow knowing he’d been a father made Barry relax a little around him. He felt sorry for him, he’d lost so much and Barry understood what that was like all too well.

“I need to do this,” he declared “I need to this for myself.”

“I understand,” Rip smiled kindly at him “I am here if you need me and remember you may only be outside Star labs but the ship is invisible and if Zoom runs out that door Gideon will lurch us into the nearest time stream.”

Barry nodded, there was no more time for small talk, it was time to finish this. On a floating screen before him, Len and Sara entered Star labs; a holographic version of himself appeared beside Len. He was unable to see Sara as she wore the contact lenses that connected with the screen which allowed Barry to see where he was heading. Both Len and Sara wore bracelets that allowed the hologram of Barry to appear between them, if he were to walk into someone or something the hologram would fizzle out.

“That formula you gave Ray better work” Len whispered over the comms “our asses are counting on it.”

“Don’t worry Mr Snart I can assure you that the nanobots will stop both Zoom’s rapidly healing system and speed without fail.” He replied, business-like as usual “Ray will merely need to inject them into the target and the rest is up to you I’m afraid.”

The comms went silent, on screen Len, Sara and the holographic Barry moved on, in only minutes they will reach the cortex. With every footstep closer, Barry felt the ever-present fear twist in his gut, there was no hiding the trembling in his hands or the sweat beading on his forehead. Sickness washed over him, everything seemed too bright, too hot, his breathing grew laboured and the world seemed to sway around him, he felt like he was standing aboard a ship that was fighting to stay
upright in a violent storm. He couldn’t pass out now if he broke contact with the equipment he was using then he’s holographic self would vanish, he had to fight, he had to be brave, braver than he’d ever been before.

“Nearly there Barry” Rip reassured, “deep breaths now, you’re safe, it’s about to be all over.”

With strength he swore he’d long ago lost he continued forward, following Len and Sara into the cortex, bracing himself he looked at the place on the screen where Zoom stood. Cold swept through him, he hated how much power Zoom held over him, hated how even though he was out of reach he still managed to make him terrified. Hate wasn’t something he felt often, he had known people he didn’t like and would actively avoid them but he didn’t hate, it just wasn’t him. That was until he met the Reserve Flash, he despised that man, he’d killed his mother, left his father looking guilty and singlehandedly destroyed Barry’s innocent world, crushing it dust without a care in the world. He his hatred for Zoom was stronger, he loathed him, Zoom had hurt him directly, Zoom damaged him in ways The Reserves Flash never could.

He’d defeated Eobard Thawne, it had been hard and it had regrettably cost Eddie and Ronny their lives but he had beaten him. That was as The Flash, now he was just Barry Allen, actually, he wasn’t even Barry Allen anymore, that guy was happy go lucky, shyly confident and brilliant. Whoever he is now is nothing compared to The Flash and even every day Barry could run circles around him. He was no longer a hero or a young forensic scientist always running late for work, he was just Barry, a broken, scared and tired soul. If any of The Flash still lived on inside him then he needed to tap into it, use what heroism he had left to face Zoom for the last time.

He owed himself that much.

Looking back at the screen he saw that things were not going well, it took him a moment to realise Ray was unable to inject the nanobots into Zoom and Len and Sara’s attempts at goading Zoom to take off his mask were failing. They were going to die, they were all going to die and he was unable to do a damn thing. Rage burst to life in his veins, it burnt so bright and strong that it engulfed the fear and churned it into more hatred, he was not about to watch everyone die, he’d been a damn hero once and he could be again, if only for a moment.

“You always were a coward” he growled out between clenched teeth, shaking with the effort of his words “That’s why you needed to be the fastest; you had to prove you were worth something to the world, to yourself, but YOU’RE NOT!” Barry bellowed tears swelled in his eyes and his face grew hot, sweat matting his overgrown hair. “You are worthless! You had to break me down just so I could be on your level, but you failed at that too” dizziness was overtaking him again; the emotions raging war within were sucking the oxygen from his lungs. “I am not on your level, I will never be!” Still he carried on, every time he spoke he felt himself grow fainter, vision darkening around the edges “I survived you, Hunter, I survived all of what you put me through” the darkness wasn’t scaring him, it felt welcoming, beaconing him forwards, every word made him grow lighter and lighter “and I can stand here and look you in the eyes and tell you that I hate you! That you are pathetic and you will never win!”

Unable to stand a moment longer he toppled to the side; Rip caught him before he could reach the floor. The world swayed before his eyes, blurring together in a colourful dance of imagery, sickness washed over him like a wave, he didn’t have the energy to hold back the bile and vomited onto the floor. Rip held him in steady arms, sweeping his sweat-soaked bangs away from his burning forehead, it seemed hours until his vision cleared and his stomach settled, in reality, it was only minutes. Everything flooded back in, the darkened room; Rips arms snug around him, the bright floating screen that was broadcasting Zoom’s death.
Zoom’s death… Zoom was dead.

Flying to his feet, so fast that Rip almost fell backwards, he rushed from the ship, the world around him turning into white noise. As he runs, legs crying out in protest, lungs burning, tears clouding his vision, he felt a sense of freedom wash over him. He was home, Zoom was gone, gone forever and as he ran like wild towards the lab he felt relief chase away the aches in his muscles, calm the fires in his lungs, nothing had ever felt so liberating. It was only yesterday that he tried to take his life right now it felt like a lifetime ago, he’d thought he’d never get home again, it had been the only way at time, now he vowed to himself that he would keep pushing on, keep running because if he stopped, for even a moment, he might give up, he might get lost in the dark.

Bursting into the room Barry barreled into Len, hugging him so tight his arms strained and shook from the effort, he would not let go, he needed to know, to feel, that this was real. Arms encircled him, holding on just as tight, words were not needed, it was enough for Barry to know. This was real, he was safe and he was home. He was so exhausted, he was beyond exhausted, he could let go now, he’d been brave long enough, the fight was over, the threat gone, sagging against Len he let his legs go weak beneath him, he let sleep claim him, the last thing he thought before the darkness rushed in was it feels like I’ve come home.
Fragile

I'm sorry you saw me shaking
Stay with me for a day
I've got no one to hold me

Cause I'm fragile
God, I'm fragile

Gnash feat Wrenn - Fragile

The daylight spilling softly into the room stirs Barry from his slumber, upon opening his eyes he finds himself in an empty room, it's not just a room, though, it’s his. It’s the room he spent his teenage years growing up in, it's the room he spent countless hours studying and playing computer games in. It's home, it's safe and it's real. Scrunching the sheets in his fingers, smelling the soft fragrance of his pillow, relearning every nook and cranny of his room has his heart filling with joy. Everything was the same as it was when he left it, papers scattered over his desk and corner table, books were left at random on his dresser, nightstand and chair, even a shirt was still left unnoticed on the floor. If it weren’t for the open windows and freshly made bed Barry would have thought his room hadn’t been entered since he was taken, but he knew better. He could imagine Joe and Iris coming in here, wandering around aimless, hoping and praying that he would somehow come home to them.

And he had, despite everything he had endured he’d made it home, the bed beneath him, the walls around him and the roof above him were not mere memories or passing dreams, he was home and he thought it would be enough to make him feel safe. Zoom is dead, he is wrapped in warm blankets in his bedroom, in his home and yet he can still felt a chill deep in his bones, a flicker of fear skittering beneath the surface. A painful reminder that just because he was home it didn’t mean all was well. He was just as broken as yesterday; the only difference is now everyone would be able to see it. The last time they’d seen Barry he’d been The Flash, a hero, giving up his speed to save Wally’s life, months later, cracked and scarred and bruised he was a different person, he isn’t the hero who gave up everything to save a friend’s life. He is broken and he has miles and miles and rivers and roads to go before he can feel like anything less.

After a few more moments sitting lost in thought courage shows its face and he carefully untangles himself from the blankets and stands on weak leg. Shivers course this frail frame, without Len’s coat he feels bare, exposed to the world, all his shame could be seen. He’s about to tear his room apart in search of it when his eyes find the familiar black parka resting at the foot of the bed, quickly he pulls it on and folds himself inside, using it as a buffer to separate himself from the world around him. Logically he knows he is safe, no one in this house is going to hurt him, it’s just such a default habit to make himself as small as possible.

Silently he slips out the door into the hallway, voices drift up from downstairs, hastily he glances back at his bedroom, debating whether or not he should go back in, crawl back into bed and hide under the covers until he feels stable enough to face everyone. Bed bathed in the warm glow of the daylight, covers rumpled and inviting almost have him turning back, he can’t hide away, warm sunlight and blankets aren’t going to chase away his demons.

Venturing further into to the hallway the soft voices grow louder, a comforting background noise that eases some of the anxiety tightening in his chest or he would feel comfortable if he didn’t just
realise he was surrounded by ghosts. The walls are lined with framed pictures of his life. Coming to a halt his gaze falls on a picture of his younger self, armed with a baseball bat and a goofy grin, it was taken on the day he tried out for the school baseball team. He didn’t make the cut, he’d been utterly terrible, too slow and clumsy but Joe took him for ice cream after and told him was meant for greater things.

At the time he believed him and for a time he had been done greater things, been a greater person, The Flash could do the impossible, save lives and stop bad guys, he’d been the greatest he ever was. Now he was nothing more than the remains of a mad man’s creation. Eyes dart away from the smiling boy in the bright red baseball cap, it hurts to look, to see all that had been torn, burnt and fucked from him. He should turn back, lock the door and climb under the covers and forget the image of the innocent boy but his legs keep carrying him forwards.

Trembling fingers trail along the smooth surface of the wall, eyes find a picture of a dorky and bony sixteen-year-old frozen in time, he is dressed in a cheap tux suit, Iris standing beside him, looking beautiful. She’d offered to be his date after Jenny Sloane dumped him for a jock thirty minutes before the dance, he hadn’t cared about being dumped, going to prom with Iris was better than going to prom with Jenny. As luck would have it, though, her high school crush had asked her to dance and a dejected Barry slunk off to pine under the bleachers, then Liam Fraser, the cute Scottish transfer student, appeared and Barry ended up fumbling around with him in dark.

Memories crash over him, it became too much standing there with the eyes of the past watching him, innocent and unknowing of what is to come. Tearing his gaze away he forced his feet to carry him to the stairs, taking a deep breath, he carefully descended the first flight, pausing only a heartbeat before rounding the corner only to find himself freezing in panic. Ice pulsed in his veins, nauseous was a beast within his stomach and his legs started to fail him; one hand gripped the bannister for support and the other wound around his waist in the attempt of comfort. Everyone was looking up at him, Iris, Joe, Cisco, Caitlin, Harrison Wells, Jessie and Wally, each had a hundred different emotions dancing in their eyes and it was all too much. The pain they’d been through was clear on their faces and Barry felt a tremendous guilt at being the reason for it.

He also felt like he owed it to them to smile, to embrace them all in a hug and tell them he was fine, he couldn’t of course, it would be a lie and even if he could move his frozen limbs he’s not sure he’s ready to have so many people near him. Someone has to break the silence and he’s glad that it’s Len, he doesn’t say anything at first, just strolls across to Barry and holds out a hand, Barry may grip it too hard but Len shows no sign of discomfort. With great effort he makes it to the bottom of the stairs, all eyes still on him, watching silently, taking in the Barry they have been left with.

“I think we should give Barry some air” Joe ordered and Barry feels so grateful, he truly wants to hug him but something keeps him at Len’s side.

“Good idea.”

He didn’t see him before; he didn’t see him when rushed into Star Labs, however, many hours ago, but seeing him now, his father, after all these month’s brings a flood of emotion to the surface. His father had been so proud of him, of The Flash, now there was nothing left to be proud of. He should want to be surrounded by his father’s embrace, to feel self in his arms like he used to as a child after waking up from a bad dream, instead, he just feels angry. He hadn’t been there for Barry, he’d left Central City to start anew and it had hurt like hell to let him go but Barry had, because he was a good son and he knew his dad needed to start over, to find a place that wouldn’t see him as the person who’d been held responsible for his wife’s murder.
He hadn’t been there, though and Barry knows deep down that even if he had it wouldn’t have made a difference, Zoom would still have taken him, but he can’t help it, wouldn’t it have been nice to have been protected for once? Instead, he had to save Wally, save the day again and he ended up as Zoom’s prize while everyone got to go home and sleep comfortably and safe in their own beds. Which makes him realise he’s not just mad at his father, or Joe, who asked him to save Wally, to give up his speed, so his real son could live, he’s mad at everyone in this room because they don’t know and they’ll never know what it was like. They won’t have the nightmares, the scars, the bastard child, they get to go to sleep at night and feel good about themselves because Barry is home and the city is safe.

“I can’t be here” Barry stammers, the room sways around him, God he feels so fragile “I…. I just” giving up on finding the right words he whirls around and bolts up the stairs, ignoring the concerned people calling out after him. Reaching his room, he slammed the door shut and hurled himself onto the bed, burying himself deep in the covers, breathing hard around the sobs building in his chest. A broken scream tears free, muffled by the mattress, he screams and screams until his throat is raw and burning, he cries and cries until he physically can’t cry anymore***

Strong hands force his legs apart.

Resistance is futile.

Teeth graze painfully at tender skin, nipping and biting until bruises blossom and blood flows.

Screams fall on deaf ears.

Nails leave red trails in their wake and fingers mark a ring of purple around a throat.

Lights dance like butterflies in a blurred field of vision, only to be broken by the face of a devil, peering down satisfied and yet still eager for me, into wide hazel eyes filled with terror like never before.

Forever on it goes, days bleeding into weeks into months. Forever alone, lost, calling out for a saviour only never to be heard.

Forever in the darkness, only company the devil who has cruel hands, cold eyes and a mighty thirst.

A devil that takes you over and over, cuts and tears away until all that is left is a shell.

And he does all this in the name of love.

It’s the scream that wakes him. He is wailing like a banshee, vocal cords shredding under the abuse, strong hands reach for him, the scream dies out in burning lungs. Gasping deeply for air, images of the nightmare clouding his brain prevent him from calming down. It felt as though he was back there, reliving the first few weeks of torment, they had been the worst, back when he still fought hard and fierce for his freedom. One day Zoom hurt him just the right way, broke enough bones, left enough bruises to make him realise that fighting would never be enough; there was no freedom on the horizon. If he wanted to make it through the day without pain he had to obey, play the meek captive, let Zoom use him when he wanted, lie there pliant and pretend that he wasn’t disgusted with himself. It didn’t take long for Barry to stop pretending and become the meek and obedient captive, it had taken many beatings and rapes but eventually, Zoom broke him.

Sitting in the dark of his room, eyes filled with tears and throat on fire he is reminded how he felt that first night, scared, hurt and alone but tonight he is not alone, his father had been the one to
come in and help steer him from his night terror. All the anger from earlier has faded away, left behind in its wake is guilt for ever feeling it in the first place. No one had come out unscathed, Barry may bear the physical scars, the horrifying nightmares and unborn child but everyone else had been dealt their own cards. Gazing up, Barry finally met his father’s eyes, he smiled half-heartedly at him through the dim light, Barry pushed aside his fear and hugged him.

In his father’s embrace he felt the clock turn backwards, he was seven years old again and he’d had a nightmare about a monster under the bed. A reassuring hug was all he needed, there had been nothing lurking in the dark beneath his bed, just bad dreams chasing him from sleep. Monsters were hiding in the dark, lurking and waiting and taking what they desired, now a warm embrace couldn’t chase them away. Arms too strong, too warm, had Barry backing away, a flicker of hurt crossed his father’s features but he quickly masked it with a half-hearted smile.

“I’m sorry” was all could think to say “I know you won’t hurt me… it’s just…” trailing off, he looked down at his hands, which were knotted in the covers; he felt a deep ache pulse from the freshly broken one. He didn’t untangle his hands, he was used to the twinge of broken bones by now.

“You don’t have to be sorry for anything, son” Henry reassured. “If you need space, I will give it to you; if you need me to stay awake and sit beside you all night then I will do that too. I am here for you, we all are and you never have to apologise for how you react or how you feel, okay?”

“Oh” he didn’t mean to sound disappointed, it’s not that he didn’t want to see Iris or Joe, it’s just that he needed Len and Sara more. His father looked so hopefully, though, like a good hug, a bowl of soup and a night in with the family would fix him, it wouldn’t but for tonight he could let his
father believe that it would. “Right, of course, I… I’d like to shower first than come down for dinner. Is that okay?”

His father smiled, this time, it reached his eyes “Of course, just don’t get your hand wet; I had to reset your finger.” Pain flickered like flames in his father’s eyes, he could practically see the wheels turning; see the imaginary situations playing out in the back of his mind. He could envision all many of tortures, it would hurt him less, to see the real scars, to hear the true tales behind them would be enough to break Henry’s heart.

“I’ll run a bath then,” he said quickly, trying to dismiss him, hating to see the pain clouding his eyes. “I’ll be fine” well that was a lie, he wasn’t anywhere near fine, but physically he could manage to get himself to the bathroom. After hesitating a moment his father gave him one last look and left, leaving Barry alone in the dark.

XxX

Len was less than impressed with being told to leave the West house, even if he was promised he’d be able to return tomorrow first thing. He would have been booted out for good if Iris didn’t step in and vouch for them, reminding them that they’d saved Barry, Len had killed Zoom and rescued them all, it was a valid argument and not even Joe or Henry could dispute it. On their way out Iris slipped Len her phone number, telling him to text her so she could pass it on to Barry, she could already see that Barry needed them and Len was grateful for it. With Iris on their side, he’d be able to get around Barry’s two very protective fathers and actually offer his support to the former speedster.

As always, there needed to be a plan first, a well-constructed, foolproof plan, which wasn’t exactly easy, fixing a person wasn’t like robbing a museum. Len and Sara didn’t have a clue what they were doing and honestly they were probably way over their heads, but screw that because they were going to help Barry get through this. Across from him, resting against their hotel room bed was Sara, scribing away rapidly on a torn out piece of paper. She’d been writing, he didn’t know what, for the better part of the last hour. From his place on the sofa, he simply observed, knowing she’d talk to him about it when she was ready.

In the meantime, Len waited anxiously for a text from Barry, he’d texted Iris through his number hours ago and she’d promised to pass it on, he just hoped the kid was doing okay. Well not okay, because how the hell could he be okay after everything he’d just been through, he just hoped he was alright, that’s all he could ask for right now. Sighing wearily he glanced over at Sara, the dying daylight filtered in through the blinds, bathing her in a radiant glow.

“You look like an angel” Len mused; admiring her beauty, the way the sun turned her hair golden and highlighted her freckles.

“I’m no angel” the corner of her mouth twitched into a small smile “and keep your eyes to yourself, we’re not happening.”

“I wasn’t flirting, just stating a fact” he shrugged, not bothered by her rejection, he hadn’t been chasing after anything, they had a good friendship and maybe it could have led to something else but Len knew something had changed. They weren’t meant to be, perhaps on another earth, on this one his heart was on hold for another. Only the heart he was after was in pieces and may never be whole again, no, he couldn’t believe that. Barry Allen was one of the most resilient people he knew and he might never be the same again but he would be okay in the end, Len had to believe that.

“Do you think there is a reality where we didn’t have to go through any of this?” Sara asked unexpectedly “a world where we were in a band and we always had sold out shows or a world
where I was a kick ass surgeon and you were an idiot that fell off his bike because you were trying to show off to Barry and I had to sew up a small cut on your dumb head and I was super mad about it because it was a waste of my supreme talent.” She looked over at Len, the golden light making her tears sparkle “and Laurel was alive and so was Mick and we owned a café, one of those stupid hipster ones and sold ridiculously priced coffee and paleo food to people who thought they were too cool and everything was fine and nothing bad ever happened.” Folding in herself, Sara let out a shuddering breath that was followed by a heart-wrenching sob.

Len rushed to her side, pulling her into his arms, she huddled against him, tears soaking his shirt. “I bet there is an us on every earth and somehow we find our way to each other and on one earth we are happy and we never know pain and it’s great, but on this earth, we have seen it all and we are still here because we are strong and all those other versions of ourselves will never know our pain but they’ll never get to say that they were hero’s.” Len paused, forcing away his own tears “they’ll never know what it’s like to save a life and how, and don’t ever tell anyone I told you this, rewarding it is.”

Sara looked up at him, smiling through her pain.

Len smiled back, brushing away a stray tear with the pad of his thumb “so dry your eyes sweetheart, we’ve got a life to save.”

XxX

“How long have I been gone?”

Heads swivel in his direction, Barry casts an unwavering look at Joe and Henry, he doesn’t want to be coddled, what he wants is an honest answer. While lying in the bath, submerged in water that was slightly too hot, his eyes kept flickering to his slightly rounded stomach, it seemed so out of place on his emaciated frame. Nervous fingers whispered across wet flesh, exploring the new change, trying to find a way to make his mind and heart accept the life growing inside.

For so long Barry had loathed the unborn child growing within him, it was part of Zoom and surely that made it evil, a devil in the making. Here, though, in the silence of the bathroom, in a place safe and warm, Barry started to feel a little different. From the outside it seemed so harmless, just a small bump made more pronounced by a starved body, underneath, growing within him was a baby, who would come into this world innocent and unknowing of the pain its other father had caused. Zoom had surely been innocent once, a curious boy who loved his mother as much as Barry did, who idolised his father only to have him sent away to war and have him return a changed man.

Seeing your father shoot your mother and then kill himself would turn anyone cold, having no loving family to pick up the pieces meant Zoom, Hunter, was cast out into an unknown world and left to feed for himself at an orphanage where there was no love to be seen. All these events surely can make a monster, had Barry not been taken in by Joe he might have ended up in the same kind of place. Zoom had talked about what happened in the orphanage, what kind of people stole away into his room late at night.

Shaking the thoughts from his mind, Barry carefully placed both hands on his stomach, heart pounding in his chest, unfamiliar emotions building within. He is not sure he will ever be able to love the child or even glance its way without being reminded of Zoom and all he’d put him through but he vowed to give it a better chance at life. A home and a loving family, a safe place to grow up, so it would be unaware of its conception, never having to have the truth of its heritage hanging over its head.
Which brings him to the present, he’d lost count of how long he’d been gone, he’d had a tally at first but eventually gave up, letting go of the hope of ever being found. He needed to know how many months he’d been gone so he could roughly work out how far along he was then he could start looking into adoption agencies. It was better than sitting around feeling sorry for himself, at least someone could get away unmarked by this, it made some of the darkness in his heart lift at the thought of being rid of every last reminder of Zoom, even if it were just an innocent unborn child.

“Four months” Iris answered, reaching tentatively for his hand “it’s been four months, Barr.”

Barry allowed her to take his hand, when he first arrived downstairs she’d rushed over to greet him, stopping to ask if she could hug him, he was grateful for her courtesy and replied by pulling her into his arms. Hugging her felt like home, he was Barry again, not The Flash or this new version, just good old Barry Allan. Time stood still for a moment, allowing him to feel normal again, like himself, then she let go and it shattered, time started again and everything rushed back in, the feeling of home, of normalcy fading away, forcing him to accept once more that this was who he was now.

“We didn’t stop trying to rescue you, son,” Henry vowed, that sad little smile present on his face once more “we tried everything to reach you but we couldn’t get to you without your speed ability.”

Barry looked down at his cooling bowl of soup; guilt churning in his stomach chased away his appetite. Part of him wanted to admit that he’d stopped trying to escape, that after the first attempt he was punished so cruelly that his second and last attempt had only been when he tried to take his life yesterday morning. He was only grateful that his punishment was not brutal like the last; he had the unborn child to thank for that. Being repeatedly electrocuted isn’t exactly good for a person let alone one who is pregnant; however, it is a wonderful punishment to sway anyone from trying to escape.

Images dance in Barry’s mind, chains biting tightly into skin, screams of agony reverberating off walls, electric currents seizing every nerve, consuming him until all that he knows is pain. Shackled to a rusty old pipe, arms trembling in exhaustion as they struggled to hold the dead weight of his body off the ground, Zoom prowled around the room like the predator he was. The wait was killing him, what could Zoom possibly have in store? Surely there was nothing more he could do to him that he already hadn’t done.

Only Barry was wrong, so very wrong.

He didn’t say anything as he walked towards him; he hadn’t said anything at all since he caught Barry and Killer Frost at the entrance to the cave. He’d killed her before Barry even registered that he had returned, the shock at her death took a few minutes to take over, it was only once he realised she was truly dead that he started to panic. His only means of escape was gone and he was left to face Zoom’s wrath all on his own and the rage on his face left him petrified. Frozen in terror he didn’t even fight off the hands that dragged him deeper into the asylum, everything became hazy, the only thing that stood out was his pounding heart.

Time seemed to stretch on forever, suspending him in the moments between each shock and the next.Zoom took great pleasure in his punishment; he picked the most delicate spots to place the cattle prod, his nipples, under his arms, between his legs. Barry had cried and begged for the pain to stop, promised he’d never try to leave again, he’d do anything just please God make the pain stop. When he was satisfied that Barry had learnt his lesson and he had, oh God he had, he threw the prod aside and left, leaving a barely conscious Barry hanging from a worn out pipe for hours.
Nauseous filled him, concerned eyes only made him feel more panicked, the room suddenly began
to tilt, the people around where too close, the air was too thick to breathe. Heart a freight train in
his chest he lurched to his feet, everyone jumped at the heavy thud of the chair crashing to the
ground. Barry paid it no mind, without a second thought, he bolted for the safety of his room, as he
ran he couldn’t help but think that he’d never be fast enough to outrun his demons.

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Alone in the quiet darkness of his room, Barry felt the panic release its hold over him, letting out a
shaky breath he collapsed onto his rumpled bed. Blindly he fumbled for the switch of the lamp; the
orange glow illuminating the room and chasing away the shadows. Feeling more at ease in his
isolation he allowed himself to lay back, eyes closed, breathing in. He tried to ignore the phantom
feeling of hands roaming over his covered skin; it was just his mind playing games on him. He was
so God damn tired, it was just his imagination, there were no hands pulling at the layers of clothing
he wore, that wasn’t warm breath whispering against his cheek.

Goosebumps rose with the beat of his heart, fear had him refusing to open his eyes, it was just in
his mind, Zoom was gone, he was dead, Len had killed him. Slowly he opened tired eyes, the space
above him was empty, the sensation of being touched vanished. Gulping down air he hauled
himself up, standing he spun in a slow circle, searching every shadowy corner for a monster, for
his monster. Alone he stood, alone and scared and still desperate to escape from this hell. Escaping
Zoom had been his number one goal for so long now; he thought if he could just get home, if he
could just be rid of Zoom, then he’d be free, free of the fear, free of the pain. He didn’t feel free.

Zoom had caged him, broken his wings and claimed him; even in death, he was still haunting him.
Perhaps there would never be any true freedom; he’d be a broken bird locked away in a cage for
the rest of his life. It felt impossible to think he’d feel anything other than the cold chill inside his
bones that happiness could replace the terror within his heart. Alone in the quiet darkness, brighter
days seemed nothing more than a distant memory, memories of a life that another Barry had lived.
Darkness danced around him, weaving through him, filling his mind with nothing but times of
misery and despise, if he let go, if he stopped fighting to hold onto the ember of light inside him,
then he’d surely drown.

Surely that wouldn’t be so bad, though? He could let go of everything, just succumb to the pain,
like he had yesterday, only this time he would leap into the abyss, break out of his cage and fly into
freedom. Heavy lids fluttered shut, graceless he flopped back onto the bed, letting everything go;
he was ready to embrace the dark.

“Barry?” Iris called uncertainly from the other side of the door, shattering the moment “Can I come
in? I have something to give you.”

Upon opening his eyes the world rushed in, the dark spell he had just slipped under evaporated,
leaving him numb, which honestly wasn’t the worst feeling to have right now. “Come in Iris.” He
called back, heaving himself up into a sitting position once more. The door squeaked in protest as
it opened, something it only ever did if they’d been lots of rain, Iris poked her head in, a cautious
smile on his face.

“Are you okay? Sorry, stupid question” she stopped midway, wrapping her arms around herself
“You just ran and I wanted to make sure you were alright.” She had tears in her eyes and a sombre
look on her face, she looked so lost standing before him, not wanting to see her cry Barry patted
the bed beside him, beaconing for her to sit down with him. “I’m sorry, I don’t know what to say or do
Barr. I just hate seeing you like this and I know I can’t fix it with a punnet of ice cream and Netflix
but I want to help you” she continued, tears threatening to fall at any moment. “I want to be here
for you, so please, Barry tell me what I can do?”

Her words broke off into a heart-wrenching sob, Barry pulled her into his arms; there was nothing he could say to her, he didn’t know how to fix himself let alone give Iris instructions on how to do so. She wept for what felt like an age, Barry had become too numb to be bothered by her pain, he just held her tight until finally, she pulled back, brushing away tears from flushed cheeks.

“God I am so sorry, I am a mess.” She shook her head in shame of her breakdown.

“It’s okay” Barry reassured, “I’m sorry too, about dinner, I got lost in painful memories and I just freaked out.”

“You don’t have to be sorry for anything” she echoed his father’s earlier words “Do you want to talk about it?”

“No, no I can’t” he shook his head, trying to shake the memories back into the dark corners, he wasn’t ready to reveal to Iris what had been done to him, especially not right now, while she looked as fragile as he felt. “I’m not ready.”

“Okay,” she whispered, “do you want me to leave?”

“No” He didn’t want to be alone, it wasn’t safe for him, he needed someone to keep him from slipping back into the darkness, he feared next time he may be unable to find a way back out. “I’d like you to stay… Until I fall asleep at least, if… if that’s okay?”

“Of course Barry” she replied, brushing back his overgrown hair “Oh and before I forget, I have Len’s number for you, I thought you might need to reach out to him.”

“Thank you, Iris” this time a real smile graced his face, it was small and tired but it was real and that was a start.

XxX

Len woke to the sound of a beep, without a moment’s hesitation he rolled over and snatched the cell from the nightstand; tired eyes squinted at the bright screen. Sara made a noise of complaint from the other side of the bed; Len ignored her, opening the message he found that it was from Barry. Relief filled him; he’d been waiting anxiously all day to get a reply from him. Len smiled at the screen, Barry’s message was short and sweet, his old self shining through as he apologised for how he acted this morning and thanked him for stopping Zoom (that was the first murder anyone had ever thanked him for and it was also the one Len would never regret.) and he invited him and Sara over tomorrow.

He quickly texted back, telling him never had to apologise for anything and that he didn’t need to thank him for killing Zoom, he’d do anything to protect him and he promised to never let anyone hurt him again. He ended the message by telling him that he and Sara were here for him. Head heavy, he let it drop back to the pillow, cradling the phone against his chest made him feel closer to Barry, which was a sappy and a ridiculous thought but in the late hours of the night and in the privacy of his own mind he allowed himself to indulge in such thoughts.

Len couldn’t remember the exact moment he started having feelings for Barry, it seemed to go from hate to lust to infatuation before he even really knew what was happening. One day he woke up, made his morning coffee and thought ‘I wonder what Barry is doing today’ and of course, at the time he scolded himself for the stupid thought. The Flash and Captain Cold were enemies and sure it’d be fun to indulge in some no strings attached sex with the Speedster but wondering what
the kid was up to was off limits. He couldn’t allow himself to have feelings for someone like Barry, it was pointless, he was the city hero and Len the villain, anything else was impossible. The good guy did not date the bad guy or climb into his bed.

After that Len pushed all thoughts of the Scarlet Speedster out of his mind, focusing on work, Lisa and Mick kept him his mind from wondering then one day his asshole father showed up and everything went spiralling out of control. Lisa had a bomb in her head, Len was forced to work with his father and The Flash came to his aid and he had to ice him for his own safety and of course, Barry came back again and again and his friends saved Lisa and Len owed it to Barry to protect him from his father. So he killed the bastard, it doesn’t make him feel better, it makes him feel like crap but he’d never regretted it, he’d hurt them for long enough, it was time he paid. Lisa is safe, his douchbag dad is dead and he goes to jail, life is just so brilliant.

One day Barry shows up at the prison and he tells him, staring right into his eyes through his own beautiful hazel ones, that there is good in him and that is the moment Len acknowledges his feelings for him. He can barely keep himself together after that, watching Barry leave is stupidly hard and he hates himself for being weak enough to let his heart overcome his mind. There is no possible explanation for why he has feelings for Barry, he has noticed that the kid is attractive but anyone with eyes could see that, and thinking someone is good-looking is different to having feelings. In a heartbeat, all Len wants is Barry Allen and he can’t find a rational reason as to why.

Now, as he lies in a bed, in some cheap motel, he wonders if fate has anything to with it, which is ridiculous since Mick died to destroy the Time Masters, so there were no more puppeteers to make the marionettes dance. Still, there seemed to be something bigger here, something Len didn’t understand and probably never would, not that it mattered if it was fate or coincidence that led him to this moment because he was here now and he cared deeply for Barry. So he was going to do everything within his power to help him. Barry had already saved Len, he saved him the day he told him he believed he saw something good inside and now Len was going to return the favour.

In the quiet late hours of the night, with the moonlight spilling in through dusty windows, Len allowed himself to drift back to sleep, soon enough he’d be back by Barry’s side, where he was starting to believe he was always meant to be.

XxX

He dreams of nothing but Zoom, every corner he turns he finds him, every time a dream morphs into something else and he thinks he is finally free he finds him, over and over he finds for him. He’d woken up to a new day with a scream dying out in his lungs and hot tears dampening flushed cheeks. The daylight does not save him from the darkness, it curls around him like toxic smoke, seeping deep into his pores, poisoning his lungs, and like that the world is gone.

He is taken by the numbness.

He’s sunken down deep into the blissful void, lost so far within his mind that he wasn’t even aware of Iris trying to coax him out of bed; he didn’t notice his father’s worried face hovering over his or see Joe pacing nervously around the room. He was locked inside his own mind, safe and far, far away, lost in memories of better times. This wasn’t the first time he’d found himself lost in his own mind, it happened often while being held captive, everything would become too much and Barry would spiral down the rabbit hole and hide away in a fantasy world until something shattered it and he’d be forced to return to the world he was desperately trying to leave behind.

Sometimes he was gone for hours, sometimes days, eventually he’d find his way out of the imaginary paradise. The world would come rushing back in screaming colour, pain, hunger and thirst would burn to life and he’d take in a deep shuddering breath and let out a pitiful cry. He cried
because he was still there, trapped, alone and afraid, he was in pain, starving, cold and Zoom was looking at him with hungry eyes and more pain and tears would follow. It was safe in his wonderland; the real world was full of monsters with sharp teeth and insatiable appetites.

He’s not sure how many hours have passed, there is no memory of driving to Star Labs, the world was washed away, now it slowly bleeds back in, bright lights, white ceiling, concerned faces blurring in out of focus until finally, one becomes clear. Ice blue eyes set him free, they chase away the hollowness, lift him from his wonderland. Nothing could possibly feel safer than having Len at his side, not even the safe harbour deep within his mind. Barry sits up, tentatively leaning towards Len in hopes that he understands he would like to embrace him, he hasn’t quite remembered that it’s okay to ask for things, that now no question will be denied.

Without hesitation Len wraps his strong arms around Barry’s frail body, he breathes in his scent and sags weightlessly against his body, enjoying the comfort and security he finds in his embrace. Too soon their embrace is interrupted, and before Barry can even register what is happening the room is filling up with people. Trying to keep calm, he greets everyone with a tired hello and half-hearted wave; clearly, he’s not the only one trying to hold himself together. Caitlin looks like she might cry, Cisco looks torn between giving him a hug or fleeing the room and Joe, Iris and his father’s look of relief doesn’t quite reach their eyes. The only person who doesn’t look like they are faking it is Sara, who gives him a genuine smile.

Still, it’s too much, he’s been alone for so long now that it’s become overwhelming to be surrounded by so many people, especially if the people are worried friends, friends that know all too well that this Barry is a shadow of the man he used to be. Air becomes tight in his lungs, heat creeps up his neck as his heart pounds widely against his ribcage, a steady soundtrack to a panic attack brewing below the surface. Len, who is proving himself over and over that he is Barry’s hero, tells everyone that it’s time to give Barry some space so Caitlin can give him a check-up. Hesitantly, they leave the room, when Len goes to leave Barry grabs his hand, clutching it tightly in hopes it conveys his meaning.

He wants him to stay, stay always.

***

Star labs seemed brighter than Barry remembered, too big and white, overflowing with memories and crowded with people, friends who last saw him as The Flash, who is now like a ghost haunting him alongside Zoom. From where he sits in the infirmary he can see the empty space where the suit used to be, it was torn from his body by Zoom, shredded to nothing as he clawed his way to Barry’s soft flesh underneath. He doesn’t want to think about that right now, instead, he closes his eyes. It’s been around half an hour since he came around, Caitlin had bustled around him, taking blood, checking vitals, chatting about a vitamin regimen that she is going to be placing him on, while Len sat at his side, holding his hand and distracting him with tales of his adventure on the Wave Rider.

“Barry, I have one last thing I’d like to do before I let you leave” she sounded hesitant.

Barry noticed the way she nervously wrung her hands together and worried her bottom lip between her teeth; it was a nervous habit he knew too well. Despite not knowing what she was asking he couldn’t help but feel a trickle of fear, which was ridiculous, she’d never hurt him. “Wh… what is it Cait?” he stuttered, unconsciously tightening his hold on Len’s hand.

“I’d like to…” pausing she took a deep breath “I’d like to an ultrasound of the baby? I don’t know how far along you are and I’d really like to find out so I know what I can treat you with and I need to monitor you throughout the pregnancy to make sure that you are okay.” This was said all one
breath, when she finished she sagged slightly, dropping her hands to her side. “This is important and you can say no and I’ll listen” She spoke in a carefully measured tone “but, it’s really important for your health that I do this.”

Barry couldn’t find words at first, he wasn’t about to deny her, he knew this was important, for both him and the baby, it’s just… if he sees it, if he hears its heartbeat and learns how big it is, it will start to feel real for the first time. More real than the growing bump under his skin, more real than the nauseous that overtook him in the beginning. How will he react if he looks? If he sees what Zoom forced inside of him, will he be filled with sickness and rage like he was in the beginning? Or will he feel somewhat at ease with it, like last night when freedom finally allowed him to view it in a different light? What will he feel when he hears its heartbeat, life blossoming within him, pure and innocent, a piece of him and a piece of Zoom?

Would the light that used to burn bright inside him find its way to the unborn child? Would the good he held inside himself be enough to chase away the darkness that Zoom had left within him? Barry couldn’t possibly know what the future held in store for the child but since once upon a time he’d been a hero, he’d find the strength to make sure it came into this world safe and healthy. Somewhere out there were two people who would love and raise it as their own and give it the childhood Barry and Zoom never had. A life without darkness and monsters, a life filled with love and brightness and football games, dance recitals and a loving family. The kind of life Barry could not provide.

“I understand” the words felt heavy on his tongue, nervous energy hummed beneath his skin. “I’m okay, Caitlin and I trust you.”

“Thank you, Barry” she picked up the handheld ultrasound machine and a tube of gel “I… I’ll be quick, I promise.” Barry got the feeling she wanted to say more, as she bowed her head he caught sight of a single tear making tracks down her face. It took her a moment to gather herself when she looked back up all sign of sadness were gone, replaced with a professional demeanour. “Can you please lift up your shirt?” Barry did as he was asked “This was will be cold” she warned before squeezing a sizeable amount of gel onto his abdomen.

No one spoke as Caitlin moved the wand over Barry’s stomach; she kept her gaze on the small screen held in her hand, Barry couldn’t look away, part of him wanted to look at the monitor, to see with his own eyes what was growing inside and another part, filled with fear and memories of how this baby came to be, wanted to turn away. When a steady thump, thump, thump filled the silence Barry found his urge to look too strong to deny.

“Can I see?” panic rippled beneath his skin, this was real, this was about to be so much more than just a bump.

Caitlin turned the screen towards him, offering him a gentle smile as she told him about the baby. “It’s the size of an olive right now, so that puts you at about 3 months, maybe three and a half. I can see fingers and toes although the digits are still fused together.” She explained, her face lit with a kind of wonder Barry had seen whenever she got excited about science, “The external ears are formed but it can’t hear yet as its internal ears are filled with fluid” the wand glided smoothly across his stomach, the image is grainy and at first, he can’t see more than the fluttering heart but slowly he begins to see a shape. “The digestive system has started forming and the diaphragm which allows it to breathe and hiccup.”

*It can hiccup* Barry thought, feeling a storm of emotions build in his chest. It can hiccup, it has fingers and toes, he can hear its heartbeat, see its alien-like body float against the darkness, it’s little partly formed body nothing more than a lumpy mass of light. Barry starts to understand the
wonder on Caitlin’s face, she’s not excited about the science or the knowledge’s learnt, she’s taken by the simple beauty of life. In this moment it feels like he might be able to shake away the last tendrils of hate, this is not a monster growing within him, all he can see is an innocent life, perhaps the light that used to burn bright inside of him has found a new home. He won’t let it burn out; Zoom doesn’t get to ruin any more lives. This child will never know the hatred Zoom felt, Barry will not show this child, his child the same hatred he harbours for its father, the cycle of abuse ends here.

“Are you okay Scarlet?” Len asked, breaking Barry out of his thoughts.

“Yeah…” he breathed “I… I’m just, I’m just processing, but I am okay” he turned to Len, smiling, “right now, I am okay.”

XxX

Sara found herself alone in Cisco’s lab. She’d wondered away from the crowd gathered outside Barry’s room and soon found herself in another smaller lab, tools and parts littering every available surface. She wouldn’t have known who the lab belonged to if she hadn’t seen Cisco’s name scrawled messily onto a whiteboard and a list of rules to abide by written below. Apparently, mess, food, drinks and intoxicated people were no permitted here, Sara wondered about the story behind the intoxicated people; she made a mental note to ask one day. She was also going to point out the room was already in a mess, all kinds of things were scattered around the place, mostly it was paper and scraps of metal or plastic and there was the odd piece of wiring and a dozen or so books.

Sara felt oddly uneasy amongst the clutter, she may not know Cisco but something told her this wasn’t how he usually kept his workspace, this was the kind of mess left behind when something else demanded your attention. Say, finding a way to another earth to save a friend? Strolling around the room, she found herself getting more and more acquainted with Cisco, the League of Assassins had taught her how to read a person just by their belongings, it helped her to get close to her targets. He wasn’t a target, from what she was reading he was a dedicated friend who was devastated by his lack of ability to rescue Barry, Sara knew how he felt all too well. Her inability to save Laurel would have driven her made by now if it hadn’t been for the mission Rip had given them. Saving people, she could do that, she’d done it before, but ‘saving’ Barry was something she wasn’t sure she’d be very good at; Laurel would have believed her in and that’s enough to force her to try.

“Oh, sorry, I didn’t know you were in here.”

Turning around Sara found Cisco hesitating in the doorway, clothes rumpled and a lost look in his eyes. She immediately felt guilty for looking through his things. “I should be the one that’s sorry, I was snooping.”

“It’s fine” he waved her off, crossing the threshold to take a seat. “I didn’t get the chance to say I’m sorry about Laurel.”

“You don’t have to be sorry” Sara replied around a tight lump in her throat, she wasn’t ready to talk about this. Something in Cisco’s expression changed, Sara noticed the look of guilt flicker in his eyes before he ducked his head and begins to fiddle with some sort of device. Briefly, she wondered why he felt guilt over Laurel’s death; he wasn’t even with her when she died so why blame himself when there was absolutely nothing he could have done? Of course, that wasn’t where his guilt was directed, it was about Barry. “It’s not your fault” she finds herself saying, because it’s the right thing to say to someone, it’s what everyone keeps saying to her. It doesn’t change a damn thing, though because it sure as hell still feels like she’s the one to blame.
Cisco looked up at her, device forgotten, left amongst the chaos of the desk. “It is my fault” he insisted and Sara could see the same war that raged in her mind mirrored within his eyes “it’s all our fault.” He gestured towards the door “we are a team and we failed him.”

“You tried” Sara nodded to a work desk with over stacked books, papers and metal parts. She honestly didn’t know what else to say, she wanted to reassure him, say the right things and make him feel unburdened but in truth he, they had failed Barry. He was taken right before them because Joe asked him to give up his speed and they’d been unsuccessful in rescuing him from earth two, it was Barry who saved himself, it was Len that killed Zoom with a little help from Ray. Team Flash had failed their hero in so many ways and a better person would tell Cisco it wasn’t his fault that he tried to find him, they all did, but Sara wasn’t that kind of person. She was brutal and honest and Team Flash didn’t need a pat on the back for this, they failed and it couldn’t happen again.

“You tried to rescue him and yes, you did fail, I don’t have a clue what it takes to get to another earth but what I’ve been told is you let Barry give up his speed which allowed all of this happen” Cisco looked surprised, a little hurt even, good, this was a lesson they needed to learn. “I know Zoom had Joe’s kid, who I am sure has a bright future and is a great guy but Barry is, was The Flash and this might sound cruel to you, but that makes him more important than just one life.” It felt wrong to say these things to Cisco; he wasn’t hard around the edges like her. “You failed Barry by not coming up with a better plan; you should have put him first no matter how horrible the idea of the alternative was. There might have been a better way to approach the situation, maybe the only thing you could have done is risked Wall’s life and failed at saving him instead of your friend, the guy who has saved more lives’ than-”

“-I know we should have done it differently” Cisco snapped, banging his hands against the desk, a few sheets of paper fluttered to the floor. “I think back to that moment, right before Zoom took Barry, and think I should have seen it coming, I should have been faster, done something, anything, but I didn’t! I watched my best friend disappear before my eyes and I go over and over that moment and all the moments before and I think to myself, how did I miss it?” He trailed off, taking in a deep shuddering breath; he looked over at Sara with wet eyes.

She should have been kinder; perhaps her words were not meant for Cisco, they were about her own guilt, her own self-hatred at failing Laurel. She wanted to apologise for her outburst, it wasn’t fair that she blew up at him. She was weighed down with grief and had no right to judge anyone on how they handled losing Barry, they were good people, they weren’t about to sacrifice an innocent life for another. Unlike Sara, who would have given anything if she could just have Laurel back.

“Did you know if I touch something, say that helmet over there” Pulled from her dark spiral, Sara looked towards a desk to the left where an oddly shaped metal hat rested “that I can see things? I vibe things… so I used that” again he motioned at the metal helmet, curiosity momentarily taking Sara from her grief she stepped towards it. “To see Barry, I knew where he was, it was like I was there… and… and I saw everything.”

Sara felt ill, a cold chill swept through her. “You saw…” she didn’t need to say the words; the haunted look in Cisco’s eyes was answer enough.

“I saw too much” angrily he wiped at his eyes “I didn’t want to tell anyone what was happening. I couldn’t bear to, I felt sick to my stomach just at the thought of saying the words and I was so afraid to see the look on everyone’s faces. It would kill them.” he shuddered, wrapped his arms tightly around himself “I couldn’t keep it to myself, though, they had a right to know and I couldn’t keep something like that a secret, it was too huge, so I eventually told them.” he shook his head, trying to dislodge unwanted memories. “Caitlin wouldn’t stop crying, Iris flat out didn’t believe me and Joe got so mad he punched a hole in the wall and it felt like the world dropped out from under
Sara was left speechless; there was nothing she could say that would comfort Cisco. Her harsh words before now haunted her, she didn’t stop to think about what he had endured, she’d only seen Barry’s pain and she understood that. She didn’t know what it was like to be the friend of a victim, she’d never told Oliver or Laurel so she’d never witnessed the devastation it brought. She’d known it would be brutal and that’s why she kept this secret so long.

“It isn’t your fault” she finally said, meaning it this time. “Even if you had somehow found a way to save Wally without Barry giving up his speed, Zoom would have most likely found another way to go after Barry. None of you knew what he really wanted from him, how could of you?” Cisco looked up at her with such misery in his eyes that it broke her heart. “The only thing we can do is help Barry piece himself back together.”

“How do I do that? I feel so wretched.”

“By letting go of the guilt,” by admitting to herself that Laurel’s death wasn’t her fault, believing that leaving Star City wasn’t the wrong thing to do. “It will only hold us back and you need to be at your very best so, this time, you don’t fail him.” So she can make Laurel proud, so she can be the hero that Laurel wanted her to be, so she could do right by Barry, guide him back towards the light instead of into the dark, where Sara had wound up all those years ago.

“And you don’t have to blame yourself for Laurel’s death either,” he said firmly, was her inner turmoil written that clearly on her face? “She wouldn’t want you too.”

“I know” she always knew Laurel only wanted her to be happy, to be the best she could be and weighed down with guilt and self-loathing was distracting her from helping Barry. He was her mission; she’d lost Laurel so she was going to make damn sure that they didn’t lose Barry. “I guess we’re both going to have to learn to let go of our guilt.”

Cisco nodded at her, offering her a feeble smile “Here’s to forgiveness.”
Broken Things

Chapter Notes

I just wanted to say a quick thank you for all the kudos and reviews and I really appreciate the feedback :) In the coming chapters, I will start talking about the pregnancy and baby more. There are just some other things I had to set up first. I hope you enjoy.

I am off to watch The Flash season 3 premier so I will see you all next week :)

Light bulbs in your head, they might be burnt out
Maybe rough around the edges, you barely function
   I'm tired, I can't carry all this hurt now
You're more to me than all these broken things

Clarity – Broken Things

When Barry was young he was afraid of the dark, when he was in high school he was afraid of clowns, by the time he reached his twenties he was afraid of heights and spiders. Barry seemed to collect phobias the way people collect coins. When he became The Flash he found a new fear, one to rival all the others and his biggest fear was losing the people he loved most. Becoming a hero might have been the best thing to have happened to him but it came with the potential to lose his family and friends.

It was his deepest fear and it always will be. Right now, though, when his body is slowly healing and his mind is in ruins, it seems far away, new fears have arisen to take centre place in his mind. Barry would startle when the doorbell rings, he shudders when someone touches him without consent, too many people crowding around make him want to flee and the dark turns every shadow into a monster. It feels like every day he finds something new to be afraid of, something will trigger a memory or he’ll imagine phantom hands, the ghost of a breath or a face in a foggy bathroom mirror and he’ll spiral. There hasn’t been a day gone by that Barry hasn’t had a panic attack or locked himself away in his room, hiding beneath a mountain of covers.

He is a broken thing and he’s trying, he is trying very hard to piece himself back together, everyone is trying, they try with kind words, gentle touches and sad little smiles. They offer support and give him food and vitamins and make him hot milk and honey in the middle of the night to sooth the night terrors. They don’t want him to be like all the other broken things so they try to fix him, they try and they try but all the kings’ men and all the kings’ horses couldn’t put him together again.

Then there is Len. Len is different. He is safe and doesn’t ask him to talk about how he is feeling or to talk about what he’s been through, he doesn’t force vitamins into him or cook him his favourite food in an attempt to make everything appear better when nothing is better. Len somehow makes everything bearable, when he appears all the pain doesn’t just magically vanish but the world gets a little less grey, it gets a little easier to breathe. Honestly, he isn’t sure why reacts this way around Len, it’s not as though they had ever really been friends, there is just something, something he doesn’t understand yet, that tells him Len is safe and safe is something he hasn’t felt
in such a long time.

He does hope that he can find his way back to his friends and family, he honestly does, he can’t help but notice the hurt in their eyes when he seeks Len for out for comfort over them. Family had been all he’d wanted, all he dreamt of, now he was back he struggled to be near them. He is trying, though; he will use glue and tape to slowly piece himself back together so they can have the Barry they deserve back. When he is with Len and Sara he doesn’t have to be anything more than the mess he is now. They are all broken in their own ways, jiggered edges fitting together to form a very unexpected friendship.

It’s a lazy Thursday afternoon; the sun hangs low in the darkening sky and autumn leaf’s dance in a swirl of half-malted hues of green, brown and gold, it’s a picturesque evening. Only Barry is not seeing the dancing leaves or the stars twinkling to life, he is thinking that four days ago he escaped from Zoom; four days ago he was sure he was never going to make it home. He is home, though, he is sitting in the swing chair on the back porch, wrapped up in blankets and Len’s jacket, inside there is a fire going and a pie cooking in the oven, everything seems so normal.

The sun is setting, Iris is probably arriving home from work, Joe will greet her with a hug and ask her about her day and she’ll regale him with wonderful stories. Everyone goes on with their lives; Barry doesn’t even know where to start. How does he even begin to pick up the pieces of his tattered life? Does he eventually go back to work? Does he still help Star Labs protect the city? Doubtful, he couldn’t even protect himself, what use is he to the city now he has no speed and how will he be able to go through crime evidence when one day that evidence will be a sharp reminder of things he’s been through?

There wasn’t much of a future left for him, he’d never be a hero again and how could he step foot into the precinct without being assaulted by memories? The foyer had been littered with bodies; he’d been raped on top of a work desk, it was bad enough being here surrounded by the ghost of the past. God, where did he even start? Day bleeds from the sky, a sly breeze rifles fingers through messy hair and sends shiver coursing through his body, despite the many layers he wears.

Sighing wearily he decides it’s time to head back inside, bracing himself for the endless glances of concern, just as he is about to rise, the door swings open and Joe steps out, carrying two steaming mugs. The smell of cocoa is carried over on the wind; Joe walked towards Barry.

“Can I sit?” he asked, gesturing to the empty space beside him.

“Sure” Barry replied. He was grateful that his family and friends had learnt to ask for his permission before sitting down near him or touching him, it was nice to finally be given a choice, to be able to say no and have it be heard. It had taken a short adjustment period, at first they didn’t ask, which was okay, they didn’t know how to approach him and at times they still messed up, but everyone was learning and now they asked; now they didn’t hold him down when he screamed himself awake in the middle of the cold dark nights.

“I’ve been meaning to talk with you” Joe handed him the hot cocoa like it was some sort of piece offering.

Oh God, no. Barry did not want to have this conversation, he didn’t want to hear Joe blame himself for what had happened because Barry would have to be the good son and tell him it wasn’t his fault that it was his choice and he had been a damn hero so of course, he saved Wally. Even if Joe hadn’t asked he would have still made the same choice, only now it was different, now he was broken, angry, hurting and a small part of him did blame Joe. It wasn’t fair and it wasn’t right but neither was what happened to him so he was allowed to have some misplaced anger towards him. At least while he was blaming others he could avoid blaming himself, he’d done enough of that.
There was a chance that he’d do a complete turnaround and start blaming himself again, he had no control over his emotions right now, one moment he could be relatively okay the next he would start to cry or rage inwardly at the world and all the misery it had thrown his way. Sometimes he felt like he was losing his damn mind, sometimes he thought that might not be so bad. Right now discomfort was making itself known in his chest, he wasn’t ready for the heart to heart chats, he needed more time to heal before he could open up.

Looking at Joe, taking in the dark circles under sad eyes, he felt he at least owed this to him; the man had taken him in, feed and clothed him, loved him and helped him through every rough patch. “It’s not your fault, Joe.” His words seemed as hollowed out as he was. “I chose to give up my speed to save Wally. You couldn’t have done anything to stop Zoom, so stop blaming yourself. It’s over. I’m home and I just want to move on with my life the best I can.”

“I know you do, Barr, we all want you to get better” awkwardly he reached out to pat Barry’s shoulder, he froze midway when he saw Barry flinch, he lowered his hand, giving Barry a sorry smile. “I… I can’t begin to understand what you’ve been through, but I want to understand. I want you to open up to me, to your dad, Iris, anybody. I don’t want you to bottle it up inside, it’s not good for you.” Joe pleaded, scrubbing his hands over his face in distress. “I want you to know that we are here for you and we hate seeing you hurt like this. We just want to help.”

Barry took in a deep breath, seeing Joe’s grief-stricken face made his heart ache, he truly hated seeing his family suffer like this, suffer for him, but he wasn’t ready to open up. He couldn’t tell Joe about the torture, the embarrassment, the rapes, it was his burden and he wasn’t about to share its weight. “I can’t… I’m not ready, please, don’t force me to.” His throat tightened around a lump, stomach twisting painfully into knots, he couldn’t handle this, it was suddenly too much. “I just need to breathe” air vanished from aching lungs, fear coursed through his body like a deadly disease “I just need air” hands tighten into shaking fist, the world dances around him, it’s too big, towering over him like a monster, like Zoom.

Numb legs force him to his feet, he takes one step then another and another and suddenly he is running, running through the backyard and out the back gate, he runs and runs and runs. It’s not fast enough; it’s never going to be fast enough. Collapsing onto the sidewalk he heaves heavily, muscles cramp and spasm and all he can do is cry and pound angrily at the footpath as wave after wave of panic rushes through him. He feels so small, so helpless; he doesn’t understand why he ran, it just felt like he had to get away, it felt like the only reasonable choice to make. It’s what he used to do when he failed at saving someone or the weight of world grew too heavy upon his shoulders, he ran, it’s just what he did. What is the point now, though? He doesn’t have his speed when he did he could just take off, go anywhere and as he ran all his troubles slowly slipped away, momentarily lost in the speed force.

He could run all night and day and he’d still feel Zoom’s presence around him, inside him. The mere memory has him vomiting again, body shaking from the abuse. Will this every go away? Will he wake up one day and no longer feel what Zoom had done to him? God, he hopes so, it’s unbearable to wake to the sensation of sharp teeth, invisible hands and bruising kisses. There has to be a day, maybe months or years from now, but there has to be a day when he is free of the cold inside his bones, the fear in his gut and the phantom hands against his skin.

That day might as well be a lifetime away; Barry only has today, the now and the now is God-awful. Looking around he notices he is nowhere near home and it’s getting bitterly cold, he can’t stay here any longer. He doesn’t want to go home, though; home isn’t what he wants anymore. Honestly, he doesn’t know what he wants, but he knows what he needs. He needs to be somewhere he can feel safe and there may be no house or home where he’ll ever feel safe again but there is a person.
There are two people who make him feel safe actually, who make him feel almost normal again. Len and Sara don’t crowd around him or look at him with pity filled eyes, they don’t treat him like the broken thing that he is. It’s not to say they don’t offer comfort or support because they do, they’ll hug him if needs a comforting touch, they’ll sit silently at his side if he needs company but doesn’t wish to speak. They have been the most helpful over the past few days, Sara had taught Joe and his father not to hold him down if he was having a nightmare; she also made a point of asking Barry if she could sit down near him or touch him, showing everyone else what they should be doing without actually telling them.

Two nights ago Sara, Len, Iris and himself had been watching reruns of Doctor Who when he dozed off for the smallest of moments, light beams from a passing shone through the window and a Dalek on screen screeched exterminate. Barry bolted upright, Zoom appeared before him, disorientated and panicked, all he could think to do was scream. By the time the cry died in his lungs his senses had returned to him, it had just been his imagination, a trick of the light, he was safe, on screen, The Doctor had saved the day.

His scream had alerted everyone inside the house to his distress, Iris looked at him with troubled eyes from across the room, Len moved back to give him space and Henry and Joe had rushed in to see what had happened. Sara moved slowly towards him, there was something in her eyes that said she knew exactly what he’d just experienced. The room filled with a chorus of questions, it made Barry feel uneasy and somewhat embarrassed; he couldn’t even watch SyFy without being scared.

“Everybody shut up” Sara ordered, sitting down at his side, not too close but not too far. “Barry, what happened?”

“I thought…” his mouth felt dry, words heavy on his tongue, “I thought I saw Zoom.”

“It’s okay; it happens sometimes” she reassured “it’s just your mind playing tricks on you,”

He nodded, feeling his throat constrict around a swell of emotion.

“Are you okay now?”

“I… guess so” he whispered, “I think I’d like to go to my room, though.”

“Okay” Sara smiled, “would you like me to walk with you?”

“Yes… yes, please.”

That night Sara had opened up to him about her assault, she didn’t go into great detail but she offered some insight into some of the things he’d been feeling and could possibly start to feel. It was weirdly comforting to have some kind of understanding of what he’d been going through, it didn’t make anything better but it made him feel a lot less like he was losing his mind. Sure he knew most of his reactions were perfectly normal, he had been working in crime and Joe was a detective so he knew from past experience what a victim of assault would act like but being on the other side was different; it was a world away from analysing the crime. He was the victim this time round and all the research and crimes scenes hadn’t prepared him for what it would actually be like. There was no textbook for this, no clear instructions on how to move on with your life.

There was just Sara and she had survived but the girl she used to be was gone forever.

Just like the Flash and Barry Allen, he wondered if they should throw them a funeral.

An owl hooting brings Barry back to the present, the payphone he’d been walking to is now in sight, he lets out a breath he didn’t realise he was holding. The night has grown remarkably cold,
even with the layers of clothing he can feel a chill stir awake in his bones. Inside the phone booth isn’t much warmer; at least it keeps at the icy breeze out. Barry, unfortunately, doesn’t have any change on him and he left his cell back at the house so he hopes that Len will answer the call collect, it’s also a good thing he memorised the his number.

It answers on the second ring.

“Hello, who’s this?”

Just hearing his voice was enough to make Barry relax his tense hold on the grimy phone. “Len, it’s me.”

“Barry, are you okay?” Len’s voice was riddled with concerned “why are you calling on a pay phone?”

“I’m okay,” he answered, “I kinda had to get away for a while, I just ran and it’s dark and cold and I don’t want to go home yet so can you and Sara come get me please?”

“Of course, Scarlet” Len replied, voice heavy with worry that was almost perfectly hidden by the smooth way he pronounced ‘Scarlet’ “tell us where you and we’ll come get you.”

Barry gave him the address and he listened as Len called out to Sara, informing her of what was happening.

“We’ll be there in about five minutes, Scarlet. Think you’ll be alright until we get there?”

“Yeah… but… can you stay on the line? Please.”

“No problem” there was the sound of a door shutting, it made Barry relaxes slightly, five minutes, he could do this. “Tell me who your favourite author is.”

Barry was surprised at the question, he hadn’t been excepting Len to say much let alone ask him such a mundane question. It was nice, though, it was better than asking the dreaded ‘do you want to talk about it’ he answered with a smile. “There are too many to name.”

Len laughed it was a sweet melody in the silence around him “Of course, give me your all-time favourite?”

“Terry Prattchet” he replied without pause, he’d been reading The Disc World series for as long as he could remember. “What about yourself?”

“Good choice, Steven King is one my top author’s” he replied.

Barry chuckled, it was the first time he’d laughed in months and he relished the normalcy of this moment. “I never pictured you as much of a reader actually.”

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“You’d be surprised Scarlet; I’m not just into stealing things and saving the world.”

“So what else does the notorious Captain Cold like?” it should feel strange having this conversation, he should feel vulnerable out in the cold night like this but Len’s voice wraps around him like a blanket, keeping him safe from the rest of the world.

“Mint chocolate chip ice cream, rainy Sundays, long winters” Len divulged “dogs, I always wanted a dog.”

“Me too,” Barry said “I wanted one so much that I once covered the entire fridge in pictures of
dogs and puppies, I think I was about to get my way too but…” he trailed off, biting his lip to mask the pain flaring to life in his chest. “Well… my mum was murdered and…” he paused, inhaling in a lungful of air, blinking away tears and the memory “maybe someday.”

“Maybe someday” Len echoed. “We’ll nearly there; you holding up alright?”

“Yeah” kind of, maybe, better than he had been at least “Shit, this must be costing you a fortune, sorry, I can pay.” He thinks. He did have some money put aside for a rainy day.

“Don’t worry about it, Scarlet. We’re here now anyway.”

Bright lights appeared in the distance followed soon after by the rumble of an engine. Barry hung up the phone and stepped out into the night, rushing to greet Len and Sara as they pulled up at the curve. Inside the car was warm, smelt like pine and felt like safety. “Thank you two for coming to get me.”

“Like I said, Scarlet,” Len looked over his shoulder, smiling warmly at him “it’s no problem.”

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Len and Sara are staying with Lisa in her lavish two bedroom apartment that is nestled in a nice part of town; apparently, Lisa was very good at spending the money she’d acquired over the years. Barry wondered how a wanted criminal came to own such a lovely place, having an address also made her easy to find or was it in another name altogether? These were just passing thoughts he had as they walked in the front door, gone as soon as Len offered to take his coat, which was actually his parka he’d wrapped Barry up in only a handful of nights ago.

Shrugging off the parka he gave it to Len to hang by the door, at home there was barely a moment gone by that he wasn’t huddled in the soft worn out fabric, it guarded him against the curious eyes, the monsters in the dark, it was his shield; here he felt safe enough to part with it. Len led the way to the kitchen while Sara headed to their room to call Iris and inform her that Barry was safe and they’d bring him home later. Barry makes himself comfortable at the breakfast bar while Len bustles around in the ultra-stylish kitchen; reading the ingredients for spaghetti Bolognese.

“Joe said we have to have you home by nine” Sara appears from the hallway, heading towards Len to offer her assistance but he playfully shoo’s her way, instead she moves to sit next to Barry, grabbing him a cool glass of water on her way.

“Great, they are treating my like a child” Barry murmured, playing absentmindedly with the glass.

“They are just worried about you,” Sara soothed “You did kind of scare them.”

Barry sighed tiredly, rubbing at his eyes with the back of hands that never seemed to be without a tremor. “Joe… he wanted to talk and I am not ready” He was starting to feel a little like a broken record, how many times would he have to say those words before someone finally listened? “I am not… I’m not okay with them knowing every little thing, I know they want to help but I just can’t tell them what Zoom did. They don’t need the details. He did so many horrible things to me and if I tell my dad or Joe it won’t change that, they’ll just see that their Barry is gone. Zoom tore me apart and they can’t fix me by knowing, it’ll just tear me apart more.” Hiding his face in heads he let out a groan of frustration. “I’m sorry I don’t think I’m making any sense.”

“I never want my dad or Laurel to know” Sara revealed “so I never told them and it doesn’t really make me feel any better; them not knowing only made me feel lonely. I get not wanting to share burdens, I am a master of not sharing, but it doesn’t help you to avoid talking about it.” Barry
looked up at her with pained eyes, hoping that she could see the message he was trying to convey without words. “I am not saying you have to tell them every little thing and you don’t have to talk about it yet but talking to them will help. Don’t be like me, don’t join the league of assassins and bury yourself in your pain.” She smiled in understanding, her words lightly teasing at the end an attempt to make this moment less heavy.

“Was that’s Nyssa’s way of helping you?”

“Nyssa was the only person I opened up to” Sara confessed “up until a few days ago she was the only one that ever knew what happened. She taught me to be a warrior so I wouldn’t be scared, so I wouldn’t find myself in that situation again.” Sara’s eyes darkened with memories of the past “She was there through every good and bad day and I know she meant for me to heal through our training, the pain just got too much, I closed off, became cold.” Her faraway look floated away “I don’t want that for you, Barry. Don’t let the darkness consume you, it won’t make anything better.”

“Some days it seems the best thing to do” looking down he found himself studying the patterns in the marble benchtops, it was easier to trace the swirls and pretend he was intrigued by their design rather than look Sara in the eyes and see the reaction to his words. “When Zoom had me I would just… blackout, the world would fade away and I’d get lost in memories or a fantasy world for hours or days at times and sometimes I just want to fall into those fantasies, be safe in a world where nothing can hurt me.”

“Zoom wins if you do that” Len interrupted, “you told the bastard that he didn’t destroy you and I know that’s true. No matter how much pain you’re in now, you have to know that one day it will be better.”

“Len is right, Barry” Sara reached out her hand, palm up, an offering. “I did close off for a while, but Nyssa got through to me in the end, I did get through it, Barry.”

Hesitantly he reached out to take her hand; she squeezed it tightly in her own. “But she’s still dead” Sara tilted her head to the side in confusion “the Sara you used to be. They still killed her.”

“She is dead,” Sara breathed “and so is the Sara who came after her” the image of her falling from a roof appeared in Barry’s mind, Thea had killed her and the Lazarus Pit brought her back but that Sara was not Sara at all. “I have said goodbye to many versions of myself throughout my life.”

“I feel like I died” tears sprang to eyes that had already shed rivers “like Barry Allen is dead and now I don’t know who I am. I wanted to pretend for everyone else that I was still him, still The Flash, even without my speed, but it’s just so hard” doubling over he let a wailing sob, Sara moved closer, wrapping her arms around him in a comforting hug.

“Shh, it's okay” Sara soothed “you don’t have to pretend, Barry, especially not to us, if you need a safe place or just someone to talk to then we’ll be that for you, okay?”

“Okay,” he sniffled “thank you, Sara, Len. I just can’t… I just feel more alone at home than I did in the Asylum. I know it’s my fault, for everything and I’m not ready to have the others know that their hero is dead, that even their Barry is dead. It’s too much trying to pretend that I will be okay in the end when I don’t even know if I’ll be okay tomorrow. Sometimes I want to yell at them and make them see that they aren’t getting me back, that the person in their home is a stranger now.”

Another sob, it rattles through him, tearing him apart. “I can’t bring myself to say those things, every time I look at them I see so much hope in their eyes and who am I to take it away from them?”
Sara eased back, cupping his face between her small hands “First: It is not your fault. You did not ask for this and you sure as hell didn’t deserve it. It’s not your fault, say it like a mantra Barry, over and over until you don’t have to anymore.” Softly, a thump swept away a falling tear. “Second: You don’t owe your family and friends anything, Barry, if you want to cry and rage at them then go ahead, they don’t get to put their shit on you. If they can’t handle the fact that you are changed now then that is on them. They don’t get to force you back into the person you used to be to fix their own guilt. From now on you don’t owe anyone a damn thing. You get to do what is best for you; you get the choices again, Barry.”

Tears dry, a tired calmness washes over him. She is right; he can’t keep trying to pretend he is okay for everyone only to fall apart behind closed doors. He can’t let his family go on believing that one day he will wake up and be himself again, it’s not fair for him and it’s not fair for anyone. Barry is no longer The Flash and he never will be again, they have to know that, they can’t keep waiting with bated breath to have the scarlet speedster back. It’s time to bury the memory of those two people so he can start moving forward.

It’s time he says goodbye to man and the hero he used to be.

XxX

The night is quiet and cold, the wood creaks beneath feet as Barry creeps out onto the back porch, listening carefully for any movement from inside. The house remains silent, on he goes, venturing out into the garden, clear night sky luminous with starlight and a moon full and bright. Coming to a stop beneath the large apple tree that never bore fruit he lowers himself to the ground and begins to dig into the soft soil with bare hands. The dirt is cold and damp against his skin, seeping deep under his nailbeds; it feels strangely wonderful to dig into the earth like he did as a child, happy to be covered in mud. This time is vastly different, though; he is not digging for lost treasure or out of the need to know what lies within the earth.

He is digging a grave, one for the Barry Allen he was and one for The Flash.

May they rest in peace.

When he left Len and Sara’s he knew what he wanted to do, what he needed to do. He waited for everyone to go to bed before he snuck out, it was something he had to do alone and with the way everyone was hovering around him after he got back he feared he’d be unable to get it done tonight. Thankfully fatigue won out and one by one everyone went to bed, after the strike of twelve he made his way silently through the house, now, here he is staring into his freshly dug hole, ready to say farewell.

Held within his hand is the first emblem from the Flash suit, when Cisco updated it he’d given this one to him, he’d kept as a keepsake, a reminder that he would keep getting stronger, faster. Now it’s just a heavy weight in his hand, a piece of the life he was no longer able to live. Tonight he will say goodbye, it was time to stop pretending to his family and friends that he’d someday pick up the mantle again, he would never be the Flash again. Holding his hand out over the hole he released the emblem from his hold, it lands with a soft thud onto the cold soil below.

“Rest in peace Flash” he whispers, shovelling the soil back into the hole “rest in peace, Barry Allen” atop the mound of dirt he places a twig with a single burnt orange leaf on it. In the morning when he faces his family he’ll no longer pretend to them that he is fine, that he is going to be fine if he feels like hell then he was not going to hide it behind a false reassuring smile. Sara was right, he didn’t owe it to them to be okay, they couldn’t expect him to come back from hell and just be the same. No more fake bravado and no more acting like wasn’t torn about in a million different ways, he was hurt and angry and sad and he was going to let them know.
Barry stood up and headed back inside, leaving his past behind in the cold, dark night.

XxX

Morning light filters in through a large window, bathing the room in soft rays of golden light. To say it feels strange waking up in Lisa over the top apartment is an understatement, Len had always known his sister had liked the finer things in life but he never expected her to go out and buy a freaking apartment. When he left eight months ago she’d been happy to roam free, going from town to town, stealing when she felt like it, she’d been a wanderers, a hurricane, now she had roots. The timeline had changed, something small, probably insignificant, had broken and now Lisa had a home in Central City and it was doing Len’s mind in.

Rip had always said it takes a while for time to catch up, so maybe in a few days or weeks, he’ll forget that he is confused by this and somehow wake to have memories of how Lisa came to live now. Fundamentally she was the same, sassy, quick witted and clever; she still had the scar from their asshole father and had been raised by him. She was still his sister and he should be happy that she had a home, that she still loved her older brother even though something somewhere had altered just the slightest. There were more important things to worry about right now, like Barry, who was an emotional mess and Sara, who was still in mourning.

Which is why he insisted she take the day to herself, he would go spend time with Barry and allow her to deal with her own pain. He could hear Sara and Lisa’s voices drifting from the kitchen; they’d hit it off right away, which Len wasn’t surprised at. They were both tough as nails and yet kind and compassionate to the people they loved, even if they tried hiding that part of themselves at times. Today Sara could be a normal twenty-six-year-old, Lisa could take her to the mall and they could do all the stupid crap girls do in Hollywood movies. Or knowing them, they’d go to a bar, get into a fight and possibly steal something while at it, whatever, he just wanted Sara to have a moment to breathe.

That’s not to say Len wasn’t dealing with his own problems, actually, he wasn’t dealing with his own problems, he was pushing them back to a remote corner of his mind so he didn’t have to deal with them. It was fine, though, he’d be fine, he accepted that Mick was gone and now he was going to get out of bed and go on with his life. That’s what he always did when bad stuff happened, you shake it off and go on living because that was all you could do. Getting lost in his grief wasn’t going to help anyone and he wasn’t exactly the kind of man who wallowed in his sorrow. He dealt with his pain by marching on, maybe he’d plan a heist to keep his mind occupied or go to Saint’s and Sinner’s and get blind drunk and find someone to go home with.

Of course, none of these things would be productive right now, so instead he was going to shower then join his sister and Sara for breakfast and after that, he was going to spend the day with Barry. Not exactly a usual day for Leonard Snart but this was going to be his life for the foreseeable future so he might as well get used to it. Not that he was complaining, he was actually okay with not planning any elaborate heists or running head first into danger, he just wished the situation was different.

He’d always wanted to get to know Barry better, he’d been ever so curious about the fastest man alive, but this isn’t how he wanted it to happen. He wanted to come back into Barry’s life and show him that he had changed, that maybe they could be friends or something other than whatever they had been and Barry would allow it because he was a God damn good person and a tentative friendship would form. Well at least part of it is coming true, there is a bond forming between them and it’s strong, Len doesn’t know what their future holds for them but he can see he is in Barry’s life for good now.
If there was one thing Len could not escape it was how much it hurt to see Barry like this. Last night had broken his heart, watching Barry fall apart in front of him and being unable to help was awful, thank God they had Sara. He didn’t feel completely usually, though, he’d managed to give Barry a little slice of normality back last night, he’d asked him questions he’d always been curious to know and after his conversation with Sara, they ate dinner then played card games until they had to take him home.

He’d thanked them as he said their goodnight’s, he’d hugged Len tight and nuzzled his face into the crook of his neck. Len had wanted him to stay there forever. Sadly, he had to go and Len watched as he walked up the front steps and he didn’t turn away until Barry had disappeared into the house, the door shutting behind him as Joe locked them out. Joe did not like him, not that he could blame the guy, but he was helping Barry, hell he and Sara seemed to be the only ones actually getting through to him. Joe could not like him all he wanted but there was no way in hell he was going to let him stop him from being there for Barry and didn’t the fact Barry trusts them count for something? Or you know the fact that he killed Zoom.

“Lenny?”

His sister’s voice pulled him out his reverie, turning around he found Lisa leaning casually in the doorway. “Yeah?”

“I have been here for like five minutes and you’ve just been staring off into space” strutting into the room, she perched herself gracefully at the end of bed. “I know we don’t ask this often, but are you okay?”

“Just peachy” Len replied, finally getting up from the bed and heading towards the dresser to collect his phone which buzzed with a message alert. “Since we’re all touchy, feely, how are you?”

“Fabulous” red lips twist into a playful smirk. “Sara and I are making pancakes and there is fresh coffee if you’d like to join us?”

“You and Sara are getting all homey I see” he mirrored her smirk “should I expect a fall fling?”

“Perhaps” she mused “Lenny, enough banter, I know you better than anyone, I can see the storm raging in your eyes.”

Len turned cold blue eyes his sister way, she wore a determined expression, this conversation would not be given up easily, it’s a good thing Len had the perfect weapon to disrupt her questioning. “When did you get this place?” He asked instead, watching the stubborn set of her jaw shift into pursed lips, her quest to expose his pain to the bright morning forgotten, at least for now.

“Not long ago” she answered “my big brother took off to save the world so I thought to myself, why should I continue being a screw-up when Lenny is out there making a difference. So I gathered by savings, packed my things and left that God awful apartment I was staying at in Keystone city and moved home to the kind of place I always wanted and enrolled myself in university.” She explained, beaming with pride “I’m going to study psychology because I want to help people too, I want to be more than a thief.”

Pride swells in his chest, this new Lisa wasn’t the result of a whisper of a change to the timeline, she was the creation of Len actually doing something good in his life. “I’m proud of you sis.” He was, God he was, all he ever wanted was for Lisa to be happy, to have all the things she deserved and like the badass she is she went out and got them for herself.
“Thanks, Lenny” she smiled; blinking away tears with mascara coated lashes “now if you don’t mind, I have a cute blonde to flirt with.” With that she got to her feet, winking mischievously as she left.

“Good luck” he called after her, absentmindedly picking up his cell, finally he could answer the message, he knew hadn’t been Barry as he’d given him his own ring tone. Surprised, he found the message was from Iris.

Hey, Len, it’s Iris.

I know we don’t know each other – and we haven’t exactly got the best track record- but after you rescued Barry, I trust you and I don’t know who else to turn to. Barry is shuttling us all out. He won’t even get out of bed today and I need to know how to help him, I am at a loss. So please, would you meet at Jitters in an hour? I know you don’t owe me this but I am desperate, I know our Barry is still in there somewhere.

This was most certainly unexpected and he wasn’t sure how he could help Iris, they were all struggling with this, Len and Sara only appeared more equipped because they had suffered abuse in their past, which tragically gave them an advantage. It didn’t make them experts on the matter, though. He would still try, maybe he could help her to see that she needed to let go of the idea of finding the old Barry tucked away somewhere in the shell of the man they had been reunited with. Len didn’t believe Barry was broken beyond repair, he was messed up and hurt and Len knew he would never be the same. Hell, there is no being the same after months of torture; you don’t get over it or wake up one morning to find you are magically better. No, you rebuild yourself from the ground up, some days you can’t build and some days what you have built comes crashing down and then you have to start again.

You build and you break and you build again until finally, you can stand. It’s a process Len has endured many times. Despite the hell Barry had been through Len could still see the light inside of him. It was just a spark, an ember waiting to be blown into back into a fire someday. That day was far off; it was nights of harrowing dreams, days of misery and months and months of heartache away. These things were the honest truths Iris needed to hear, she needed to know this and be able to accept in order to help Barry.

Today he could help Iris, it might hurt her to have someone tell her to give up on the dream of having Barry back, taking hope away is always wickedly cruel but it was a necessity. No one could go around pretending that the sun would rise one morning and with it the Flash, the cheerful Barry Allen who hadn’t been perfectly taken apart. This would hurt her but he knew Iris was strong enough to handle it.

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Len has lived in Central City his whole life and not once has he stepped foot inside Jitters. It’s pretty much what he expected, fancy coffee, a mix of hipsters, businessmen and mums trying to get away from the daily grind. He orders a basic black coffee, double shot of course, and waits for Iris at one of the tables that have uncomfortable stools to sit on. Seriously he’s been in dive bars that have better seating. He doesn’t know how everyone is looking so relaxed and cheerful. It’s loud in here and far to warm for his liking. More people pour in, order coffee then take a seat and either start up conversations or get lost on their phones, which, Len thinks really defeats the purpose of being out. The exact moment his coffee order is called Iris West strolled in, looking well-presented and less anxious than he’d anticipated, though something tells him it’s just facade.

“Thank you for meeting me” is her way of greeting him “I’… I didn’t know if you’d be willing to
“If it helps Barry then I am always willing.”

“Why do you care so much about him, all of sudden?” She demanded, staring him down with the same expression of challenge as his sister.

“We have a special bond” is all he offers. He doesn’t share with just anyone and as much as he likes Iris he isn’t exactly about to open his heart to her. What he feels for Barry, whatever it may be, is his secret to keep. “All you need to know is I do care and I am here to help you the best way I can, so we can all help Barry.”

“Okay, well, let’s go get a table upstairs so we can talk” Iris looked frustrated at not getting the answer she’d been seeking, thankfully instead of prying further she marched passed him and up the stairs to the second floor.

Len grabbed his coffee and followed. He found her sitting in a booth tucked away in the corner, upstairs was less crowded, only a handful of hipsters lingered at the tables. Up close Len could now see Iris’s facade cracking, distress clouded her eyes like a summer storm. She looked wrecked, all signs of the confident girl that walked in had faded away to reveal the distraught girl within. Len hoped he could help her, he felt like maybe she should be talking to Sara instead but after how her conversation with Cisco went that mightn’t be the best idea either.

“What made you text me today?” he asked, “Is this about last night?”

“No, not really” she answered, the hostile woman who’d entered Jitter’s was now nowhere to be seen. In her place was a distressed girl trying desperately to grasp hold of her newly shattered world. “I just feel at a loss at what to do and I get that you probably don’t have all the answers but you are the only one who will be honest enough to tell me if my trying to help Barry is actually hurting him,” her hands balled into fist, shame darkening her features, a whisper of the hostile woman who’d walked in moments ago flashing on the surface “or my lack of help rather.”

“Care to explain?” he pressed.

“Ever since…” her eyes fluttered closed, arms wrapping around her middle in a protective embrace “ever since I couldn’t get Barry to snap out of his Blackout.”

Apparently, that’s what they were calling what happened to Barry the other day. He only now recalls Iris calling him in tears from Star labs, telling him there was something wrong with Barry. He’d rushed to Star labs, finding Barry tucked into bed, staring up at the ceiling through unseeing eyes. It had taken a few moments but eventually Len pulled Barry from his catatonic state, it wasn’t something he’d witnessed before but Sara reassured him that this used to happen to her, she called them her Gone Days.

She explained it was sort of like daydreaming, only you got stuck there, sometimes it was pleasant, you’d be lost in memories or a craft your own world and everything world be good, everything would be fine. Sometimes you’d get lost in your deepest nightmares, in your darkest memories.

Len understood what she meant perfectly, he didn’t blame Barry for wanting to hide away for a while, be somewhere safe and happy. He, however, didn’t want him to get lost in his darkest hours. That could be detrimental to his healing.

“I’ve been avoiding him, burying myself in work” she continued, “So today, I told myself I would spend time with him, stop being selfish and scared and actually do something.”
“Didn’t go as planned?” Len guessed.

“It went terribly” she confessed, closing her eyes to hold back the tears “I tried to get him to come out for breakfast but he wouldn’t even talk to me. He wouldn’t even get out of bed, he just slunk under the covers and I got angry” she tilted her head backwards like she was looking heavenward for forgiveness. “I snapped at him and left, what the hell is wrong with me? He has been” she paused, wearing an uneasy expression. Len could see she wasn’t ready to use the words ‘tortured and raped’ “he’s been through hell and I acted like a total bitch.”

Len took a long drink of his coffee, mulling over what Iris’s words. He understands where she was coming from; she doesn’t know how to handle this situation and how the hell is she meant to know? This shouldn’t be happening, this is supposed happen to other people, people that they don’t know, yet somehow Len has found himself with two friends who have been hurt. Life is messed up; Len already knew that, though.

“What did you expect Barry would be like when he came back?” he knew the answer to this; he knew the way hope worked. Unfortunately, hope could often make someone delusion, make someone believe in the impossible.

“Like Barry” Iris answered honestly, brows knitting together in confusion like Len expected her answer to be anything else like she thought Len was crazy for knowing that Barry wouldn’t be the same.

“And what did you think he’d be like after you learnt that he’d been raped?” He feels like he should have put a warning before he asked this, maybe waving a big red flashing ‘This Might Hurt’ sign would have been the way to go because Iris inhaled sharply and his words might as well have been a slap in the face.

“I… don’t know.” She stuttered, looking more and more distressed by the minute. “I just knew that I would do anything to make him whole again.”

“And let me guess,” Len ventured “this image of Barry whole again has him back in red, saving the city and bouncing around like the excited puppy he was.”

“I… I do see him becoming The Flash again,” she confessed, taking several deep breaths to reign back in her composure “I don’t know how but I believe we can figure it, give him his speed back and a part of himself with it.”

She truly believed this, Len could see it her eyes and honestly he’d love to see Barry back as the Scarlet Speedster but even if they could get his speed back it didn’t mean they could get The Flash back. *I felt like I died* Barry words from last night whisper in his mind, he blinks away the memory of Barry sobbing brokenly in his sister kitchen, he swallows down the bitter taste of thinking the hero might be nothing more than a fond memory. Maybe, *maybe* if they were really lucky one day The Flash would rise from the ashes like a phoenix, for now, they had to respect that Barry believed that part of him was gone forever.

So the was what Iris needed to hear, even if it wasn’t what she had been seeking. “You just have to accept that the Barry you knew is gone and he *will* never be the same. He’ll get better and if we’re really lucky he might even become the Flash again someday but right now our hopes for his future don’t matter. We can encourage him and guide him along the way but we can’t force our own desires and needs onto him. He needs us to embrace the person he is right now, we have to love him even when he’s broken, if we don’t, he’ll sense that and it *will* hurt him more and he will withdraw further.” Len paused, studying Iris closely, making sure that she was hearing his words and understanding how important it was that she heeds them. “He is healing now, very slowly, but
he is healing and we have to be there for him, unselfishly and unconditionally.”

Iris was silent for a moment, collecting herself the best she could. “You’re right… Dad and Henry and I, we’ve wanted to see our old Barry back. We’ve been selfishly ignoring the fact that he is back, broken or not he is still Barry and he is back.” She swallowed down the dry lump in her throat, brushing away a stray tear with a red painted nail tip. “He is back and that is enough, it’s enough” her voice broke, Len reached out for her hand but she abruptly stood “Thank you, Len, for this, for everything you’ve been doing for Barry. I… I just need some air.” Without another word, she sprinted away.

Heaving a sigh Len leant back in the booth, he knew Iris would be fine, she was strong and she needed to realise that it wasn’t okay to force Barry back into the person that he was. He could see that she knew that now, that something clicked and she finally got that Barry was back and that was the most important thing. He wasn’t lost to them, wasn’t trapped on another earth suffering unspeakable torture, he was home, he was safe. The rest would take tears and broken sobs and long winter nights filled with screams echoing out into the cold darkness.

It would take their all to help rebuild the perfectly broken boy.

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It’s raining, no it’s storming.

This morning’s blue sky has been lost to wicked black clouds that flash in bursts of bright white light. Trees bend to the will of the wind, umbrellas tear free of desperate hands and sail away too far off lands and the ground shutters and shakes with the roar of thunder. It’s terrifying. The city is at the mercy of Mother Nature and it looks like she is about to blow them all away or drown them in icy waters. Something isn’t right, though, Len can feel it like an itch crawling under his skin; this storm is not Mother Nature wracking havoc, not in this city.

Watching safe from inside Jitters Len calls Sara, grateful that there is still service, she answered on the second ring. “Did you order a tornado to Oz?”

“No but Cisco called me for my help and said a guy named Mark Mardon is attacking the city” she replied, in the background, he could hear the sound of commotion; wherever she and Lisa had gone was filled with panicking people. “Apparently you two have crossed paths?”

“I know the guy” Mark Mardon wasn’t exactly someone he expected to see again, he was sure the guy would have run far away from the city after he helped set him free. Word must have gotten around that The Flash was gone and the city was ripe for the taking. Well this was Len’s city and if Barry couldn’t protect it then he’d do so in his stead, he owed it to him anyway, it’s his fault this happening right now. “The guy owes me a favour, maybe I can get him to step down peacefully.”

“Peaceful approach, huh? Guess you are getting old” Sara teased “need any backup?”

“Nah I’m all good” he reassured “I’ll swing by Lisa’s and get the cold gun in case. Where is the bastard?”

“He’s heading to Star Labs and by the way, asking if you needed backup was just out of courtesy. We work better together as partners” she declared.

Len chuckled, “Right, well then partner I’ll see you on the battlefield.” Without another word he hung up, bracing himself to face the vengeful storm.
Unarmed

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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So just save your words and I'll fade away now
Give me a match and I'll burn it all down
Pick up your feet and take me home now
'Cause it's dark inside, and I'm all alone

Mariah McManus - Unarmed

When Zoom held Barry captive all he wanted was to go home. To be somewhere safe and familiar, a place filled with those who loved him, with warmth and memories and security. Everything would be okay, everything would be better if he could just get home, right? The nightmares, the pain, the loneliness it would go away once he was surrounded by familiar walls, right? If he could just do the impossible one last time, if he could just click his heels together three times then he’d be home and he would be fine.

Right?

He believed at first that home would fix him; it would wrap itself around him, keep him warm and safe. His friends and family would be able to make it better, make him better and in the end, he would be okay, if he could just get home. He had been deluding himself, though, Barry had believed that once he was home everything would be okay, now that he was home, surrounded by familiar things and memories, so many damn memories, he knew that it was just that; a delusion.

Being home didn't make him feel safe or warm or clean; he still trembled in fear and woke screaming in the dark, he still scrubbed his skin raw, desperately trying to remove the ugliness left behind and a bitter chill still clung to his bones. Home did not feel like a security blanket wrapped around him. It was just another prison, another place to make him feel trapped and afraid and alone. Its walls were lined with memories of a curious and happy child, a young man that was always late, clumsy and mostly wore a smile. This house was not a home. It was suffocating and maddening and he doesn't remember why he had the urge to return so desperately. Now all he wants is to escape, to find somewhere not haunted by ghosts of the past and bustling with people who expect to find those ghosts within him once more.

This house is not a home, not right now… maybe one day.

Just not today…

It’s why he has to leave, to go somewhere that won’t remind him of the man he was, go to a place that won’t remind him that he’d been a hero. He is suffocating here, trapped once more and desperately needing a place, a home, an open road, anything that will allow him to be free. He has to rebuild from the ground up; he has to get to know the person that has been shaped by Zoom’s hands, broken by them. He is not the creation Zoom had been crafting, he’d been hoping for a monster, to break and bend and tear Barry into someone like him. He’ll never be what Zoom wanted; he’ll never be what his friends and family want, he needs to get away so he can start over.

Deep down he knows it’s selfish to want to leave when his family just got him back but he can’t
stay, can’t breathe, can’t heal. Guilt he can handle, they will eventually understand why he is doing this or maybe they won’t, it doesn’t matter, his mind is already made up. He just wants to be somewhere safe, to be somewhere that isn’t bustling with people, to go somewhere that doesn’t serve coffee named after its fallen hero, he wants to go someplace and find himself again.

If that was at all possible.

XxX

Rain pelts heavily onto the windowpane, the sky had been post-card perfect all morning, endless blue with a few lazy clouds drifting by without a care in the world. Then there was a shift in the wind, a gentle breeze blowing into a wickedly cold gust, thunder roaring in the distance like the sky had come alive and dark clouds rolling in like an approaching army. There was a pause, a heartbeat then the sky cracked open and a torrential pour came crashing down, it went from calm to chaos in a matter of minutes.

Barry shivered from where he watched the downpour; even Len’s jacket had trouble keeping out the chill in the air. Lights flickered as lightning crackled in the raging sky, Barry jumped, panic waking inside him. Something about the storm was setting him off, maybe it’s the thunder that makes it sound like the sky is tumbling down or maybe it’s the rain pelting violently at the window, like a beast, hungry to come inside. Perhaps it’s the way his skin seems to hum, almost vibrate, the way it used to when he was The Flash. For a moment he longs to feel like the Flash again, to be the fastest man alive, but he wasn’t the fastest and now he wasn’t even a speedster, he was barely Barry Allen.

Around came the carousel again, same old thoughts circling and circling and circling, he was stuck on this broken ride. It seemed a stupid question to ask oneself, he knew that of course, he was still Barry Allen, son of Henry and Norah Allen, but who was he beneath the name? Before he would happily call himself a nerd, a forensic scientist, a hero, a good friend, a good son and on the list would go, but now he fills stripped of these titles. He doesn’t know the person(101,768),(883,991). Would he still risk his life to save a stranger, a friend, a city, a world? Could he ever return to his job, was he still a good friend, a good son?

He couldn’t answer any of these and it was maddening, it made him quiver, he felt unattached, a boat drifting through an open sea without a paddle, without an anchor. An invisible hand wraps around his throat, lungs burn for air as fear chokes the oxygen from dying lungs. An urge to run surges through him, forcing him to his feet but when he stands his leg give out underneath him and he falls to the floor in a pathetic heap. Paralysed, gasping for air, heart racing, he is in total panic. It feels like this could kill him.

He has walked this road before, been alone in a dark asylum, crying, gasping for air and thinking I am going to die, I am going to die and each time he doesn’t. The oxygen will return to lungs, crippling anxiety will wane, he’ll blink away tears and the storm will have passed. It will stop, he won’t die, but my God knowing this doesn’t help one bit. Lost in the storm he huddles into himself, breathing, breathing, breathing, it’s not enough, never enough, he’s going to die.

This time, he’s going to die.

Shallow breathing.

Heart racing.

“Barry, hey, it’s okay, it’s okay. You’re safe.”
A voice, a light, a hand reaching out through the darkness; storm clouds part, oxygen forces its way into screaming lungs, slowly the world seeps back into focus. At first, it comes in goes in waves, a blurred face peering through the fog, a hand outstretched, the rain battering against the roof and finally, finally he can see, can breathe. Iris is peering at him through eyes darkened with concern, her hair is messy and damp and she smells like rain, it’s comforting. Comfort; that is something he never used to have after a panic attack, it’s something he has gone so long without. He’d almost forgotten what it was like to be soothed, to be cared for.

It’s not like he hasn’t had plenty of comfort in the last week, everyone was offering their support, sometimes in ways that were too much for him, but at least they were trying. There had been a welcome face to wake to after a terrible nightmare. There had been arms willing to embrace him if he sought out a hug, if only he could bring himself to seek out his family instead of withdrawing in on himself. There was always sorrow in their eyes, pity accompanied with their guilt, with a hint of rage that Barry didn’t understand. Where they mad at him? Was it disappointment he saw? It was obvious this is not the Barry they had been desperately seeking. They wanted him whole; they wanted their hero, not the broken mess left behind.

“Barry, are you with me?”

“Yeah, sorry” he goes to get up, only he ends up hitting his head against something hard, apparently, in his panic, he ended up under the bed. It feels safe under here, a barrier between the world and its raging storms.

“Ouch, you okay?” Iris asked, brow furrowing impossibly further.

“Yeah, just didn’t realise where I was” he confessed, rubbing at the sore spot on his head.

“You used to hide under the bed when a big storm came, remember?” She smiled fondly, eyes clouding over with the memories “I found you once, not long after you moved in with us, there was this massive downpour and the power had gone out and dad wasn’t home yet and the sitter was too busy texting her boyfriend to notice you’d gone missing. I noticed, though, as soon as the first clap of thunder rattled through the sky I knew you’d be rushing to hide under the bed. So I left our useless sitter to stumble around in the dark and I raided the linen closet and built us a fort to wait out the storm.” Her gaze shifts back into focus, the dreamy look floating away, replaced with determination “You, Barry Allen, need a blanket fort!”

Before he could utter a word she had vanished, a moment later the room filled with the sound of commotion as Iris whisked in out, carrying armfuls of sheets and blankets. Barry crawled out from under his hiding place, missing the security it brought when a loud clap of thunder boomed in the sky. Iris had dumped a mound of linen at the end of his bed, a mix of colours and fabrics and memories. They used to do this a lot, creating their own little safe heaven, a place where they could hide away from the world and all its problems. It had been years since Barry had done this, as he began to untangle sheets from blankets he searched his memory for the correct way to assemble the fort.

It was incredible how many memories he currently held in his hands, each sheet could tell a different story, each blanket could remember every cold night. Grasped in his hands was the comforter he used to sleep with when he was eleven. It was faded now, dark midnight blue paled to a lighter hue and once yellow stars now bleached white, the edges frayed and torn. There is a moment of sorrow for the eleven-year-old boy who doesn’t yet know that his mother will be murdered, that his father will go to prison, that one he will be taken and broken. The comforter falls gracelessly to the floor, dropped like it was hot coal, he cannot stand to look at it any longer, he cannot stand to be constantly reminded of all the things he once was.
He feels *unarmed*, standing here among the memories of the life of an innocent boy; he has no weapons to defend himself from the on slaughter of grief that rush’s through his veins like a wicked poison. The carousel starts again, around and around and down and down he goes, falling helplessly into despair, body seized by panic. Home is smothering him, memories chasing him to insanity, he’d like to run, to flee but Iris is standing before him now, telling him to breathe, wrapping that stupid star covered comforter around his shoulders and all he can do is deflate. He is worn to the bone; there is no fight left, *not today*.

“Just sit down, Bar” Iris gently eases him down on the bed, brushing away a few fallen strands of hair from his forehead. “Take some deep breaths, I am right here, I am going to make us our safe heaven okay?”

Barry could only nod, words lodged behind an ever growing lump in his throat. He watches Iris move gracefully around the room, turning old linen into a warm and inviting tent in a matter of minutes. Once done she grabs an armful of pillows from varies locations in the house and tosses them into the fort and like that a thousand memories come crashing in. Barry chases them away with a forceful shake of the head, he doesn’t want to go skipping down memory lane anymore, doesn’t want to see the smiley and happy kids who sat amongst a mound of pillows eating chocolate and candies. Instead, he focuses on Iris; she is waiting for him, a gentle smile on her beautiful face, a smile that is for once not marred by concern.

“You go first” Barry insisted, he doesn’t want to feel trapped or caged in, he needs a clear path at all times.

Iris disappears into the fort, with a shaky breath Barry gets to his feet and follows. Once inside he makes himself comfortable on the mound of pillows, Iris sits opposite him, still smiling, like she’s discovered the secret to the universe. Barry can’t help it; he smiles back, forgetting that he’d been angry with her this morning, that he’d been hurt when she raged at him for not getting out of bed. In this moment he forgave her for her outburst because he could see she somehow finally understood what he needed: a friend, a friend who didn’t look at him with eyes brimming with tears and glistening with guilt. He needed her to stop looking at him like she expected some miracle from him and start looking at him like she saw him, ugly scars and broken mind and all.

“You’re safe now Barry” she whispered, lacing her delicate fingers through his worn out ones “You’re safe now” she closed her eyes, Barry watched as a tear slipped free “I have you back” she wasn’t talking to him any longer, Barry grasped her hand tighter. “I have you back and I am so grateful for that” glistening brown eyes fluttered open “I was being selfish, Barry, when you came home all I could think about was getting you back out there, I had convinced myself that if we got you your speed back then you’d be fixed” she confessed, her face clouding with shame. “I thought it would help mend your mind, somehow erase what Jay did to you, I wanted you to be whole again so bad but” she paused to clear her throat “but someone helped me realise that I should be grateful that you’re alive and you’re home. So I want you to know I am so thankful to have you here and I know you are hurt but you are enough! Hurt and a little rough around the edges you are enough, you’re still our Barry.”

Barry allows Iris’s words to wash over him, this is what he’d wanted to hear and yet in this moment it didn’t make him feel one bit better. He felt just as hollowed out as ever. “I don’t feel much like Barry anymore” he confessed, “I barely feel human.”

“Well then tell me how I can help you, Barry, please.” Iris pleaded.

“I wish I could Iris, I wish it was that simple” abruptly he snatched his hand away, the urge to get away intensifying. “I want to feel at home with you and Joe and dad but I just feel trapped here!”
Frustration sizzled beneath his skin, he was so sick of feeling like this, of the mess of emotions and jumbled thoughts racing through him. “Every time I open my eyes I have all these memories and I am reminded of everything that has been taken from, of everything I let him take from me and I want to run, I want to scream!”

“Barry, you may have lost your speed but you haven’t lost us” Iris reassured, “we’re still your family.”

“That’s not what I mean” he groaned, nervous hands scrubbed furiously over his face, desperately wiping away the tears that never seemed to stop. “I feel hollowed out like I have been stripped of every part of myself. I look in the mirror and I don’t recognise the face staring back at me. I don’t know who I am now and it that terrifies me!”

“I’m sorry, God I am so sorry” Iris pulled him into her arms, for once he allowed it, folding himself into her warm embrace. “It’s going to be okay, we’re going to make it okay.”

He wished he could believe her, he wished he believed that his family was enough to make him whole again but maybe, this time, they couldn’t. “I don’t think you can” he mumbled into her neck, tasting bitter salt on his tongue “not this time.”

Iris held him tighter, gently running her fingers through his messy hair. “It’s Len and Sara… they can help you” her words sounded slightly bitter, a hint of jealous. “Rip said that they helped you, that we had to trust them to bring you back to us. I think we have to let you go Barry” her voice broke; Barry could feel her breath shudder in her chest. “I think that right now, here isn’t where you’re meant to be. You said it’s full of memories and if you keep holding on to who you were then you won’t be able to move on. You need to heal, Barr and as much as it breaks my heart to say this, I don’t think you can do that here. I don’t think we’re enough to help you through this.”

The rain had slowed to a steady pitter-patter, it seemed eerily silent now that the storm had passed, Iris had also gone silent. Barry takes in his own shuddering breath and replays her words in his mind. She can see that he is drowning here, that the ghosts are driving him mad, that this house does not feel like a home anymore and she is not punishing him, she is not imprisoning him here, she is setting him free. There are no bonds tiring him to the bed, there are no bars keeping him from walking away, from running away. Monsters do not dwell here, memories and ghosts may haunt him but there is no devious creature caging him in. Finally, if he so wishes, he can leave. He can march out into the daylight, bruised and broken, anxious and scared, and go anywhere his heart desires.

All he can say to her is ‘Thank you, Iris, thank you for understanding, thank you for allowing me to be able to heal in my own messy way.’ He’s not sure Joe or his dad will understand, that they’ll be willing to let him go so soon after he returned, but having Iris allow him this, give him this, is enough.

“You don’t have to thank me,” she draws back, taking Barry’s face into her hands “you are allowed to heal in any way you want, just as long as you do” gently, like a whisper, she kissed his forehead. “I am still here for you and I always will be.”

“I know” a tired smile graces his tear streaked face, a warmth begins to bloom in his chest, outside the rain finally stops, it’s a promise of better days ahead.

Xxx

It’s late afternoon by the time Len finally arrives at the West house, he’s exhausted from taking on Mardon, it didn’t go as easy as he would have liked and he’s honestly glad he had Sara for backup.
In the end, they got Mardon or Weather Wizard as Cisco had named him and now the bastard was locked away in the pipeline once more, the idiot should have stayed away. Even though Len is worn out and has been soaked to the bone and has blooming bruises from where Mardon threw him with a strong gust of wind, he’s happy to see Barry at the end of it. It’s like coming home, it’s almost like the fantasies he used to indulge in, before Barry, back when he was still a young enough to believe in a better tomorrow.

He used to imagine a faceless person waiting to greet him at the end of the day, a home to retreat to when the world got too loud and big. Maybe in another world, one where fate had not been so cruel, he did have a place to call home, a someone to call home. This world had dealt its cards, fate was sealed and this house was not his home and he may never get to call this Barry his own. Mick would have laughed at him if he could have heard his thoughts, heard how they changed from a curious lust to infatuation to something that maybe, could be, might be, love. Which, Len knows is ridiculous because Barry and he haven’t spent that much time together, hell most of the time spent together was just them arguing or in mortal danger.

There were many fantasies in Len’s mind, many dreams in his head; he’d been falling from afar, saving the world and biding his time until he could finally act on his feelings. He’d been waiting for courage, maybe if he’d stopped by, got Rip to drop him right off at the front door, then he could have told Barry how he felt. Maybe he could have been here to stop Zoom from taking him. There are too many ‘maybes’, a thousand different things could have transpired but none of them did. Fate had been sealed. The Time Masters had pulled their strings and down came Barry’s world. Len’s dreams of a home nothing more than ash on the wind.

How Len felt now no longer mattered. Getting Barry better, making him whole, no matter how impossible, was the most important job he would ever have. He would save Barry; he would stay by his side until the end of time just to keep him safe. He’d do anything to make this better. It was his redemption, it was his destiny, he’d save Barry, one day he’d save him. For now, the sun is retreating for the night, dying leaves are falling from the trees, the cold dark night is moving in but even it has the promise of dawn.

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Inside is filled with warmth; the fire has been lit to chase away the chill in the air. It’s oddly silent as Len makes his way towards Barry’s bedroom, after being let in by a tired and frazzled looking Henry. He didn’t offer him a drink; he stayed staring at him for a solid minute before stepping aside and allowing him to come in out of the cold. He didn’t trust Len and honestly, it pissed him off, trust was always something he believed needed to be earned and didn’t he earn it when he killed Zoom when he joined Rip and his merry band of ‘legions’? Joe and Barry’s father just wouldn’t trust him, no matter how helpful he’d been, no matter how many times Barry chose him for comfort over them. A childish part thought maybe they were jealous; it was stupid and cruel so he pushed the thought away and walked towards Barry’s room.

Not a moment later and he felt bad for his previous thought, he couldn’t imagine what Henry was going through or Joe, they’d been unable to protect their son, that kind of guilt can eat you up. They were not his concern, though, he was here for Barry and everyone else had to deal with their own problems. He couldn’t save everyone; it wasn’t his job to this time. Chatter drifted towards him from Barry’s room, he could hear Iris’s voice but her tone was too low for him to make out the words. Upon entering Barry’s bedroom his eyes landed on the colourful mound of blankets arranged into a haphazard tent, God he remembers when he used to build forts for Lisa when the yelling got too loud.
He peers inside; Iris and Barry are tangled up in each other, looking back at him with smiling faces. It appears Len has managed to help someone else, Iris has clearly sorted things out and ended the distance she’d accidentally created between herself and Barry. Barry seems relaxed, his smile warm like the afternoon sun that illuminated the room in gold, there was something in his eyes, a flicker of a spark and it had Len mirroring their grins. He was about to ask if he could join when Iris cut him off, excusing herself and leaving him to crawl into the space she’d only moments ago been.

Barry rested his head on Len’s thigh, staring up at him through beautiful eyes, without hesitation Len begins to caress his fingers through his hair. He notices it’s shorter, in his mind he sees Iris cutting it back into his usual style, he is about to mention it, when a hand reaches up to trace carefully at the bruise darkening around his eye. Barry’s face scrunches up in concern, questions forming on his tongue but Len beats him to it. It’s a habit of his to brush away concern, shrug it off and say he’s fine without bothering with details. He does assure Barry that he is indeed fine, no broken bones to be seen. He tells him about Mardon, Iris and Barry had been completely unaware that the city had been under siege, the storm had reached them here but they didn’t stop to question if it was something out of the ordinary.

“I’m glad you’re okay,” Barry said, hand lingering on his face, a gentle thumb occasionally sweeping over the darkening bruise “and that city is still in one piece. Mardon is dangerous.”

“It was no big deal” he shrugged it off; Mardon was nothing compared to the things he’d faced over the past few months. “I’ve faced worse.”

“Haven’t we all?” the spark vanished from his eyes like tendrils of smoke; left in its wake was uncertainty. “If I asked you to take me away, somewhere far away, would you?”

Len’s brow furrowed in concern, warmth seemed to evaporate from the air, the sun had set, it was dark now. Barry was asking him to take him away, from this city, from this house and the people who loved him and if it wasn’t filled with the notion that it was he and Sara that helped Barry get through this than he would have said no. He would convince him that he should stay here with his family and friends, tell him he didn’t really want to run away. It was just a fleeting feeling, a combination of emotions and trauma and after a while, he’d be okay, the urge would fade. He did know this, if Barry wanted to leave, for whatever reason, then Len would say yes, he’d take him anywhere.

He could have said no, he just had this feeling in his gut that he shouldn’t. He felt it was important that he didn’t. Running away wasn’t going to fix anything, it wouldn’t magically make anything better, no matter how far Barry ran he couldn’t escape what had happened to him, what he was still happening to him. Unfortunately, it was something he’d have to learn on his own. Len could not tell him that he was running from himself, not this house or this city, this he’d have to come to understand on his own and when he did Len would be there, because there was nothing worse than learning you can’t escape the pain.

So instead of saying no, instead of saying think about it, he said: “Where do you want to go, Scarlet?”

XxX

Sara’s sitting with her legs crossed on the medical bed at Star Labs, nursing a sore wrist and watching Lisa flirtatiously say goodbye to Cisco, who tries to play it cool but his cheeks are coloured pink and there is no doubt he’s under her spell. Sara had been feeling the pull of her charm as well, perhaps if things were a little different right then she would have given in to her desire, enjoyed a night of passion with a gorgeous woman. Things weren’t different, she grieved
for Laurel and the memories of her past were pounding furiously at the door she’d sealed them behind. She was starting to fray and she feared one wrong move, one bad day, might have her unravelling and she was no help to anyone if she came undone. So she added another lock to that door kept in the dark, shadowy parts of her mind, she took a deep breath and let the air replenish her lungs and tighten her seams, she would not unravel today.

Cisco wandered into the room, trying to hide the cat that got the cream smile from his face, it didn’t work and Sara found herself smiling back. It was a sweet little moment, a break from all the darkness swirling around them, it didn’t last long enough, it was gone in the flutter of a moth’s wings. Despair darkened Cisco’s face; it was clear he was still holding blame for Barry’s abduction, it wouldn’t be easy to let go of, even if they promised to try. Sara still felt guilt over Laurel, she wept in the shower where no one could see, they were the only few precious moments she allowed herself to break down, to lose herself in the grief, both past and present. Her only salvation was this mission, it was something worth getting out of bed in the morning for and it helped knowing Laurel would be proud, she always believed Sara could save people.

Why not start with Cisco, why not try and help mend his wounds? She wasn’t really sure what to say; still, she’d open her mouth and asked: “How have you been Cisco?”

“Oh you know, can’t complain” he shrugged off her concern, busying himself with the ice pack that Sara had set aside after it had grown warm. “You?”

“Five-by-five.”

“A Faith fan, good to see,” Cisco said with an approving nod.

“I love Buffy too, of course, but I can relate to Faith” she explained. “Now how do you really feel, Cisco?” her tone left no room for lies or roundabout questions, she could see Cisco visibly react to the sudden change in her tone. All trivial talk was shelved.

“Are assassins trained to read micro-expressions or something?” he enquired.

“We are trained in the art of body language” she jumped off the bed, sliding right over to Cisco and taking the ice pack from his nervous hands. “I can see something is bothering you and I’d like to help if you let me?” She stepped back, resting against the bed in a casual stance, leaving the rest for Cisco to decide.

Finally, he gave in, shoulders sagging under the weight of the words. “I feel guilty still. I tried to forgive myself, I tried to go see Barry but every time I do I get seized with panic and I don’t go, I stay away like a coward.” He dropped his head into his hands and let out a frustrated groan.

“Is this guilt still over Barry being taken?” she probed.

“Yes and no” raising his head he met Sara’s gaze with his own big brown eyes brimming with sorrow. “It’s about the things I saw… when I vibed. At first, I was afraid to do it again, I remember I was sick to my stomach and I couldn’t breathe and I was shaking…” words trail off; he seems lost in the memory.

“You saw your friend being violated, Cisco, how you reacted is normal” Sara stepped closer, she wished she could offer some words of wisdom but what else could she say? Sorry wasn’t a strong enough word, there weren’t any words for this.

“I kept going back, though, at first to reassure everyone that Barry was still alive. it was pretty selfish of us really, we all knew what was happening and yet all we cared about was that he was
alive and that meant we could bring him home and as long as we had that hope then we had a way
fix to our guilt, our failure.” Eyes darken with haunted recollections “No one asked for details, I
couldn’t shout about the blood and the bruises or the way Barry cried late at night when Zoom
wasn’t around. They didn’t want the details; they didn’t want to help shoulder my burden.”

“I could have stopped, I could have stayed for only seconds when instead I stayed for hours, sitting
in the dark, unable to help, unable to comfort” the words kept caged behind a bitten tongue finally
pour out. “I saw things I know I shouldn’t have, it felt like I was trespassing on a secret, like seeing
it happen was somehow hurting Barry as well.” His gaze snapped back into focus, eyes alight with
anguish “I think I did to punish myself, ‘look, Cisco, look what you can’t stop!’” His tone was
laced with bitterness, “maybe that’s why I can’t face him now. I know he’ll take one good look at
me and he’ll see what I’ve seen and he’ll hate me for it.”

Sara used to have nightmares about Laurel witnessing her assault, she’d startle awake, bile already
burning its way up her throat. The thought of having someone actually see what she endured was
one of her worst nightmares, she couldn’t bear the thought of her sister having to live with the
burden; it’s why in the end she never told her. Sara can understand Cisco’s guilt, she can certainly
understand his need for self-punishment and she is sure that deep down he thought he might have
been doing the right thing, at first but he was right, it’s like he discovered a secret he wasn’t meant
to know.

She wouldn’t tell him that what he did was wrong, it was important to know that Barry was alive,
and he’d kept the details quiet. He’d suffered the knowledge of Barry’s true torment for months
and no one asked to shoulder that with him, no one wanted to really believe what Cisco had told
them. She couldn’t blame them for that, sometimes denial is the only way to protect yourself but
Cisco didn’t protect himself, he faced the truth, he sat alone in the dark, a whole world away and
suffered with Barry.

“You shouldn’t have punished yourself, Cisco, you don’t deserve it.”

“I thought I did” he confessed, “Only now I just feel worse.”

“I don’t know if what you did was right or wrong,” Sara continued, “but if you keep this a secret it
will always be there, it’ll be a physical block between you and Barry and you’re friendship might
never recover.”

“What if telling him ruins it? What if he gets so mad that he never forgives me?” Cisco starts
pacing, hands pulling at his long hair in frustration “I saw Barry in his darkest hours and I couldn’t
do a DAMN THING! I watched like some monster, I did nothing, I let it happen.”

“You didn’t let any of this happen” Sara didn’t flinch at his sudden outburst, she could see it
building and building, she’d merely been waiting for the release. After the tension dropped from
his shoulders she closed the space between. “You were not there Cisco; it wasn’t you who hurt
him.” Cupping his face between her hands she sweeps away a stray tear with the pad of her thumb
“You are not the monster of this story, I promise you that.”

“So I should basically suck it up and be a good friend and go visit Barry, right?”

Sara smiled warmly, letting her hands trail down to rest upon Cisco’s shoulders, “Right.”

***

Sara watches Cisco hesitate at the front door of the West house, hand hovering over the doorbell,
Sara nodding encouraging at his side and the setting sun warmed their backs with its last few dying
rays. Finally, he rang the bell; the sound of the chime seemed jarring in the silence of the twilight. Footsteps approached from the other side, a chilly evening breeze whispered through Sara’s hair, shivering she tightened her coat against the looming night’s icy fingers. A beat later and the door swung open, revealing Iris, warmth from a well-nurtured fire rushed out in greeting, luring them in out of the cold.

They exchanged small talk as she stepped aside to let them in, shutting out the darkness that had swept in to swallow the city. Iris offered them drinks as she took their coats and hung them on the rack by the door, in the distance Henry Allen watched, wordless, from his place by the fire. Sara could see the anguish in his eyes, it made it difficult to look, she had seen that same look in her own father’s eyes many times, despite the uneasy in the pit of her stomach she still waved hello. With a flutter of lashes, the anguish is hidden behind a forced smile, Henry gets to his feet and greets them; whatever hell he’d been momentarily lost in is forgotten.

“It’s good to see you Cisco.” Henry’s weary eyes do not glance Sara’s way, he strides right by her and sweeps Cisco into a hug.

She stifles the rage boiling in the pit of her stomach, Len and Sara have been allowed into this home and the only person who tries to make them welcomed is Iris. Henry and Joe have done nothing but push them to the outside, making them feel like invaders. Today they saved the city from Mardon, they saved the freaking world and yet they are dismissed, treated like they are worthless, nothing more than toys to be put away and forgotten. They risked their lives to save Barry, they are the ones he seeks for comfort, the ones he confides in, they are going to save Barry so they should damn well be treated with some respect.

Maybe it’s because Barry chooses them time and time again that have Henry and Joe acting so ill-mannered towards them, perhaps they are lost and worn out and they feel useless because their help is not enough, it’s not enough to save their son. Sara is sorry, she is, she didn’t ask for this, she never ventured out into the world to become a saviour but all roads have led her here and she is here, facing the same pain she’d lived through, to help Barry. They better suck it up and get over it because she is not going anywhere.

The house is stuffy, she longs for the crisp air of the fall night to caress her skin and sooth the heat pulsing within her like poison. Iris is leading them further into the house, up the stairs and around the corner and down the dim corridor to Barry’s bedroom. It’s cooler here, she can breathe again. Inside Barry’s bedroom, she finds herself staring at the past, pitched at the foot of the bed is a multi-coloured tent made of linen goods, she is ripped from her body, hurtled back years, seasons and a city.

Laurel is smiling at her, offering her imaginary tea in a pretty pink plastic cup that belongs to the tea-set their mother got them for Christmas a year ago. Sara accepts the cup with chubby fingers, Laurel smiles, toothy and happy and full of life. They are inside the tent their father got for her last birthday, its sunshine yellow and small enough to fit in the living room, blocking out the TV so that their father can’t see the sports and their mother will miss out on the weather for tomorrow.

They don’t care about any of that. Inside their tent, they have freshly baked chocolate chip cookies and imaginary tea, outside is a fantasy wildness, filled with beasts and a bad man hunting for lost treasure that Sara and Laurel guard with their lives. Inside, skin seemingly yellow, lips stained with chocolate, they are safe. Nothing in the world can get them as long as they are safe and warm inside their sunshine yellow tent. Eventually, they will outgrow this tent; it will rip and tear at the seams before being tossed away like it wasn’t two little girls safe haven.
Years later one of those girls is gone, lost, never to be seen like that little sunshine yellow tent.

Sara doesn’t realise she’s outside until her fingers find cold grass, there is no recollection of the last few minutes, all she can see is her sister’s smiling face, offering her more tea and giggling with innocence they both lost far too soon. She’s too tired to stand, her wrist throbs and her throat constricts around sobs desperately wanting to be freed into the silent night, to screech and wail like a banshee warning of impending death. She looks up at the velvety night sky, glittering with stars that have long ago died, and imagines that she opens her mouth and screams. Screams so loud that the world tremors beneath her, the sky will crack open and the stars will be cut from their string and plummet to earth in orbs of fire, the world will shutter and shake and everyone will know her pain.

Her scream will be thundering, piercing, it will be heard for miles and miles. It will reach ever corner and fill every room, in its wake the world will split apart and the sky will crumble to ash when it’s all over there’ll be nothing left. Emptiness, ash, broken bodies scattered around like doll parts, the world will end with a bang. She does not wail and the world does not turn to dust; a single tear falls silently onto a single blade of grass and the broken girl locks up her pain and stores it away for another day.

She can break another day.

“You okay, Sara?”

Sara jumps, startled by what she should have sensed moments ago. “Yeah, I just… just needed some air.” Len would see through her lies, he would shrug and ask her to come back inside, never pushing or asking for more when maybe just this once she’d be willing to share.

“It’s a nice night” he mused, strolling lazily over to where she had collapsed to the ground “why don’t take a sit and talk?”

He offered her his hand; she accepted without fuss and allowed him to lead her over to the porch steps. They sat side by side, staring up at the night sky with all its burnt out stars and secrets. She opened her mouth and spoke, telling Len about the sunshine yellow tent and the many fond memories she treasured of it. He listened letting her broken words fill the space between them. It felt like cracking open, her seams ripping and overflowing her anguish into the world, stories of two little girls and their sunshine yellow tent and pink tea-set float up into the night sky, to be lost amongst glittering stars.

XxX

Barry did not expect to see Cisco appear in the opening to this safe haven, clothes rumpled and looking like he needed to catch up on a month’s worth of sleep. He smiled shyly and offered an awkward wave, Barry felt himself smile in return. He hadn’t seen Cisco since he was taken to Star labs the other day and he knows he could have messaged him, reached out, but when he saw the way he acted around him he feared that Cisco didn’t want to see him, that maybe he was ashamed of him. He didn’t see shame in his friend’s eyes, he just saw genuine happiness, yet there was a flicker of something, a dark and troubling secret that shimmered below the surface.

“Hey, so, Sara kinda just freaked out and ran outside, I have no idea what happened,” he said hurriedly “Iris went to go check on her but…”

“I’ll go,” Len said, untangling himself from Barry, who’d been lounging on him, feeling safer than he had months.
Barry watched Len leave, feeling his stomach tighten in worry for Sara, he should go too, comfort her the way she had comforted him, be a pillar of strength for her to lean her. It was a nice thought, to step outside and go to Sara and ease her pain the way she did his. It was a nice to think he was strong enough to carry her weight as well as his. What support could he really offer, he was unravelled, loss strings hanging free and ripping and tearing in the breeze, like this he would be no help to Sara. Len knew her well, he wasn’t in ruins, he was strong enough to carry them both.

Helpless as always Barry turned his gaze back towards his friend, trying to force down the panic rising in his throat. What was he to say to Cisco? The usual way of greeting seemed so pointless now, ‘hello’ and ‘how are you’ were trivial, they were reserved for better days, for far off days. Words failing, he merely nodded for Cisco to come sit down in his mix-matched nest of pillows; he smiled, placing a brown paper bag full of junk food on the ground between them. It was there movie snack mix, Reese Peanut Butter Cups, Popcorn, Twizzlers, Gummy Bears, Twix; all that was missing was the movie collection.

Warmth flooded Barry’s chest, memories of better times filling his mind. What he wouldn’t give to be able to go back, to be able to relax on the couch, eat candy and binge watch movies until the break of dawn. It hurt to remember; looking back at those nights felt like watching an old time movie, greyed and torn around the edges, fizzing and fading until all he could see is the white screen where the movie should be. It shouldn’t feel like a thousand cuts to gaze through the looking glass and view his old life, but it does, it does. It aches like an open wound, all that was is haunting him, taunting him with the happiness he no longer has.

Blinking away tears, he locks the memories away so they cannot trouble him, at least for now. He returned Cisco’s smile, hiding the turmoil behind an honest “It’s good to see you.”

“It’s good to see you too, Barry.” Cisco’s eyes well with tears “I’m sorry I haven’t come to see you sooner… I wanted to… I just” he reaches out to collect a Twizzler from the spread of food between them. “I’ve just been…”

He looks down at the floor, Barry catches a glimmer of the dark secret, he wanted to ignore it, to say ‘it’s fine’ and then Cisco would start telling him about some new movie or TV series he’d been watching. He’d insist that Barry watch it and they’d eat junk food and tell jokes and stories and it would be fine. Only this isn’t old times, Barry doesn’t feel much like joking and there is a troublesome look in his friend’s eyes and whatever it has got Cisco stumbling for words.

“What’s wrong Cisco?” he asked, scared of the answer, terrified he’ll tell him that he is ashamed of him, that he wants his old friend back, the hero.

Instead, he lowers the twizzler, nervous hands playing absentmindedly with the half chewed candy and says, in a whisper full of shame “I vibed you… when Jay had you, I vibed you.”

Barry felt the earth collapse beneath him, his stomach bottoming out with it, heart pounded like a war drum in his ears and if he wasn’t paralysed by the shock of Cisco’s confession he would have run away. I vibed you translates to I saw what happened to you, I saw what Zoom did to you, I saw what you let Zoom do to you. God, he feels sick, he wants Cisco to leave, to take it back, tell him he didn’t see a damn thing. He can’t take back what he said, he can’t lie because Barry can tell he’s seen it all just by looking into his eyes. Silence stretches out between them, what can be said? This can’t be undone, Cisco had the golden ticket to Barry’s downfall, the front row seats to the horror show and he wouldn’t have been able to keep it to himself, he would have given everyone else a glimpse behind the curtain Barry had been trying desperately to seal shut.

“Get out” the words free themselves from Barry’s mouth in a snarl “Get out!” he repeats louder, blind to the look of hurt on his friend's stunned face “please just get out!”
“Barry, please” Cisco pleads “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean too, I felt so awful!”

“You felt awful?” he roared “You must feel really awfully after having to witness the things I went through! The things I endured for months on my own because no one came to rescue me. It must have been so awful to go to sleep at night safe in your own bed while I was left cold and abandoned in asylum never knowing when he’d come hurt me again. It must have been so awful for you to be the one who wasn’t being assaulted by the person you thought was a friend.” He started crying; words glass in his throat “It must have been so fucking awful for you Cisco!”

“Barry, I didn’t mean it like that” reaching a hand out to offer comfort had Barry pulling away violently, half falling out of the fort that had only moments ago felt like a safe heaven. “I didn’t mean to vibe you, I just needed to know you were alive, we all did. We had to have some kind of hope to hang on to. I didn’t always see…” he trails off, swallowing hard, tears staining his flushed cheeks. “I was hopeless to do anything but watch and I know I shouldn’t have but you were alone and scared and even though you didn’t know I was there, I thought I owed it to you to stay.” He sobbed brokenly “I failed you Barry and I saw this as a way to help you… or maybe it was just about punishing myself, I’m not sure anymore.”

“You saw him ruin me, Cisco” anger fades, ripped away as fast it came rushing in, replaced by bone-deep sorrow.

“Barry, you are not ruined” he forced a smile through the tears. “I may have seen some of what he put through you and I can’t imagine what it must have felt like but I believe in you, Barry. You’re so strong and we’ll get you up and running again. You are not ruined.”

Running, of course, like everyone else all Cisco wanted was the hero, the guy who could save lives. Nobody wanted the person beneath the scarlet suit and certainly, nobody wanted the mess he was now. A chill swept through him, sorrow becoming so heavy he thought he’d collapse beneath its weight. “I will never be the Flash again, Cisco.” He declared words fighting passed the tightening lump in his throat “That part of me has been ripped out and if you are here for the Flash only then you will be bitterly disappointed.”

“I am here for you, Barry, my best friend” Cisco comforted “I believe in you, not just the Flash but all of you and if you can’t ever be the person you were then that’s okay. I don’t care if you run faster than bullets or fight crime and Meta-Humans; I only care about you, Barry.”

The knot tightened in Barry’s throat tightens “I thought that’s what everyone wanted, to have the Flash back, I just…” he trailed off, a storm of emotions wrecking his body.

“We just want to help you” Cisco reached out again, waiting to see if Barry would pull away but when he didn’t he scooted closer, not enough to crowd him but enough to show support. “Getting you better is all that matters to us okay”

Barry nodded, feeling lost for words. The thought of Cisco having witnessed what Zoom put him through made him feel ill, he’d wanted so desperately to keep everyone safe from that part, because knowing was not seeing. When he did choose to open up he could tell them only what he was comfortable with sharing. He could keep the humiliation, the depravity a secret, he didn’t have to tell them how gave he in, gave up, surrendered to Zoom. There were things he never wanted to speak about, it was bad enough having them taunt his sleep, haunt his every waking hour. He could spare them from the darkest and wickedest things; it was too late for Cisco, though. He was tainted by the darkness just like he was and this kind of darkness digs its claws deep down into the bones, it’s the ever-present chill, the monster in his head, it’s a scar on his soul.

“I’m sorry you had to see it,” he says bitterly “I’m sorry you saw me break, I’m sorry I was so
weak… that I let Zoom do those things to me.”

“Barry, you don’t have to be sorry, ever” Cisco emphasised “and you were not weak, you fought hard Barry and you did what you needed to survive. So don’t think I will ever look at you as less or with shame, you are the strongest person I know Barry Allen.”

“You don’t hate me?” Barry asked, sounding so, so small.

“There’s no reason to hate you. If anything, you should hate me.”

“I don’t,” he shakes his head, blinded by tears “Cisco, I don’t hate you. I’m just not sure how I feel right now.”

“Well if you still want to be mad at me at you can” he smiled half-heartedly.

“No, no I’m mad at you;” he confessed, “I think I just need some time, I think I need a lot of time, to be honest.”

Cisco’s smile faltered “I understand, I shouldn’t have sprung this on you, I can see that I’ve hurt you and that was the last thing I wanted to do, I’m so sorry.”

“I know, Cisco” finally he took Cisco’s outstretched hand, giving it a gentle squeeze.

He could say a great many things to him right now. Tell him that he felt humiliated knowing that he had witnessed the depravity he’d been forced to endure. He could express how grateful he was that someone knew the exact pain he’d suffered; tell him that sometimes he felt his presence in the dark. He could hate him for watching, being unable to rescue him from the torture. He could confess that nearly every minute of every day he felt immensely sad. He could open his mouth and say ‘I cried myself to sleep every night, I still do’ words could free themselves and string together ‘I am covered in scars, look at my wrists, look at my body, my legs, feel the lump on my stomach. Feel the baby growing within me; hear how confused I am about it.’ He could scream ‘I fought so hard, I tried to escape” and he could whisper ‘I tried to kill myself.’

He could say all of this and more and Cisco would probably understand because he saw the blood and the bruises and heard the screams bounce off correct walls and revibrate until it felt like they would crush his skull. He’d understand better than anyone else, he knew what happened in the dark. To speak, to say all of these things would feel like being flayed alive and he was not ready for that agony to be set free into the world, it was best left unsaid inside his mind. A time would come, one day the sun would rise and he’d find the courage to open up, the strength to face the pain of his past, for now, it was dark outside.

Chapter End Notes

I just wanted to say another thank you to everyone reading this story. Chapter six will be up next Wednesday and as the rest haven't been written yet free feel to let me know if there are some things you'd like to see in the story. I have a clear idea where it's heading but I'm always happy to have more to add. Also, would anyone like to see a chapter dedicated to Barry's time spent with Zoom? It would obviously contain some very dark themes and I'm not sure how many of you'd be interested in such a chapter. I am an old hat at writing dark story lines so it will be no trouble for me if it's something enough be would like to read, just let me know in the comments below :)
Hurts Like Hell

Chapter Notes

Here is the long awaited chapter addressing the baby. I actually really enjoyed writing this chapter; I’d sit down every evening and spend a few hours or just a few minutes getting it just right. There is a lot happening with Barry and Sara in this chapter so be prepared for a heavy read. There is also a member of Team Arrow showing up as well.

As always enjoy and check out the end of the chapter for more notes.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

*How can I say this without breaking*

*How can I say this without taking over*

*How can I put it down into words*

*When it's almost too much for my soul alone*

**Fleurie - Hurts Like Hell**

Before the world comes shifting into perspective, before everything falls into place Barry drifts in the beautiful limbo between sleep and the waking world. It’s in these few blissful moments that he forgets. Forgets the lonely days trapped wandering aimlessly through cobwebbed riddled hallways, his shadow and echo of footsteps on worn out floors the only company to be found. They are no memories of fingernails clawing into soft flesh, of teeth sinking into delicate skin and hungrily drawing blood. It’s peaceful without the sound of desperate cries and the blood stained sheets and aching wrists that are bound too tight to a rusted metal headboard that is attached to a rickety bed that rattles like a train when Zoom pins Barry to the ruined mattress. It’s a small window of bliss that slips from his fingers rapidly, chased away by morning sunlight filtering in to announce a brand new day.

It’d be heaven to stay in that moment forever. There is no forgetting. Not when eyes flutter open and find a scarred wrist tucked beside his face, ghastly thick red lines peeking out beneath the sleeves of his shirt. There are only the reminders and they come in many forms. Scars left from nails that dug too deep, burn marks in the most unfortunate places from the cattle prod, cuts from a wickedly sharp knife criss-cross his inner thighs, left behind in a sick devotion of love. Hidden beneath layers of clothing are so many horrible moments, days, months. There are constellations of stories etched into his skin, all waiting to be told, released into the world and set free like a bird from a cage.

All stories are born if you tell them, sharing them gives them life and life gives them power and Barry isn’t ready for them to be more than memories. Setting them free will be to relieve them, he isn’t strong enough for that. Time is on his side, the scars and their harrowing stories are not going anywhere, they are the iron in his blood, the air in his lungs and the nightmares in his head. They
can wait for a rainy day, a cold Tuesday or a lazy Sunday morning, they can wait.

The life growing within him cannot. It has a due date, it grows bigger every day; it will be seen even through the thickest layers. It is alive; it’s coming into this world whether or not he speaks of it. It’s something that has been swept under the rug, the only person who has had anything to do with it is Caitlin and Len, no one else has even whispered about it. Perhaps it’s not a bad thing, Barry can pretend they don’t know, it’s his secret, they won’t judge or stare as long as they don’t know. They do know, though, it’s a ticking time bomb and one day they will ask him, one day he’ll have to open his mouth and tell them he doesn’t hate it like he did, like maybe he should. They won’t understand they’ll just see what Zoom did to him, forced on him and they will think he doesn’t really mean it when he says ‘I think I might want to keep it’.

When Barry strips himself of his clothing, his armour and submerges in a tube full of warm water and looks down with hands splayed over the ever so slightly bulging flesh he doesn’t see the monster he used to imagine. He see’s innocence, light, a bright future, a chance to be everything Zoom never wanted. There is hope blossoming to life within him and after all the pain and darkness it is amazing to look down at his damaged body and see something beautiful amongst the chaos.

Each day as he slips into the warm water, eyes and hands wondering to his stomach, he has a moment of clarity, a pivotal moment trickling into something else, into a heart beating with something that isn’t yet love but if nurtured could be. Each day there is a small, blink and you’ll miss it moment where Barry embraces the beauty of what this child could bring. Over time it will become a fire burning bright, guiding a lost traveller home after being lost in the deepest, darkest woods.

XxX

Star City station is bustling when Sara steps out onto the platform. People rush by, shoving and running to get their destinations. Sara wants to turn back around and get back on the train that has just closed its doors, trundling away to the next city, leaving Sara behind. There would be another train eventually, she could grab a coffee and maybe a book or some trashy magazine and find a quiet spot to wait for it. She could have stayed in bed this morning, refused the coffee Len had presented her as peace offering and rolled back into blissful slumber. She didn’t though, she accepted the coffee and untangled herself from the sheets and trudged out to the bathroom to shower away the fog in her brain, the nerves in her gut.

Being here is harder than she imagined, it’s only the train station and yet she can feel the absence of her sister. It’s only going to get worse when she looks her father in the eyes; it’s going to be a knife to the heart when she finally lays flowers at her sister’s grave. It hurts. It hurts like hell and she is still standing on the platform and there are people rushing by like nothing terrible has happened. Among the crowd she meets blue eyes as haunted and broken as her own, these eyes she could find among a crowd of thousands.

“Oliver” her feet carry her forward, there is no hesitation when she throws herself into his arms. She hasn’t been able to feel the comfort of an embrace in far too long. “I’ve missed you.”

“I’ve missed you too,” he says into her ear, hugging her tighter.

Moments later they break apart, the platform has grown silent; the early morning rush whisked away too far off places. She took the five o’clock train out of the city so she could return by tonight. Return only to leave again, vanishing into the darkness in search of a place to wait out the winter. Sara feels uneasy about the decision to take Barry away. She understands his need to run; it’s the same defence mechanism as her own, run, run, run away and all the problems will
disappear. Run away and away will be better, the past couldn’t hurt him if he just keep running.

There is no outrunning the monsters that haunt him, though. The demons that linger in the shadows and hide under the bed at night will follow. Run and they will give chase. There might be a day or so that is wonderful, new people to talk to and towering woods or a beach stretching on for eternity to get lost in, to hide in. The woods will grow dark, shadows looming like beasts torn from nightmares, once blue water churning black, all her demons standing out in the choppy waves, calling him back home.

They can run all night and day but eventually Barry will have to come to understand that he’ll never be able to outrun his pain. He has to let it consume him; it’s the only way he’ll ever be able to stop running. It’s why Sara is willing, despite her fears and concerns, to go through with this. Maybe it will be the only way for Barry to heal, maybe it will be awful and harmful but doing nothing is not an option. Saying no and forcing him to stay in the place he feels imprisoned is the worst thing they could do. He’s been imprisoned long enough.

She’ll shelf her doubts, pack her bags and do this for Barry and Len. They will go somewhere away from the bustling city, somewhere that is peaceful, safe, somewhere where they can all heal. That’s another reason she is agreeing to this, she wants to run too. Not from her past, not from Laurel’s death, she is standing in Star City so she can finally come to terms with that. She wants to run because it’s what she’s good at because running away helps in a roundabout way. The clarity of a cabin nestled in the woods or amongst the sand of the beach is something she desperately needs right now. Solace has always been found in the quiet lonely corners of the world.

“Hey, Ollie” they are outside now, she hadn’t been paying attention to her surroundings, trusting to follow Oliver out into the dark underground car park of the station. She could let her guard down around him; if a threat was at large he’d sense it just as fast as she could. All she wanted to be right now was Sara Lance, the everyday average woman going to grab some coffee with a friend. “Remember when we were in high school and we all went to stay at that beautiful lodge by the lake in the summer?”

“Yeah, of course,” he said with a smile, opening the car door for her. “It was you, me, Laurel and Tommy.” Darkness flickered in his eyes, Sara felt the same darkness tear at her heart. “It was one of the best times of my life. I think we broke a window, though.”

“You broke the window” she points a freshly manicured nail at him, Lisa had painted them an autumn red last night, while Len watched with an amused grin from his place on the sofa. “Throwing a football at the invisible dog your drug addled brain conjured up.”

“Hey, I hold you responsible, you put the pot in the brownies without telling anyone” he teased, darkness lifting from his eyes. “Laurel was so mad.”

“She was livid” Sara corrected “but high Laurel was very adorable.”

“It was a really good time” Oliver smiled fondly “though as the newly appointed mayor, I probably shouldn’t endorse the use of illegal drugs.”

“It really was” she agreed “and I won’t tell” she added, getting into the car before time could get away from them.

Years ago when they went to Lakeview for a long weekend in summer it felt like they had all the time in the wold. They’d been carefree that summer, young and wild and filled with reckless abandon. They had a lavish lodge all to themselves, a crystal blue lake shimmering in golden sunlight to swim in and long summer days to delight in. Remembering felt like watching an old
home movie, she could see the projector in her mind casting the warm summer days onto a white screen, edges burnt and frayed by time. These memories belonged to another Sara, the Sara who would one day board the Gambit and be swept away by a wicked sea. The memories may feel out of reach but the joy, the sense of freedom swirled within, how she felt that weekend had stood the test of time.

It would be wonderful to feel that again, to spin around in the sun, to dive into the lake and get lost in the beauty of the woods, to take a deep breath of fresh air that taste like campfires. It would be wonderful to feel that sense of freedom again, to be unburdened like the girl who bathed in the sun with her sister by her side, drinking cocktails that tasted like summer fun.

“What was the name of that place again?” Oliver asked once he was buckled in behind the wheel.

“What was the name of that place again?” Oliver asked once he was buckled in behind the wheel.

The lodge would be locked up, the surrounding woods void of laughing friends and music blaring from expensive speakers. The lake would be still, the only ripple caused by the sly breeze whispering through the trees that would be shedding their leaves. The ground would be covered in dying leaves, vibrant reds, burnt oranges and musted yellows slowly turning black before vanishing into the earth completely. The land would fall into darkness, water freezing over with the first touch of winter’s icy fingers. The lodge would stand still, empty and silent until spring thawed the lake, bringing life back to the woods around it. That was months away, for now, it would be the perfect place to hide away.

Not the same lodge, its walls would echo with the wild and untroubled ghosts of her teenage years. Not too far away was a small cabin hidden amongst towering oak trees. Sara remembers it even after all these years, how could she not, it was like something found in a fairy tale. She couldn’t picture it exactly, the roof might have been green but she sees brown, it had a chimney but did it have a front porch? It’s faded in her memory like an old photograph and yet if she were to see it again she would recognise it instantly.

It would be empty just like the lodge, forgotten until the spring. It would be the perfect place to hide away from the rest of the world. They’d light the fire, lock the doors and the windows and stay hidden, stay safe inside its walls. It would create the perfect delusion of security; Sara knows very well that locked windows and doors do not keep out monsters, especially if they are in your head. She’s not afraid of her inner demons, she doesn’t need thick stone walls and a roaring fire to chase the shadows away, she has learnt to fight them.

To accept them.

Barry hasn’t, he needs time to heal before he can face the pain of his past. Healing doesn’t come easy, Barry has endured enough to last a thousand lifetimes, he’s been hurt in ways Sara can’t even being to fathom. He needs a safe place in a quiet corner of the world to retreat too. A place that won’t echo with his past, taunting him with all he used to be, a place where he can come undone without fear of hurting those around him. In the end, it’s the only way to heal, to find the strength to move on. It will hurt like hell, Sara knows this well, he’ll splinter and break open, rage and cry and come undone in the ugliest and painful way. After that, he’ll start piecing himself back together, bit by bit, day by day and one day it won’t hurt so much.

That time is long off. Sara was a mess for months and months after Nyssa found, rescued her. It takes time, it takes everything. If the assault is the fall then the aftermath is the landing. Falling had been terrifying and she screamed and begged to be saved. It’s painful; there are tears and trembling hands desperately searching for something sold to wrap her hands around just so the falling could stop. Falling isn’t the problem; it was only when she hit the ground that caused her all
the grief.

And hit the ground she did, skin splintering but not breaking, broken bones held together by a thousand tiny shards of glass. Every day after Sara tried to reassemble herself, she tried and tried and failed. The broken pieces wouldn’t slot seamlessly back into place. The problem is sometimes you have to break to be able to heal. Nyssa told her this, told her to surrender to her pain, let it consume her, let it devour and break the glass pieces free so they could be placed back correctly. Face it and overcome it. Sara didn’t believe Nyssa when she told her this, surely hurting herself more wouldn’t help her heal. Shattering herself to pieces wasn’t going to make the nightmares stop or the pain go away or the shame she felt disappear.

In the end, she did shatter, not all at once, but slowly over weeks and months and each time she broke Nyssa was there to help put herself together again. It took almost two years, but in the end, she was better, the nightmares had stopped, the shame and pain washed away and on the other side was a girl reborn. Putting Barry through the same kind of healing process she endured might not work, she did, after all, join the league of assassins, but she stood by what Nyssa taught her. She’s going to break herself apart soon, she’ll step up to Laurel’s grave and let the hurt and the anger and the blame consume her, she’ll cry and rage and when she has finished she’ll feel a little better. That’s not to say she’ll ever not miss her sister because she will, God she’ll miss her every day for the rest of life. She’ll just a feel a little lighter, her grief is weighing her down and if she wants to be of any use to Barry then she needs to do this.

“Sara, are you okay?”

Oliver’s voice snaps her out of her thoughts, blinking away the moisture she didn’t realise had formed in her eyes she turned to face him, only now realising they were at their destination. “Sorry, Ollie, I went tumbling down the rabbit hole for a bit there.”

“You were silent the whole drive here” he explained, brows creasing “Do you want to talk about it?”

Yes, she wanted to weep for Laurel, she wanted to be angry with him for letting her join the team, she wanted to know what it felt like to kill Darhk, was it satisfying? Did he suffer like he deserved to suffer? Was he sorry for not killing him sooner? Laurel would still be alive if he had. She shakes these thoughts from her mind, she does not blame Oliver, he didn’t kill Laurel, Darhk killed her. Darhk killed her big sister, her favourite person in the entire world, the best friend who taught her how to tie her shoelaces and always made the best mac and cheese. He took Laurel from her and she was never coming back. Her seams tear, eyes swelling with tears that have only been shed within the confines of her shower. She can let the pain and the rage and the hurt burst free into the world, she can fall here because Oliver will be there to catch her.

XxX

When Barry was fourteen he collapsed at school, knocked to the ground by a monstrous pain in his stomach. People laughed and pointed while he writhed in agony on the gymnasium floor. Iris pushed her way through the growing snickering crowd and helped him to his feet before carting him to the nurse’s office with the help of their lazy gym coach. It hurt, it felt like dying and at the time he was sure he was going to die because something that hurt this bad surely was life ending. Of course, he didn’t die. Hours later spent in the emergency of Central City General Hospital he wished he did die, well in the dramatic way teens always wish they’d died after being faced with something mortifying.

Barry Allen, at age fourteen, was told he was a carrier. At first, he felt like he’d been told he had a fatal illness, wasn’t he weird enough without being able to have a child, to actually be able to get
pregnant and get stomach cramps and oh God periods. It didn’t help that Barry was a late bloomer, most boys find out they are carriers at age twelve or thirteen, he just had to be the odd duck out. Joe took this situation in his stride; he loved Barry even though he was so very different than all the other boys. Joe was wonderful, he treated him the same way he treated Iris the first time she got her period. When they were discharged from the hospital, Barry’s pains numbed by advel and hands grasping pamphlets filled with endless information on carriers, they headed to the wharf and Joe treated them to ice cream.

That night Barry decided he didn’t want to be different, not like this, so a day later Joe took him to a specialist in male pregnancies and got him the pill. Barry pushed that horrible day deep into his mind; he took his medication every morning and never looked back. Years later he is struck by lightning and everything changes. His running around the city late at night, he’s been The Flash for nearly two months and the novelty of being a hero, the excitement of running faster than a bullet hasn’t worn off yet.

He’s running because he can, because it’s fun and exhilarating then he’s not running, he’s crashing to the ground and crying out as pain sears in his abdomen. The ally collapses around him, replaced by laughing faces, pointing fingers and a dirty gymnasium floor. He can’t stay here, he has to get up and run even though it hurts like hell. Trembling legs get him to his feet, the past ripples away, he is alone in the ally again, struggling for breath and grasping his stomach in a desperate attempt to stop that monstrous pain.

He doesn’t remember making his way to Caitlin’s apartment; he just knows that one moment he is in the dimly lit alley and the next he is pounding at Caitlin’s door. When she swings the door open his legs buckle, he collapses to the floor in a miserable heap. Caitlin frantically checks him for injuries, the pain is so immense he can barely get words out around the groans; somehow he strings together a sentence that clarifies the situation. Caitlin heaves and struggles and eventually gets him into her bed, dark brown Bambi eyes shadowed in sympathy.

“I am sorry, Barry there isn’t anything I can,” she said, pressing a hot water bottle against his aching stomach. “Painkillers won’t work with your metabolism and obviously the pill you’ve been taking is useless now.” She sat down next to him, worrying her lip between her teeth. “Why didn’t I think of this sooner? I should have realised when alcohol didn’t affect you that of course, your pill would stop working.”

Barry didn’t stop to think that Caitlin would obviously already know about this secret, he’d been at Star Labs in a coma for nine months; surely it would have come up. “Oh my God did I get my period when I was in the coma?” He was mortified at the thought, he could feel the heat of embarrassment colour his cheeks.

“No, your body was mostly shut down” she explained “When we were handed your hospital records we learnt that you had your first period at fourteen and Joe said after that he took you to get the pill and you never spoke of it again. I wanted to bring it up with you on several occasions but Doctor Wells told me to let you come to me in your time. Why didn’t you come to me sooner? I might possibly be able to make you something strong enough to work but it’s going to take some time.”

Barry looked away, fiddling with the hot water bottle that was starting to ease the pain. “I was ashamed.”

“Barry, we care about you, it doesn’t bother us that you’re different” she reassured “also have you forgotten that we are scientists? Male pregnancy is kinda exciting to us.”

He lifted his gaze to meet her eyes; they shine with the kind of acceptance he had only ever
received from Iris and Joe. “I’m sorry. I never really did handle being a carrier well. When I woke up I just took my pills and pretended that everything was normal.”

“Barry, you are the man who survived being struck by lightning that gave you superpowers, you are not normal” this was said with a heartfelt smile. “I mean that in the best way possible, just to clarify.”

“I know and thank you.” He was growing weary, pain lulling him to sleep “We’ll be able to figure this out right? I can’t be The Flash and save people while my stomach feels like it’s splitting open.”

“We will figure this out” she promised “Right now; you just get some rest, okay?”

It took three months; Barry would become bed ridden for the first three days, unable to do little more than lie on the couch writhing in pain and hate every second of it. Caitlin came through in the end; with the help of Doctor Wells, she crafted an injection that suppressed his monthly cycle. Every two weeks he’d have Caitlin administer the shot then he could go on his way, run about the city and save lives and stop meta-humans. In the end, he’d grown to accept this difference; his friends never once judged him or made a mockery of him, they accepted and love him as Barry Allen, The Flash, and the fact that he could get pregnant made him all the more special.

It also made the team theorises that he could one day pass down his speed gene to his child, they weren’t certain but it was a possibility. At the time Barry shrugged it off, he wasn’t in any hurry to be having a child and with Meta-Humans running rampant and The Reserves Flash showing up he never got the time to think about it. Now here he was, three months pregnant and wondering would the baby inherit Zoom’s speed? Would it have his eyes, his wicked grin and cruel heart? He refused to believe that, it may bare physical resemblances but he knows deep down in his heart that the goodness in him, in the people around him, will be enough to make it good.

In five months they’ll have answered the answers to their questions.

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Star Labs still feels strange, it used to feel like a second home, now it just feels foreign. Another reminder that he no longer fits into the places he used to fit. The walls have grown big, the lights brighter; the place he used to stand might as well be coated in cobwebs, where his suit once stood proudly is now empty darkness. Darkness has hollowed out the world around him, it gathers around him like a storm, hungrily reaching out towards those who step too close.

When he and Len walked into the cortex he heard laughter, a girlish squeal of delight echoing down the corridor. Chatter and banter followed in its wake, for a moment, for a heartbeat, it was like old times. He was coming in to say good morning or returning from a run and Cisco and Caitlin’s playful chitchat and laughter would bounce down the hallway to him, bringing a smile to his face. He’d step into the cortex and immediately be brought into the joke or told the funny story, he’d laugh or banter back and the room would fill with warmth because three very lonely people finally found a home. Home, what did that word mean anymore? What did home feel like? He can’t remember.

Today when he entered the cortex, steps hesitate and body stiff, the laughter dies from the room, gone, burst like air from a balloon. Jesse, whose face was flushed from giggling, at what he’ll never know, practically flung herself towards her father. Eyes wide and skin turning ashen, she looked afraid of him or did she see everything Zoom had done to him, everything he could have just as easily done to her. Doctor Wells wrapped her into his arms, safe, she was safe. Zoom didn’t break and bleed and fuck her like he did Barry. For a moment he was jealous, she’d escaped his wrath, his sick desires, she got to live without reminders while Barry had to hide the scars that were
deeply carved into his skin.

The thought slips away, ripped from his mind like a dying leaf caught in the wind is torn from its branch. He doesn’t wish his pain on anyone, though he can see how the darkness that swirls around him reaches out and poisons those around him. The Cortex might as well be a graveyard now, for there is now no joy to be found on the faces before him. He didn’t want to come here, he wants to leave, he wants to take Len’s hand and run back to the car, he wants to get behind the wheel and speed away to somewhere else, *anywhere else*. It’s not time, they will leave, it just has to wait a little longer, a little longer feels a lot like an eternity.

Back at the house, Iris will be sitting down in the kitchen with Joe and his father. She’ll sit poised at the head of the table, confident and ready for a battle. Joe will be on her left and his dad on her right, Joe will say no first, cutting Iris off before she can stress the importance of this decision. Henry will be silent, thoughtful; Barry doesn’t know if he’ll say yes or no, it’s sad how he doesn’t really know his father at all, not the way he knows Joe or Iris. He can imagine it won’t go well, there would be yelling and a heavy wooden chair scraping across timber floors when someone inevitable stormed away in defeat. Iris was fighting his battle for him because he couldn’t handle the confrontation, not like this, jumping at shadows and sleep deprived from nightmares.

The plan was originally for Len to take him to Lisa’s while Iris talked to his dads, only he received a message from Caitlin, asking if he could come in so she could do another ultrasound. Apparently after the other day she ordered a proper machine, to get better quality images was what she told him. So here he was, Len at his side and four pairs of eyes boring holes into him. Caitlin finally walked over to him, the rest of the room seemed to unfreeze after that, Jesse looked away awkwardly and Harrison Wells looked away out of guilt. Cisco followed Caitlin over, stopping beside her, Barry may not be angry with Cisco for vibing him, they’d parted on good terms last night, but there was still an uneasiness. It wasn’t coming from Cisco; he greeted Barry with a warm smile and asked for a hug, which Barry granted him.

Caitlin too embraced him, holding a little tight and a little too long, when he stepped back the awkwardness had waned, it was just them, the three them out to save the city and occasionally the world. They were still standing here, Cisco had watched him fall apart and he still loved him. Caitlin had tended his wounds on the night he returned and she still looked at him with such warmth and pride. Star Labs may feel foreign but Cisco and Caitlin still feel like safety, happiness and brighter days.

It’s why he decides to tell them of his plans; they deserve to know he is leaving; it would terrify them if he disappeared again. That can wait, right now Caitlin is ushering him into the med bay where her shiny new ultrasound machine is waiting. Feeling a sudden emptiness at his side he turns around to find Len waiting outside the door, watching silently. Barry reaches out a hand and tells him to come in; Len takes it, corner of his mouth twisting into a smile. What he feels for Len is new, unexpected, unexplored and utterly terrifying. He wants to give chase to these feelings, surrender to the quickening speed of his heartbeat and the butterflies in his stomach. He will dive in deep in the future, discovering all there is to find, when he is capable of swimming.

For now, he clasps Len’s hand firmly in his own and steps towards the bed.

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Barry is fourteen and half weeks pregnant. He’s in the second trimester. In six months he’s going to have a baby, he’s going to have Zoom’s baby. When the pregnancy test Zoom forced him to take turned up positive he felt he just discovered cancerous tumour growing inside of him, sucking the life from him and making him ill. He’d wanted to be rid of it, to purge his body of the vile, evil
thing spawning in his abdomen. He would have drunk a thousand bottles of poison just to escape it. There had been no escape, no terminating the pregnancy; Zoom would kill everyone he ever loved if harm came to the unborn child. His hate for it had been all consuming, it grew and feasted like a wound until one day he just didn’t have the strength, the seemingly endless rage dwindled to a dying flame. Hating it was pointless in the end; he’d have this child and raise it with his captor because he was sure they’d never see the sight of freedom.

He had escaped though and that changed everything. He owned his body again and it would feel great if his skin wasn’t scattered with scars left by Zoom if the skin on his stomach did stretch to accommodate the life within him. There’d be no forgetting who’d marked his body, who claimed and owned it. He could cleanse himself of the baby now, no one would hold him against him, they’d probably prefer that he did. Then they wouldn’t have to one day look into eyes that would remind them of the monster that hurt their hero. It would make life easier to just remove every last shred of Zoom from existence, but Barry could not do that, not when there was a chance that those eyes could be hazel and full of light.

When Barry had sunk into the hot bath a week ago, warmth working its way into his aching muscles, he couldn’t help his gaze from wandering to the pale white stretched skin of stomach. He had no control over the soap sodded fingers that caressed the damp skin, sending shocks pulsing through his fingertips. It felt like lightening, like the thrill of the speed force and Barry let out a broken sob. He had not felt that thrill in such a long time. Crack, zap and a whole new window opened in his mind, revealing a beautiful baby with pink chubby cheeks and hazel eyes that danced with lightning. Zoom had sought to create a monster but Barry could make a hero.

“I’m very impressed that you can read those things,” Cisco said from his place at the console desk, slurping away on his orange soda “It looked like a blob, no offence, of course, Barry.”

“None taken, Cisco” Barry replied from his place in the med bay. Caitlin was taking blood to run tests for what she called the ‘quad screen’ it was standard to test for Down syndrome, trisomy 18 and neural-tube defects at week fourteen. Barry had only nodded, allowing her to proceed. It never crossed his mind to think about what could go wrong in a pregnancy. He’d prayed for a miscarriage in the first few weeks but after a while, he feared what Zoom would do if he lost the baby so he stopped praying. He doesn’t want to lose the baby now or for it to have something horribly wrong with it, he wants it to be healthy.

“Are you okay, Barry?” Caitlin asked voice low so Cisco and Len who were in the cortex couldn’t hear. She’d asked them both to leave a moment ago, Barry wasn’t sure why but he unlaced his fingers from Len’s and let them walk out the door Caitlin has just moved to close. “I mean that as a friend, not your doctor, are you okay?

“I am okay at the moment” he answered honestly. “I mean, I’m trying to be, I don’t want to feel sad all the time.”

“Of course not, Barry” Caitlin took his hand. “I just want to make sure you are okay with this?” She gestured to his stomach. “I wanted to talk to you more about it the other day, I just felt it was too soon and it’s probably still too soon but we only have a small window of opportunity here so I am asking…” she worried her bottom lip between her teeth “I’m asking if you want an abortion.”

Barry was taken aback, a few weeks ago he would have said yes, he would have said get it out of me, please. Now he feels different and he knows he’s only been home for half a week and that is not enough time to have healed and he hasn’t, God he hasn’t. He is splintered into a thousand pieces, he jumps at shadows, cries rivers, wakes screaming in the night and see’s Zoom’s face, feels his touch late at night. He is shattered, nothing has been fixed, enough time hasn’t passed for
that. Most of the time he is immensely sad, scared and haunted and then sometimes, for a couple of precious moments he is okay, he isn’t quite as sad. In-between feeling all of these conflicting things he has found one solid thing to hold on to his growing affection for the baby.

“I don’t want that” he replied “I know it might seem strange but I can’t… I can’t abort it. It may be part of Zoom but it’s part of me too. I must seem crazy” he shook his head, turning away from Caitlin, worried he’ll find disgust in her eyes.

“I don’t think you’re crazy,” she soothed. “I only offered because I wanted you to have the option. It’s your body, we won’t do anything you’re not comfortable with or force you to do things against your will.”

Barry looked back, blinking away tears. “It won’t be like Zoom, will it?” He finds himself asking. He needs to hear someone else say it, to prove that he is making the right choose. Jumbled emotions might lead him astray; he has a desperate need for something good to come from this. God, that sounds insane, to need something good to come from months of torture? He just wants to know it will be okay, that if he has this baby it will be good, that it will do well in the world, regardless of whether or not he is in its life. “Please tell me I am not making a huge mistake, that I am not just completely fucked up and imagine I can have a child that will be nothing like Zoom.”

“Barry Allen you have such a good heart” Caitlin, swept away a tear with a painted fingertip “you are so full of light and joy and love and Jay… Zoom was ruined by his hatred, his greed and Harry told us who he really was, once Cisco learnt his true name. Hunter Zolomon wasn’t born a monster, no one is born a monster, the world turned him into one and I guess what I am trying to say is that there is so much good inside of you that it would outweigh Zoom’s hate any day.” She squeezed his hand in gentle reassurance. “Your child will have you, Barry and I know right now you may not feel it but there is so much light still left in you and without a doubt that light will be passed to your baby.”

“Thank you Cait” he sniffled. “I still don’t know if I want to raise it but I want to give it a chance, it deserves that.”

“That’s understandable” she replied “Do you want me to look into adoption agencies for you? So you have that option when the time comes and so you can focus on getting better.”

“That’d be great, thank you.”

“It’s no problem” she smiled, giving his hand one last squeeze. “Since you are keeping the baby I have some information you might need, do you think you’re up for some light home reading?”

“Yeah, sure” he nodded. Having something to focus on would be great, anything would be better than sitting around lost in his misery.

“Excellent” Caitlin stepped away to retrieve a folder she had placed on the nightstand. “In here is all the information you will need, what to eat, body changes, mood changes, I got it all covered.”

“Thanks” he took the folder from her, its weight in his hands made a trickle of fear race down his spine. This was happening; he was going to have a baby. He was going to have the baby that was forced into him by the wickedest man he’d ever known and somehow today he was okay with that. When he looked at the grainy image on the screen, when he heard its heartbeat racing away he didn’t envision a monster, he envisioned a squealing baby with dark hair and hazel eyes that flashed with lightning.

XxX
Oliver and Sara have been sitting in the loft for the past half hour. After her breakdown in the car, Oliver took her up to the apartment and made her a cup of tea. She would have preferred something stronger; Whisky or Bourbon would have hit the spot. She wiped away her tears and accepted the tea, lacing trembling fingers around the warm mug. They sat in silence, apart from Sara’s occasionally sniffles, waiting for the clock to strike twelve so she can go meet her father at her sister's grave. The mere thought had fresh tears falling down her flushed cheeks, she rubbed them away and chased down the lump in her throat with Earl Grey tea.

The clock on the wall to her left ticked away, in half an hours’ time she would lay flowers down on her sister's grave, she’d say something sweet and a little funny just to see her dad laugh then she’d break apart all over again. Right now she wanted to the heartache to stop, she wanted to open her eyes and find Laurel striding in through the door, grinning widely because she’d just won a big case. She closes her eyes, counts to ten and when she opens them the doors are sealed firmly shut and the entrance empty. No Laurel, no more Laurel ever again.

She wants the pain to stop. Oliver must see her growing agitated, he takes her hand into his own and squeezes. It feels like dropping an anchor. Her lungs pull in a deep breath of air and when it rushes out she feels calmer, she feels strong again; strong enough to carry on, at least for a while, for today.

“Thank you, Ollie.”

“For what?” he asked, completely unaware how comforting his presence was to her.

“For being here, for the tea,” she smiled half-heartedly “for just being you.”

“You don’t have to thank me, Sara” he replied, “I will be here for you.”

“I know” she took another mouthful of tea “I just wanted to thank you all the same. Us big heroes don’t often get a thanks.”

“No we don’t” he agreed. “I’ll make sure they know to thank Laurel and I’ll do my best to make sure she is remembered for the hero she was.”

Sara felt the tears again, she blinked them away hurriedly, she’d cried in front of Oliver enough today. “Thank you” she repeated. “She’s always on my mind, you know? I walked into Barry’s room the other day and he had a blanket fort and I was suddenly a kid again, sitting in Laurel’s yellow tent drinking imaginary tea.” She laughed, remembering those playful days fondly this time. “We loved that silly tent so much.”

“It’s important to remember the good times,” he said soothingly. “I wasn’t aware you’d crossed paths with Barry, though, when did you meet him?”

Sara lifted her gaze to meet Oliver’s questioning blue eyes. Last night was the first time she’d spoken to him since arriving back in two thousand and sixteen and in her distress, she’d completely forgotten to mention Barry or Len and their new mission. Did Oliver even know that Zoom took Barry? The teams had worked together before; surely they would have phoned Oliver to tell him right? What could Oliver have done, though? He was busy defending his own city, he’d been at war and Team Flash had been falling apart in the absence of their hero, in the wake of their failure.

“You don’t know?” she asked, words hesitantly falling from her tongue “about what happened to Barry?” Was it her job to tell Oliver? If Team Flash didn’t call him in then maybe they didn’t want him to know, maybe they were ashamed, maybe they didn’t call because at the end of the day Oliver was just a man and even he would have been unable to reach Barry. Oliver had been had at
war with Darhk, knowing Barry was missing would have been a distraction. They’d most likely decided that it was the best decision to not tell Oliver and his team. That brings her back to her question, was it her place to tell him? Looking into eyes blown wide with worry she made her choice. She’d tell him that Zoom had taken him that he’d been gone months and he’d been hurt, she wouldn’t go into details; Barry didn’t deserve to have his trauma disclosed to everyone.

“Know what?” his brow furrowed in concern, there was even a slight tremor to his words “What happened to Barry, Sara?”

“Ollie” she breathed, closing her eyes so he didn’t have to see the devastation of her words. She told him everything, how he lost his speed, about Zoom taking him to Earth two and how he escaped four months later. She opened her eyes to find Oliver red with rage, his eyes revealing all the horrible ways he wanted to make Zoom pay. She’d given Oliver the outline, Barry was taken but now he was home. Oliver hadn’t yet moved passed his rage to the sick realisation that four months is a long time to have someone, four months is a long time to hurt someone. She wouldn’t tell him about the torture and the rapes, the words wouldn’t leave her mouth, it felt too much like revealing her own past and that was something she’d never divulge to Oliver.

It wasn’t her place to tell him either. Instead, when he asked if he was okay she said ‘no, no he’s not Ollie, he was hurt and he’s going to need a lot of time to heal.’ Oliver’s imagination must have gone wild; he went from red to ashen in seconds, ocean blue eyes swimming with tears. Calmly he blinked them away and regained control of his emotions, swallowing hard he asked how she knew this, quickly she filled in the blanks she’d left, explaining that Rip Hunter had informed Len and herself that it was their job to help Barry get through this. When she finished the room fell back into silence, the only sound coming from the tick-tock of the clock.

“I should go see him” Oliver announced. “I have to go see him. They should have told me he’d been taken I could have done something.”

Sara flinched at the pain in Oliver’s voice, his eyes wild once more, glistening with a thousand terrible thoughts. “He needs time Ollie” Sara reached for him, placing a soothing hand on his tense shoulder. “He’s only been home a few days, I don’t think it’s a good idea to come visit just yet.”

“Why didn’t they tell me, though? I could have done something!”

He looked so desperate to believe that he could have saved Barry, like all it would have taken, was for him to rush to Central City on his bike and shoot a few arrows into some bad guys. Oliver and all his archery and fighting skills were not enough to reach across to another world and save Barry. Like Team Flash, he was going to have to live with the fact he couldn’t have rescued him, he was going to have to live with that pain and he didn’t even know the half of what Barry had been through.

The truth would break his heart, Sara could see that clearly. The things he must have been imagining had turned his skin a sickly pale. Oliver had suffered at the hands of evil many times before but the torture he endured was nothing like Barry’s or Sara’s. That’s not to say he hadn’t suffered, because my God he had, she had seen and felt those scars. He’d whispered to her late at night how he came to get them and she whispered back her own stories. In the dark it was safe to reveal their pain; their stories could be set free in the late hours of the night.

Oliver knew torture; he knew that the scar on her leg was from a knife, the few on stomach from the butt of a cigarette and the one on her left shoulder from a bullet. He didn’t know what being raped felt like; he’d never know the emotional trauma of what she and Barry had gone through. She could never tell him, she could not set the words free. Telling Len had been different, she never had to say the words to him, he looked into her eyes and saw her past written there as clear as day.
“I’m sorry, Ollie,” she says because it feels like the right thing to say. “Are you okay?”

“No really” his hands ball into a fist as his jaw sets into a hard line. “I’m going to have to tell Felicity. She kept trying to get in touch with Barry, with all of them and they never picked up their phones to tell her – us – what the hell was going on. We would have helped or tried to, they know that right?”

“You can’t be mad, Oliver” Sara warned “you can’t make this about your hurt feelings. What happened to Barry has affected them all deeply and right now you don’t get to be upset that they didn’t inform you. I know that might sound harsh but everyone is really struggling right now and they need support. So you’re going to have to put aside your personal feelings, okay?”

“God, you’re right” Oliver scrubbed his hands over his face, letting them linger on his beard, eyes flicking to the clock.

“You could call Barry” she hates seeing Oliver look like this, shoulders hunched from the weight of the world he always tries to carry alone “or his family. I can see you want to know what Barry’s been through and I can’t tell you because it’s not my place.” Lashes flutter like wings, sweeping away tears building like the grief in her gut and the lump in her throat. It hurts again, it hurts because Laurel is gone, it hurts to talk about Barry and hurts to see the anguish in Oliver’s eyes. “Don’t ask Barry, though, he’s not ready to talk about what happened. Joe will probably tell you, just prepare yourself okay.”

Oliver stiffened, breaths catching in his throat. “Sara, you’re terrifying me. What happened… what did Zoom to do Barry?”

She can’t say, she won’t say, even if the not knowing is tearing Oliver apart. She opens her mouths and tells him an absolute truth; it’s up to him if he knows what it is. “He did the worst thing anyone could do.”

XxX

Barry stares up at his family home through the rain-speckled windscreen of Len’s car. It shouldn’t feel this terrifying to open the car door, cross the lawn, climb the front stairs and open the door to the place he grew up in, the place that should feel like a home. Instead, he hesitates, shivering with anxiety, counting his breaths so he doesn’t have a full-blown panic attack. The speckles of rain on the windscreen disappear as the dark clouds blow east, outside everything is damp. Teeth grind against teeth and arms wrap tightly around his quivering body, pressing the plastic folder firmly to his chest. He keeps staring up at the house, caught between wanting to go in and face the music and the urge to turn around and run, run now before they can stop him.

Iris rang him at Star Labs after she finished talking to his dad and Joe, he could hear it in her voice that the talk hadn’t gone well. She didn’t tell him if they agreed to let him go or flat out refused; she simply told him that when he came home that they wanted to talk with him. Barry can remember all too well how these ‘talks’ went; he’d been on the receiving end many times. He didn’t want to sit down at the table and be forced to express how he was feeling. He didn’t want to have to justify to his dad and Joe why he wanted to leave. It wasn’t something he could handle right now.

They’d be no avoiding it, as soon as he walked in the front door Joe would say ‘We need to talk’ and he’d be guided to the kitchen table where he would be forced to sit down and Joe would pin him in place with his gaze and force him to un-bottle his feelings. He’d have to open his mouth and tell them that he felt trapped and taunted by his past, he was being suffocated by the memories, haunted by the smiling faces of the man, the boy, he used to be. Voices followed him through the
hallway, eyes of the past staring angrily from their places mounted on the wall.

**Why won’t you look at me?**

**Why did you let this happen?**

**Why aren’t you smiling?**

**Why won’t you look at me?**

**Why did you let this happen to us?**

**Why won’t you look at us?**

**Who are you?**

They chorus of voices crescendo, all his past selves demanding attention, screaming for answers. Who are you, look at us, why did you let this happen, race through his mind, overlapping and loudening and loudening until all he can hear is white noise. Feet carry him away to the safety of his room, the door slams shut, locking out the wailing ghosts. His twelve-year-old self wants to know why he won’t look at him, his sixteen-year-old self wants to know why he won’t smile and then there is the newest photo, from last Christmas.

The whole team is in it, smiling brightly at the camera, faces flushed from too much of Grandma Esther’s eggnog. He looks into the eyes of the Barry Allen he used to be and he hears ‘why did you let this happen, you’re supposed to be the hero.’ Eyes fill with tears and his heart thunders in his chest, he must look mad, gaping at a picture and hearing voices in his mind. He is frozen, looking into eyes of the best version of himself, he flinches when he asks; voice laced with disgust ‘who are you?’

He can’t sit down at the kitchen table and tell them that this house no longer feels like a home, it feels like walking through a graveyard on a bitterly cold moonless night. He can’t say anything, words feel heavy on his tongue, they feel like shards of glass in his throat. It’s impossible for him to look at Joe, look at dad and give them all the reasons why he can’t stay. All he can say is ‘I need to go,’ and ‘please, let me go.’ That will have to be enough for them, please let them hear the desperation in his voice because he can’t say more. Please God, don’t make him say more.

Suddenly he is gasping for air, lungs on fire as the familiar panic winds itself around his throat, hungrily squeezing the life from his frail body. Cheeks flush as heat spreads through him, heart pounding away at his ribs like it wasn’t out; it’s tired of beating for this feeble body. There isn’t enough air in the car, it’s shrinking around him; soon it will crush him to death if his lungs don’t burst first. Trembling hands fumble for the door handle, he practically falls out the door in his need for air.

The ground is solid and damp beneath him; the cool air settles on his skin and calms the raging fires in his lungs. Strong hands appear on his shoulders, startled from the touch he spins around, body prepared for the worst, expect there is no need for fear, it’s Len. *It’s Len. Carefully he crouches down beside Barry, keeping a safe distance between them. In a soothing tone, he tells Barry he’s safe, breathe, remember what Sara said, tell me the name of the plants, Scarlet. He does and once he is done he can breathe again. Wearily he sags against the car; Len too looks like someone cut his strings.*

“Sorry,” he apologised, reaching for his folder that landed a few feet from where he sits. “I was thinking about going inside and I just started to panic.”
“You know you don’t have to go in there, right?” Len scooted closer, so he too was resting with his back against the car. Barry automatically leant into him, letting Len’s warmth seep into him, allowing him to feel safe. “We can leave right now if you want to. Joe and your dad can’t make you stay and they can’t make you talk when you’re clearly not read.”

“I know” he sighed, head thumping back against the metal of the car as he gazed up at the cloud-streaked sky, “but if I leave it will only make things worse and I don’t want that. I don’t want any of this! All I wanted was to come home and now it feels like a fucking nightmare.” Eyes flutter shut in a desperate attempt to hold back the tears “When I first wake up in the morning, not fully awake but that stage between” he looks at Len questioning, hoping he understands his tired rambling. Len nods and he continues. “When I am in that stage I feel like everything is okay like I am okay because I don’t remember yet...” his breath hitched “and then I do and it hurts like hell.”

He takes a shuddering breath, face crumpling in misery. “I thought coming home would magically heal me but I feel so much worse. I know people say that the aftermath is worse I just never thought something could hurt as bad as the things he did to me.”

“After is worse because it gives us time to think, to feel” Len explained. “I remember the first time my dad hit me and it hurt like a bitch but mum gave me some ice and Tylenol and the pain went away. The emotional pain feels like hell. It tears you apart and then you start thinking a million different things and the sadness and confusion and anger last longer than that one hit.” His lips twist into a brittle smile “I wish I could tell you that it’s easy to move on but I won’t lie to you. It’s hard and there are bad days and worse days and every once in a while there are not so bad days.”

Barry nodded, wiping the tears away with the sleeves of his borrowed parka. “I’m sorry you had to go through that, Len, you were just as kid and someone should have protected you.”

“Someone should have protected all of us, in” he said bitterly.

“If only,” Barry replied, letting his eyes fall shut once more “there was someone around when the heroes needed saving.”

There never was, though, it’s always the hero’s job to protect the innocent from evil. It’s their job to save the day and if a hero can protect everyone else then surely they’ll always be able to save themselves. If only. If only there’d been another hero to stop Zoom, to swoop in with cap billowing in the wind and save Barry from the torment. No one had come for him; no one ever came for the heroes. He’d been alone, unable to rescue himself from the anguish that had become his new world.

He wasn’t alone anymore. Len was right by his side, body pressed up against his, making him feel safe, grounded. He didn’t have to be alone anymore, he didn’t have to be scared of being hurt for doing the wrong thing and this time, he wasn’t going to be punished for wanting to run. There is no stopping the shiver that runs icy fingers through his body at the memory of his failed escape. For a moment all he can hear is the drip, drip, drip, drip of the leaking pipe that echoed around him. By the time Zoom let him down his arms had grown numb and the dripping sound reverberated through his head for days.

They weren’t going to hurt him like that. They wouldn’t yell abuse at him; there’d be no breaking bones and fists leaving purple swollen eyes and bloody noses. Joe and his father were not Zoom, they would not hurt him. He didn’t realise he’d been afraid of that until this moment. Zoom had skewered his view on the people he loved; he’d embedded himself deep, reigning over him even from the grave. Today Barry wouldn’t allow it. Zoom had taken everything from, abused him and ruined him but today he felt enough courage building in his chest to say screw you! Today my fear of you isn’t going to keep me down.
It was enough to get him to his feet, to carry him across the front lawn, up the stairs and through the front door. It was enough for that. It fizzled out the moment he crossed the threshold and found his father and Joe waiting for him. He felt like he was ten years old again and he was being scolded for breaking a vase or he’d gotten into yet another fight at school. It didn’t make him tremble or his breath catch in anticipation of punishment. He could handle this; today he was going to be strong enough to handle this.

Or at least just enough of something.

***

He can’t stop fiddling, he wasn’t exactly someone who could sit still on an average day but this is worse. His at the kitchen table, fingers drumming an offbeat rhythm on the blue folder he holds tight to his chest like it’s a lifeline. Joe and his father sit on either side of him; they made him a hot cocoa in his favourite mug, it makes him feel stupid. They are being cautious, choosing their words wisely and sitting a good distance away, they are trying so hard to present themselves as anything other than the bad guys.

It’s sweet of them, it’s good to see that they’ve heeded Sara’s advice and aren’t crowding around him like he’s a fragile newborn incapable of doing anything. They don’t raise their voices or outright deny Barry his desire to leave. They want to understand, they want to help him and yet they still say it’s for best that he stays here. He could easily give them a dozen reasons why he wants to leave, if he could free them from inside of him then he would, but every time he tries the words get stuck. He at least has solid reasons as to why he shouldn’t stay, they don’t have any solid reasons as to why he can’t go and that makes him bristle with rage.

They don’t want to let him go. They don’t want Len and Sara to pick up the pieces because they are envious that they don’t know how too. They want to help, they want to wrap Barry in their arms and chase away the nightmares and whisper to him that he’s okay. He can’t stand their touch, it feels foreign, their words are meaningless because he is not okay, he is miles away from okay. They think they can fix this like they fixed everything else that came before. This isn’t a scratched knee or bruised eye from getting into a fight with a twelve-year-old, this isn’t a broken heart or a bad week. He’s been tortured and raped, ice cream and a Band-Aids aren’t going to cut it this time.

“Slugger, are you listening to us?”

Barry looked over at his dad, blinked and mumbled “yes.”

“Barr, we’re not doing this to be mean” Joe spoke next, “we just think it’ll be best for you to stay here, in your home.”

He adds and makes Barry shudder inwardly, he wants to shout ‘this house doesn’t feel like a home to me! Just let me go!’ but he remains silent.

“We could go up to my place in a few weeks” Henry suggested, “How does that sound?”

“I think that sounds good” Joe agreed “You, me, your dad and Iris, it’ll be good for us.”

“What about Len and Sara?” Barry asked, jaw clenching in anger.

“They’re not family Barr,” Joe said matter-of-factly. “I feel like you’re forgetting what Len’s done in the past, he’s done some pretty cruel things to people and to you don’t forget.”

“Joe told me he’s frozen you with that cold gun of his” Henry added, lowering his voice so that Len, who was upstairs with Iris wouldn’t overhear. “That must have hurt.”
“Not as much as being raped.” The words fell from his tongue without warning. Joe and Henry paled, eyes widening in shock, he wished he could take them back; he couldn’t, now they hung in the air like poisonous storm clouds. “I’m sorry” he dropped his gaze to the table, he felt sick. Maybe they’d let him go now, he could race upstairs and dive into his fort, barricading out the rest of the world. Silence reigned over them, it made Barry become increasing aware of his pounding heart and breathes that had grown laboured.

“Barry” Joe broke the stillness first; his voice was thick with distress, name sounding strangled to his ears. “Barry, talk to us, please?”

Barry didn’t look up; he didn’t want to see the expression waiting for him. “I can’t.”

“We understand that it’s hard difficult” Henry spoke now, voice gentle like a stream “but if you could just talk to us it would get easier, tell us something, even if it’s just one thing.”

*He couldn’t*, he couldn’t say ‘just one thing’ because if he did the rest would tumble out and he isn’t strong enough for that, not today and not tomorrow. What if this was the only way? What if they needed him to say just one thing and that would be enough for him to be granted permission to leave. Where would he even start? Were there events that were less terrible than the worst? Could he even categorise what he’d been through? Bad day, horrible day, worse day, not so bad day, horrific day, day I wanted to die, day I found out I was pregnant, day I tried to kill myself. There was no middle ground for the pain he endured, no day that wasn’t horrible in some way, because every day was horrible, every hour, every minute, every second was hell.

There was no right day to start from, the beginning, middle and end were as equally as awful as the other. There was something that wasn’t terrible, at least not anymore. The baby felt like something he could speak about now that he’d shredded his anger and abandoned the notion that it would surely grow up evil. He wouldn’t allow that, Zoom didn’t get to inflict any more wickedness on this world. He would haunt Barry for the rest of his life but this child would not be shadowed by his darkness.

“I have a picture of the baby” eyes lift to find perplexed faces, they’ve avoided talking about this for so long they’ve managed to forget its existence. “A picture from the scan, that Cait did” he explained “from this morning.” He reaches into the folder, bringing out the small image of his child. “Do you want to see?”

Silence, then Joe is saying sure, too fast, sounding completely unsure but he takes the image anyway and looks down at it with an uneasy gaze. It takes a few heart pounding moments but then he smiles, it doesn’t reach his eyes but it’s enough to make Barry relax.

“Gosh, the imagine quality has sure improved since we had Iris” he laughs a little “I can actually make this out, for the first few months I thought Iris was a sea monkey.”

Barry smiled, feeling the horror of the last half hour drain away. Joe is smiling fondly at the image of his unborn child; he is no doubt seeing what Barry’s sees. “I don’t know if I’m going to keep her… or he” he confessed, “I think I’m starting to want too, though. I, mean she or he could be a speedster, we’re kinda the only ones who know anything about that.”

Joe looks up from the photo with a brittle smile. “You get to decide, Barr and we’ll be here to support you.”

“Thank you, Joe,” Barry said, smile brightening at Joe’s acceptance. “Do you want to see, dad?”

“No” his father spat.
Barry whipped his head in his father's direction; he'd never heard his father sound this way, voice dripping with venom and disgust. Fear woke inside him; tendrils of panic constricted his lungs, terror spreading through him like cancer. He couldn't handle this.

“Henry, c’mon” Joe chided “it’s your grandchild.”

Henry’s eyes blazed with anger, he shot to his feet, chair crashing to the floor. “That thing is not my grandchild. It’s part of that monster and I can’t believe you can look at and think it’s anything other than that.”

Barry couldn’t help flinching at his father’s words, he understood they were coming from a place of anger; he’d had the same view in the start. He could forgive him for this; he just couldn’t sit here while his father raged. He couldn’t let anyone influence the feelings he’d developed for his baby, it had taken too long to get here. Without a word he snatched the picture from Joe’s hand and stuffed it back into the folder, he got slowly to unsteady feet and walked away.

XxX

Sara’s standing on the train platform again. She is in pieces but she hides it behind a brave face. Trains trundle to and from the station; people rush by in the haste to get home to loved ones, to strip themselves of their firm fitting clothes and stilettos heels. As she watches them bustle around she wonders what they will do when they reach their destinations. Will the man dressed in a dull grey suit kick off his shoes, rip that God awful yellow tie from his neck and flop down onto the couch with an ice cold beer? Will the young college student pour a hot bath smelling of lavender and soak for an hour in candlelight as she washes away the stress of the day? Will the young couple who can’t keep their hands off each other tear their clothes off the moment they step inside or will they hunger not make it to the end of the line?

Someone is going home, someone is leaving, either way, everyone is heading somewhere but Sara is frozen in place, eyes still seeing her sister’s headstone. Today she said goodbye to her big sister, today she told her friend that someone he loved was hurt in the worst possible way. Her eyes can’t cry anymore, numbness spreads through, freeing her of her pain. Her train is coming into view. She wants to run to it, she needs it to take her far from this day. She wants it to take her all the way to that tiny little cabin nestled amongst towering pine trees, she wants to be lost in the serenity of the woods, to dance in fallen leaves and forget all her suffering.

This feeling is not unfamiliar, she knows it well, could feel it building the moment Rip told her Laurel had died. It’s an ache deep in her bones; her legs want to carry away from the thoughts in her head, from the feelings in her chest. This is how Barry feels, to think she almost denied him to the right to run, now that the urge is burning beneath her skin she can think of nothing else. They will run, run, run, to the deepest parts of the woods, where no one can see them fall apart.

Her train is two minutes away, any moment now she’ll see its headlights beaming in the distance. She’ll kiss her father goodbye; he is standing motionless at her side, asking her not to go without saying a word, but she has to go and she knows he understands. He is leaving too, going back to wherever he left his new girlfriend, Sara is happy he doesn’t have to be alone through this. She can see the lights, it’s time. She kisses her father on the cheek and tells him she loves him, promises she’ll keep in touch and that she’ll be back in a few months.

He begrudgingly lets her go as he train rolls noisily to a stop. They both blink back tears as they part ways, there are emotional wrecks and leaving has always been difficult, now it was made worse by Laurel’s absence. Sara says in a tear stricken voice ‘see you soon, daddy’ then she is spinning on her heel and stepping onto the train that is getting ready to close the doors, leaving any last minute passengers stranded behind. Her father shouts ‘take care, baby’ just before the doors
shut and the train rolls away.

Tired legs carry her to an empty seat, she turns to gaze out the window, watching the sun start it’s decent for the night. By the time she reaches Central City, it will be dark out. It would be lovely to just go home, fall into bed and sleep for days, but she knows she won’t sleep tonight. The urge has settled in her bones, it has her firing off a text to Len, telling him to pack, they leave tonight.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you enjoyed this chapter; I have some tissues and a pot of tea if you need them. I would like to talk about some of the things addressed in this chapter, just to really get my feelings clear across. First, we will start with Barry. I had always intended for my Barry to eventually learn to love the child and writing his growing acceptance is difficult and challenging but in a good way. I feel Barry would respond to this kind of situation to the best I could.

Accepting the baby:

Barry always see’s the good in people (look at Len) He wants to believe that people are good, mostly and even when they aren’t he still doesn’t really view them as monsters. Barry is such a good person; he forgave Eobard for killing his mum, he trusted Jay even after he was deceived by Doctor Wells/ Eobard Thawne. To me it’s not a stretch to see Barry accepting the child, loving it and wanting to give it a better life then he and Zoom had. He is starting to see something good again and it's going to be a lifeline for him.

Barry’s anatomy:

Ok, so I decided if Barry was going to be a carrier and have ovaries, uterus, etc then that it was going to work just the same as ours. I’ve written mpreg before and I never added the extra detail in but I have seen it a few other fics so this time I thought why not? It’s how our bodies work so why should it be any different in male pregnancies.

Henry’s reaction:

I don’t honestly know the best way to write Henry, he hasn’t been on the show enough for me to really nail. What is clear is that he is always supportive of Barry and that he loves him dearly and that overprotective fatherly love is what drives his hate for the baby. To him, it’s a reminder of Zoom, of what he did to his son and that’s all he can see. Again Barry forgives this because he is Barry.

Sara’s thoughts and feelings:

I used to hide my emotions a lot, I would build a wall between me and the pain and I would parade like I was fine when I really wasn’t, then one day a friend told me about sitting in your feelings. This meant letting the pain or anger or whatever I was feeling at the time consume me. I learnt to do this and when you tear down the wall and finally sit in those feelings it hurts, it’s awful but then it gets better. You process everything and you start to heal and now I do this whenever something big is affecting me. This is what Sara is doing, Rip said Laurel died and it broke her heart so she put up her wall and only ever let it down for small periods of a time. This chapter she is
smashing it, she is letting go so she can heal.

If there any more questions feel free to message me, again I hope you enjoyed this chapter.
Also quickly before I leave, I am about to write the flashback chapter but I am unsure whether or not to have a full chapter dedicated to it or just include flashbacks in the next chapter. If anyone has a preference please let me know because sometimes I am terrible indecisive lol
Keep it in Your Sights

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delay lovelies, I've been having a lot of anxiety this week and sitting down and focusing on the story has been hard. I'm feeling a little out of sorts at the moment but hopefully next week I'll be back to my old self and will be able to get back on track.
As a treat for being late, I have made a small soundtrack to go with the fic :) I hope you enjoy.
http://8tracks.com/warrior-princess92/winter-on-the-weekend#smart_id=dj:8050326

PS: I have made it so Oliver and Felicity are still together.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

What are you made of
Water and glass
Keep it in your sights now
It's keeping you up

Keep it together
Keep it together

London Grammar - Sights

When Joe first adopted Barry he invited a traumatised little boy into his home. He was nothing like the energetic eleven-year-old who'd come around to play with Iris, racing around his home and getting into mischief. He barely spoke at first, didn't eat or race around the house. Joe waited patiently, ready to step in the moment Barry was ready to talk about that night. When he'd first taken Barry from the crime scene he'd sworn that a man in yellow had killed his mother. No one worried all that much at the time, it was only when he kept saying it, kept believing it that everyone started to worry.

So Joe made him see someone, he was out of his depth this time and if Barry was going to move on with his life then he had to face the truth: there was no man in yellow. Of course, Joe had been wrong but at the time he knew nothing of speedsters and speed forces. The therapy helped Barry, gradually the happy, curious child returned and Joe did everything in his power to keep him that way. Barry grew into a sweet, dorky, ridiculously smart young man. He grew up to be a hero and Joe was so very proud of him. He was proud of himself too; he'd raised one hell of a kid.

Only he'd screwed up, he'd forced Barry to make a terrible choice and because he'd raised a damn hero Barry sacrificed his powers to save a life. He saved Wally and in his relief Joe thought that everything was going to be okay. Jay would take Barry's speed and leave and after the dust had settled they'd find a way to defeat him. Jay did leave and he took Barry with him. There are far too many words for him to describe how he felt in that moment. One comes to mind, ringing out louder than the others: failure. He failed Barry, he failed his son and it tore him apart.
At first, he thought Barry was dead; they’d find his body somewhere in the city and the whole world would know the Flash was gone. They didn’t find a body; they couldn’t find a whisper of Zoom. He had vanished, no doubt returning to his own earth, leaving them unable to follow, unable to rescue their hero. He feared what Jay would do to Barry, he was dangerous, unstable and if he wanted to hurt Barry he could easily do so and this time there was no super speed to heal his body.

He was terrified for his son’s safety. Then one day Harry told him what Jay said right before he sped away with his son, he said he was going to take his prize and that made all the pieces fall into place. He wasn’t just obsessed with being the fastest man on every earth, no, he was obsessed with Barry and he knew how dangerous obsessions could be. They doubled their effort to save him, it had only been a week but it felt like years. Everyone was highly strung; their team had been falling apart at their seams.

Then Cisco got an idea, he could vibe Barry, that way they could at least know for sure that he was alive. It would tell them where he was and surely it would help in some way, it had to help in some way. It didn’t, it really fucking didn’t. It only confirmed Joe’s worst fear, the deep dark thought he’d kept shoving back into the corner of his mind because no way was that happening to his son, no way in hell would he believe that was happening.

Cisco walked into the cortex and he looked Joe right in the eye and told him that Barry was okay, well not okay but Jay hadn’t hurt him too bad. Today days later he walked back into the cortex, refusing to meet Joe’s eyes. He confessed he’d lied the other day, voice broken and heavy with the truth of what he witnessed. ‘I saw Jay raping Barry’ hung heavy in the air, time seemed to stand still, suspending them in the horror. Caitlin shattered the illusion of frozen time first; a gut wrenched sob ripped from her throat as she doubled over like someone had cut her strings. Iris wrapped her arms around her, sobbing loudly with Caitlin. That was the last thing he remembered seeing after that everything went red. When the anger died away he found himself holding an ice pack to bruised knuckles and choking on tears.

They tried even harder to reach him; they stayed awake for days reading every book, looking under every stone and every day they failed to bring Barry home. Now four months later Barry has returned to them, he’s not the man they lost, he’s the scared and traumatised little boy Joe brought home all those years ago. His son was broken into pieces by the acts of a wicked man and all Joe wanted to do was wrap him up in arms and tell him that he was okay, that he was safe now; he’d protect him from the monsters.

It was too late to protect him from the monsters, they had already found him, they marked his skin and followed him into his nightmares. He couldn’t embrace him because he kept flinching away, turning to Len and Sara for comfort and emotional support. He couldn’t tell him that he was okay either, that would be a lie. He wasn’t okay, he was hurt in ways Joe had only ever dealt with from afar and this time he was not an eleven-year-old who he could take to a psychologist to get help. It’s not that professional help wouldn’t be beneficial in this situation, it was most certainly something Barry should look into in the future, it’s just that he no authority to order him to go.

It’s just like he has no authority to order him to stay.

It’s why he’s been lingering outside Barry’s closed bedroom door for the past ten minutes, hesitating every time he goes to knock. Inside is quiet, Iris was downstairs cooking dinner, Henry had gone for a walk to cool down and Snart had left fifteen minutes ago to collect Sara from the train station. Now was the perfect time for him to stretch out his arm and rap on the closed timber door that still had blue tack stains from the posters Barry used to have decorating it.
Talking with Barry had always come easy, mostly because Barry came to him first; ready to sit down for a heart to heart chat at the drop of a hat. He could open up so easily, set free the storms building within in his walls and Joe would always have the right thing to say and he’d walk away with shoulders a little less burdened. He didn’t have the right words this time around. He didn’t have the perfect pep talk tucked up his sleeve for this kind of situation. He’d only ever dealt with these kinds of situations from afar and they don’t prepare you for when it happens to someone you love.

It’s not supposed to happen to the people you love, though. It happens to strangers, people on the news, in other cities, not to the child who grew up sleeping three rooms away. This kind of thing is meant to be nothing more than a case folder on his desk, its evidence and numbers and names he’d never heard before. When he walked out the door at night he came home to find two happy young adults making dinner or marathoning some new show on Netflix.

Now he’s standing in the empty hallway before a closed door that feels more like the breech to another earth, to the earth where his son suffered at the hands of a man he should have protected him from. He wants to protect him now, he’d do anything if it helped start to mend Barry. That’s why he’s going to knock on the door and tell him that if he wants to he can go if he feels like he can’t stay here then he can go. He won’t stand in his way; he won’t let Henry stand in his way either.

He figures that’s why this is so hard, he just got Barry back and the thought of him going off somewhere he can’t see him is unbearable. All he wanted was to have him home again, now he has to let him go, let him wander out into the world with two people he barely knows or trusts. Just because some guy from the future said they helped Barry doesn’t make it any easier to let him go with them, one was a criminal and the other an ex-assassin, it seemed ludicrous to let them anywhere near his son.

They had saved him, they had killed Zoom and whenever Barry fell apart it was they who picked up his pieces. It killed him to admit that they were more than capable of helping him through this, it hurt knowing that for once in Barry’s life he was not going to be enough. Barry needed more than he could give him, more than anyone of them could give him. At long last, he lifted his arm and knocked gently on the door, with heart pounding widely against his ribs he waited for Barry to appear. When he finally did, peering around the corner with large hazel eyes, he let out a long breath.

“Hey, Barr, can I come in for a bit?”

“Okay,” he said nervously stepping aside to allow him entrance.

He moved towards the bed, where he sat down drawing his knees to his chest and wrapping his arms around them, a mirror image of the eleven-year-old boy who’d moved into this room sixteen years ago. Feeling uncomfortable standing he moved towards the bed, waiting for Barry to give him some form of permission before sitting. He nodded uncertainty, shifting back so that his back was planted firmly against the headboard, reminding him of a frightened animal.

He didn’t know where to begin, he felt like his mere presence was scaring him and that was the last thing he wanted to do. He reminded himself that this was normal, it wasn’t because of anything he’d done, it was what Zoom done to him. Still, he couldn’t help a pang of hurt when he didn’t flinch away from Len or Sara, he chose them above everyone else every time and he wouldn’t deny that he was a little disappointed that he couldn’t comfort his son the same way they did.

“Is this about this afternoon?” he asked, fingers nervously tapping at his arms. “I didn’t mean to make dad angry, I thought he’d want to see the baby... I’m sorry I didn’t mean to upset anyone.”
“Barr, no, that’s not your fault” Joe quickly rushed to assure him. “Your dad shouldn’t have upset you, that wasn’t okay. He just doesn’t know how to cope with the” he paused, swallowing hard.

When Joy walked out of the precinct, legs quivering and ready to drop him to the sidewalk, the full weight of Barry’s words hit him. He was pregnant, Jay had impregnated him and Barry had used it as leverage to save his life. He doesn’t remember how he got to Star Labs, one moment he is walking along the bustling street and the next he is rushing into the Cortex, screaming that Barry was back. Of course, they already knew this; the team had been running around like headless chickens, shouting things he didn’t understand.

Iris rushed over to him, asking if he was alright, was he hurt, was Barry hurt. He didn’t see her, he just saw Barry, fearful round eyes, ashen face, bruised and broken and pressing a hand to his stomach and begging Jay to spare him. He opened his mouth and “Barry is pregnant” came rushing out, turning everyone in the room to ice statues. Things go a little foggy again after that, he blinks the memories away and focuses back on the present. If Barry is okay with being pregnant then Joe will support him, if he changes his mind then Joe will still support him, he’s always supported his son, that’s what fathers do.

“He doesn’t know how to cope with your pregnancy and it’s not because of you” he explained “You don’t have to feel like you’ve done something wrong. I’m very proud of you for opening up to us this afternoon, Barr.”

Barry lifted his face up, a brittle smile lighting up the dejected look in his eyes.

“I also want to tell you that” he inhaled deeply, trying to quell his nerves “if you want to leave, for whatever your reasons may be, then I will support your decision, even though I don’t want to let you go.”

“Thank you, Joe” the smile on his face reached his eyes, untangling his limbs he scurried forward and embraced him in a tight hug.

Joe exhaled loudly, wrapping his arms around him, forming a barrier between him and the cruel world whispering “I love you, Barr.”

Barry broke the embrace, brushing away a stray tear with the back of his head. “I want to say it… I just can’t, not right now.”

The pain in his eyes was palpable; he didn’t need an explanation as to why Barry couldn’t say those words back to him. His eyes said more than words could, he’d always been an open book, the same can’t be said for recently but right now he can see the love shimmering amongst the fear and heartache. There is a lot more Joe would like to say to him, he’d love nothing more than to spend a few hours with Barry, talking or sitting quietly, he doesn’t mind, he just wants to spend time with him before he leaves.

He’s about to suggest they go downstairs and watch a movie, something funny, maybe Big Hero 6, they all loved that movie. Iris appearing in the doorway interrupts that thought; her expression is a mixture of guilt and worry that reminds him of the face she used to pull when she’d done something he had specifically asked her not to do.

“Iris?” he doesn’t need to ask her ‘what is going on?’ He can convey a thousand messages in just the use of her name.

“So, ah, we have a visitor” she answered, wringing her hands together nervously. “He’s downstairs waiting.”
“Who is it?” Barry asked, eyes widening in alarm.

“It’s just Oliver, Barr,” Iris was quick to calm him “he wants to talk to dad because he has some explaining to do.”

“You didn’t tell Oliver that I was missing,” Barry stated surprising them both “Sara messaged me earlier after she saw him and he said he had no idea I’d been taken.”

“I thought you’d be mad at us?” Joe asked hesitantly. He’d figured Barry would be bothered by them leaving the Green Arrow out of the loop. It wasn’t about Joe’s distrust of the man, it was more to do with the fact that Oliver was trying to save own his city and they agreed that this would be a distraction that could cost people their lives. No one doubted Oliver’s commitment to Barry or his team’s ability to help them it was a simple fact that if they were trying to help rescue Barry and save their city then neither would receive their full dedication and in their line of work that could be catastrophic.

“They were trying to stop Darhk” he hung his head, arms wrapping around his middle in self-comfort “that was more important.”

“Barr, there was nothing more important than getting to you,” Iris said, rushing over to him “there are many reasons why we didn’t tell Oliver and the biggest reason is that we would have compromised him if he knew you’d been missing. Stopping Darhk wasn’t more important than finding you.”

Barry nodded, still looking down at his folders knees.

Joe sighed heavily; reaching out to place a hand on Barry’s shoulder, he tried not to take it personally when he flinched. “I’m going to go talk with him” he removed his hand, hating to let go. “Would you like him to come see you afterwards, Barr?”

Barry looked up, smiling thinly “O… okay, I’d like that.”

“Alright.” He wanted to go downstairs and push Oliver right out the front door and onto the street, he wanted to spend a few more precious moments with his son, he had missed him so. He wouldn’t though; he didn’t deserve to demand Barry’s attention, not after failing him, not after asking him to give up his speed and thus delivering him to Jay on a silver platter. Instead, he rose on weary legs, leaving the room and marching downstairs to face Star City’s vigilante.

XxX

Len’s never considered himself much of the outdoorsy type. He is happy to take a walk through a park on a chilly autumn day or watch the wave’s crash against the shore on a cold winter’s morning. He appreciates nature and its fierceness. He’s sat beneath trees that are hundreds of years old and marvelled at their beauty, their strength to weather every storm that attempts to uproot them and shed them of their leaves. He loves to watch a storm ripple in the night sky; it’s thrilling to see the lightning dance across the sky. The first snowfall is his favourite time of the year; nothing can compete with the first snowflake landing gracefully on his skin. Nature is a marvellous wonder but that doesn’t mean the tiny cabin hidden deep within overgrown woods is appealing to him.

“Well, what do you think?”

Len looked from his phone to Sara, who stood before him with her hands on her hips. She’d only gotten in the door a half hour ago, eyes red and puffy from crying, jaw set in a stubborn line and
thrust her phone into Len’s hands. She didn’t say anything else, just walked towards the bathroom, now she stood before him with damp hair and smelling of coconut shampoo. It wasn’t hard to tell that she had her mind set to something and Len didn’t need to double guess what that was. She was agreeing to take Barry away; only this time he could see her own desire to flee burning brightly in her eyes.

He’d like to ask her how today went, he’d like to stand up, discard the phone and embrace her. She would shrug him off; the determination flickering in her gaze is telling him she is in flight mode, so instead he looks back at the phone. Len didn’t see anything remotely charming about the cabin; he just saw the set for the latest horror movie slasher. He wouldn’t deny that the woods surrounding it weren’t lovely; in the picture, the leaves were freshly turned green, smoke billowed from the chimney up into the cloudless blue sky.

“I think it looks cosy in a ’we’re going to get murdered’ kinda way” he quipped.

“It’s charming” she retorted “Oliver, I, Laurel and Tommy stayed at a lodge a few miles away when we were in high school.” She sits down next to him, peering at the phone screen, eyes sparkling with a faraway look “It was an incredible summer.”

“So how come we can’t stay in the lodge?” he inquired, quirking a brow.

“The same reason Barry can’t stay in his house,” she said flatly.

“I see, so the cabin it is then” he handed her back the phone. “Quick question where are we getting the funds for this? Last time I checked Rip didn’t pay us and I’ve retired from the robbing people of their possessions business.”

“I got some money from my dad” she replied. “I rang the owners while I was on the train and they were thrilled to be having guests at this time of year.”

“So you already booked it?”

“I enquired about it and said I’d speak to my friends once I was with them” she explained, “I sent Barry a text before I got off the train; he’s on board with it.”

“Then I guess I am too,” he sighed, “not that it seems like I had much of a choice.”

“Well, no” Sara smiled slyly “but I gave you the illusion of choice.”

“So very kind of you, darling.”

Sara playfully rolled her eyes before settling in next to him, letting her head drop to his shoulder. “Today was God awful, Len.”

Len wrapped his arm around her slim shoulders. “Do you want to talk about?”

“There isn’t much to say” she shrugged “not right now, anyway, I mostly feel numb. I’m glad I went, though; I needed to go for Laurel and myself. I had to say goodbye even though it felt like my heart was being torn to pieces in the most brutal way.”

“You did good, Sara” he kissed her softly on the head, before resting his cheek against her damp hair. He thought of Mick at this moment, thought about how he hadn’t said goodbye, not really. It was difficult for him to deal with his emotions; he’d always just tossed them aside, growing cold as the years went by. He needed to be different now, he needed to be stronger and as much as Mick would laugh at him for this he needed to get more in touch with his feelings. He can practically
hear Mick’s guttural chuckle, he’d slam his beer down onto the bench and tell Len to harden up and stop acting like a prissy princess. He could see his dad flogging him, leaving a bloody nose and purple cheek; he’d spit in his face and tell him men don’t cry.

He wasn’t about to start weeping openly, it wouldn’t be that easy, but he felt something shift, a few bricks came tumbling down from his towering walls. When he closed his eyes, resting his head against Sara’s, he saw Barry’s eye’s staring at him through a glass wall. He heard him say ‘There’s good in you, Snart’ and those words sparked an ember that led him to join the legends, to Sara and back to Barry. Brave, brave Barry who was filled with such beautiful goodness that he could even extend his heart to Zoom’s child.

After Barry’s ‘talk’ with his father and Joe he’d raced upstairs, practically diving into the fort at the end of his bed. Iris and Len had exchanged worried glances before carefully entering after him, discovering him hunched over in the corner, tears that had fallen far too often making tracks down his face. Len crawled towards him first, keeping a safe distance as always but ready to move closer as soon as permission was given. Barry looked up at him with wet eyes, lips twisted in a miserable smile.

“I don’t know if they are going to let me go” he had said, looking hopelessly small in Len’s parka. “They wanted me to talk… and I thought if I showed them I was okay with at least one thing they’d change their minds.” He burrowed deeper into himself, Len decided now was a good time to move a little closer.

“What was the thing you told them?” Iris asked from behind him.

He glanced over his shoulder to see her sitting cross-legged in the mouth of the fort, part of the blanket draped over her shoulder like a shawl.

“I told them about the baby” Barry replied, eyeing them cautiously, “I thought it would be a good idea.”

“What happened, Scarlet?” Len prodded gently, willingly to back down if he wasn’t ready to speak about it.

“I showed Joe and my dad the scan” with eyes still weary he carefully let his arms drop away from his drawn knees. At his side was the blue folder Caitlin had given him only a few hours ago. Quivering hands reached inside, retrieving the sonogram. “I showed Joe first” hazel eyes flicker with affection as Barry gazes at the picture held in his hands “He talked about how he couldn’t read Iris’s sonograms and how thought she looked like a sea monkey.”

Iris laughed behind Len’s shoulder. “He used to call me sea monkey when I was a kid; I never thought to ask why.”

Barry smiled half-heartedly “I was worried he wouldn’t want to see it, the baby. It’s not like this is a normal situation and I can’t pretend that this isn’t half Zoom’s child, I just hope that you can see my half as well.”

“Of course, we can Barry.” Len had wanted to ask Barry how he felt about the pregnancy, he and Sara had even spent a good hour discussing if they should bring it up or like with everything else, wait for him to be ready. There’d been some talk about how they theorised Barry was feeling, they’d pretty much placed every possible scenario on the table and in the end the both settled on what they foresaw the outcome being. They both wholeheartedly agreed that Barry would keep the baby and they would stand by him in that decision if no one else would.
“Your dad doesn’t, does he Barr?” Iris asked and Len might have been jealous at this moment, for not seeing the end of this story before Barry even finished it.

“He got really mad” Barry’s voice broke “he called it a monster.”

“Oh, Barr” Iris shoved passed Len to pull Barry into her arms. “Give him some time. He’s not dealing with any of this very well.”

“That doesn’t mean he can say something like that” Len growled.

When he allowed himself, in the late hours of the evening, he imagined what Barry’s child could possibly be like. He pictured a mini Barry, hazel eyes filled with curiosity and sparks of lightning. Never did he picture a monster, a dark soul with dead eyes like its other father. Cruelty and hatred were not hereditary, it was the darkness in other people that was infectious, it was the cruelty and hatred of strangers that turned people into monsters. Barry would not give birth to a monster, no, Len could already see it, he’d give birth to a hero.

Back in the present he felt Sara shift beside him, heard her soft voice speaking to someone he couldn’t hear or see. It took a moment for him to realise she was on the phone, organising their escape. There is no more time to spare; they are leaving Central City, with or without permission.

XxX

Nervousness wasn’t something Oliver often felt often. Anger and sadness were more familiar to him, they had moved into his life long ago, unpacking and putting down roots before he was even aware they were there. He could probably count on one hand how often he’d been nervous, the pacing, fingers twitching, heart pounding kind. The borderline panic attack nervousness that had his thoughts racing and breath heaving as his chest constricted around his lungs. Thankfully he’d become an expert on calming himself down, it wasn’t always easy but a few deep breaths had him regaining control.

He stopped his pacing before he wore tracks onto the timber flooring of the West home. He crossed his arms over his chest in an attempt of self-comfort and hoped that he’d made the right choice. Sara had told him not to come here and of course, Oliver immediately decided he must go. He’d been furious that he’d been left in the dark, Barry was his friend and they neglected to inform him that he’d been missing for months. He may not be as smart as Felicity or Cisco and Caitlin but surely he could have done something.

All of his attention would have been focused on Barry, on getting him home and his city would have suffered for it and as much as he loves his city he very well would have sacrificed it for his friend. It was the right choice to leave out the Green Arrow and his team. They should have let him know he was back, though, he would have been here days ago, screw his duty as mayor, Barry needed him. Oliver Queen will always put family and friends first, the Green Arrow cannot afford to. What a tangled mess of a life he lives.

Right now only one thing was clear, he needed to be Oliver, not the vigilante or the mayor, he was here as a friend. That is what had him speeding towards Central City, not minutes after Sara left, his friend needed him and Sara couldn’t tell him to stay away. He doesn’t understand why she told him not to visit; it made him all the more fearful to come. She didn’t reveal any of the details, she said he was hurt but hurt could mean a number of things, there were a thousand ways to hurt someone.

When he looked into her glistening eyes he didn’t need details, her eyes said more than words could. Barry wasn’t hurt, hurt is too mild of a world, he was broken. It made Oliver sick, the
thoughts racing through his head chased him all the way here, despite his best efforts to leave them on the wind ripping by his bike. He was hurt in the worst way had bile burn his throat, he’d skidded to a stop miles from the city and heaved onto the side of the road. He knew from her refusal to say, from the agonising look in her eyes that Barry had been raped.

Oliver didn’t know how to accept that. He didn’t know how he was going to go home and go on with his life knowing that. How could he walk up to Felicity, look her in the eyes and watch them fill with tears as he tells her what happened to Barry, her friend. Oliver couldn’t go shoot an arrow into the guy who’d hurt him, he couldn’t seek vengeance or justice. He was good at that, he could break bones and kick his way to the bad guy but this was different. Barry needed fixing and Oliver wasn’t terribly good at mending things, not that it was going to stop him from trying. He’d failed enough people in his life; he wasn’t going to fail another.

“Oliver.”

Joe appeared on the stairwell; Oliver dropped his arms to his side with a weary sigh. “I know you don’t like me all that much but Barry is my friend and I can’t believe you kept this from me.”

“He’s my son, I had every right to keep this from you” he replied bluntly, pointing a finger in his direction. “I knew you wouldn’t be able to help us and save your city if you chose to help us instead then the destruction of Star City would have been on both of us. Now I don’t have to justify myself here, we were all terrified and working every minute of every day to rescue Barry and honestly, your feelings weren’t on my list of priorities. Barry was, is my – is all of ours – top concern, do you understand.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good” the anger in his stance washed away, leaving an exhausted and beaten down man behind “I’m sorry about Laurel.”

“So am I,” he said, hesitating before adding “I’m sorry about Barry.”

Joe let out a humourless, strangled chuckle “God, so am I.”

“How can I help?” he asked, voice wavering.

“I don’t know” he shrugged, descending the stairs “I wish I did.”

Oliver stepped aside to allow him to pass; they made their way to the kitchen in silence. Joe poured them both a whisky and ordered Oliver to take a seat at the table, he obeyed, nursing his whisky but not taking a drink, even though he longed to. Joe drank his down in one hit, pouring himself a second before sitting down opposite him. He had a sense of Deja vu, a memory of his father sitting him down the Queen’s impressive dining room table surfaced; he chased it away with the burn of whisky.

“He hasn’t spoken about what he’s been through” Joe fiddled with his glass, swishing the amber liquid around in nervous hands. “We know what’s happened to him, though… when we got him back…” the glass rises to his lips, it lands back on the table, empty. “Caitlin and Henry checked him over for any critical injuries, he was unconscious at the time and he… he doesn’t know that I, ah that I was there.” He pours another drink “God, he had so many scars and bruises” his voice fails him, Oliver feels his heart breaking, not sure he wants to hear this but he senses Joe needs to keep talking now that he’s opened the floodgates. “He was so thin as well, God it was fucking awful.”
“I can’t imagine how hard that must have been for you.” He shivers at thought of Barry suffering, alone and terrified on some far away earth.

Joe finished his third drink; the tumbler hits the table with a loud thud, dropped by trembling hands. “The bastard raped him, my son was raped and I hate myself for letting it happen! I vowed to protect him and then I let him give up his speed and by doing that I allowed Jay to take him! It wouldn’t have happened if I didn’t put Wally’s life above his. They are both my children and I should have protected them both.”

“We can’t always protect everyone, Joe” he knew this well, there were a string of graves behind him that reminded him of his failures. Loved ones sacrificed in the name his crusade, casualties of war, casualties of a cruel world. “I have blamed myself countless times over the past few years and what I’ve learnt is that no matter how hard I fight to protect the people that I love they still get hurt. I do my best to and sometimes that isn’t enough, sometimes, as much as I hate to admit, fate is out of our control.”

“Fate seems like a cruel bastard to me” he growled, “Barry didn’t deserve this, none of it!”

“Of course, he didn’t” Oliver clarified “but you don’t deserve to punish yourself either. I know Barry, not as well as you do, but I know him well enough to know that he would have given up his speed up for Wally’s life even if you didn’t ask him too. Jay obviously knew that too, he could have taken any of you and the results would have been the same.”

“You know, that doesn’t really make me feel any better” Joe poured another drink “I couldn’t have saved him no matter what.”

“I guess I’m not very good at making people feel better” Oliver reached over to him and took the tumbler from his hands “I can help you avoid a hangover, though.”

“Thanks” he sighed, dropping his head into his hands “why don’t you go upstairs and see Barr.”

“Thank you,” he rose to his feet, pausing before heading up “are you going to be okay?”

Joe sat up straight, screwing the cap back on the whisky bottle “Well I’m not going to have a hangover.”

“Good, have some coffee, it’ll clear away the fog.”

“You know, Oliver” the corner of his mouth curled up into a smile “you’re not so bad.”

Oliver mirrored his grin “I’m sure that’s just the whisky talking.” As he walked away he heard Joe laugh, warm and momentarily unburdened from the alcohol.

XxX

Sara is restless, she wanted to leave tonight. The owners of the cabin aren’t able to have them until midday tomorrow, it’s too far away, the itch is under her skin. She needs a distraction, something to fulfil her needs, something raw, something sweet. She could drink, turn the music up loud and dance into oblivion; she needs more than that, though. She needs to be comforted, soothed, taken apart in the best way. She could turn to Len, who is sitting in his room, propped up on the bed and nose buried in a book.

She could walk to his room, hips rocking seductively, dressed only in her underwear, she’d crawl right up to his face and toss away the book, straddle his lap and kiss him like it’s their last night on
earth. He might even kiss her back; he might push her off and pick up his book. He wouldn’t give into his desire for her, not now he had his sights on Barry. When they flirted on and off on the Wave Rider she could see the yearning in his ice blue eyes, he may have enjoyed a few nights of her company but someone else was always on his mind.

She never expected that someone to be Barry, the Flash, but when he looked at him she saw the tenderness in his eyes. Barry isn’t the right place to start a relationship and it could take months or even years before he is ready but Len was patient and his feelings for him ran deep, he’d wait, he’d wait forever if he had too, that was the kind of love Sara wouldn’t get between. She didn’t strut towards Len’s room, he belonged with Barry.

She tousled her hair and applied crimson red lipstick to her puckered lips, blowing a kiss to her reflection as she spun away from the bathroom mirror. Clad in her sexiest underwear, she sashayed in stiletto heels towards Lisa’s room, posing seductively in the doorway. Lisa looked up from the book she had open on her lap, eyes widening in desire as Sara swept her tongue across her shiny red top lip.

“I need a distraction” she purred, hands roaming teasingly over naked flesh “will you distract me?”

Lisa’s lips curled into an impish smile, the book tossed carelessly from her lap. “Honey, I thought you’d never ask.”

XxX

Barry waits anxiously for Oliver to appear in his doorway. Iris is chatting casually while rummaging around in his wardrobe for his duffle bag that he hasn’t used since Joe took him camping nearly two years ago. The weekend away had been awful, misquotes drove him insane, he got a rash from poison ivy and they had to cut the trip short. Joe never asked him to go camping again, he was very glad for that. A few months later and he was struck by lightning, after that there wasn’t any time for camping or any kind of getaway.

Lakeview looks like the perfect place to escape. The little cabin is tucked away deep in the woods, no neighbours, no bustling city and most importantly no ghosts. Finally, he’ll be free of the haunting figures that wait eagerly for him every time he steps into the hallway. Soon he’ll be free, just a few more hours and he’ll have autumn leaves crunching beneath his boots, a blank canvas at his fingertips, a safe place to rebuild.

Heavy eyelids blink away fatigue; he doesn’t want to sleep, not here, not where the ghosts can still follow. Tomorrow he can leave, they can leave, he just has to keep it together one more night. It’ll be better once he can look out across a shimmering blue lake, feel the warm sun beating down on him as it rises high in the sky. He’ll be better when there are no walls lined with memories or hallways lined with ghosts.

Approaching footsteps have him tensing, only to berate himself a moment later, it’s Oliver. He’s not sure what to say, Oliver’s gaze feels heavy as it sweeps over him, no doubt taking in the baggy clothes concealing a too thin frame. Oliver is the picture of strength, standing tall and imposing in the doorway, leather clad shoulders pushed back and head held high. Barry hates the shiver of fear racing up his spine, he knows Oliver weren’t hurt him. The uncomfortable feeling of fear is real; he shifts awkwardly, grabbing a pillow to shield himself. He must look pathetic to Oliver, nothing like the hero he’d trained and fought alongside.

“I’ll give you guys some privacy” Iris excused herself, shutting the closet doors before departing the room.
Oliver ventured in, lingering at the foot his bed, surveying the blanket fort. “What is this?”

“You never made a blanket fort?” Barry asked, “what kind of childhood did you have?”

“I honestly wouldn’t have even known where the linen closet was” he smiled at Barry and the fear rattling in his bones dropped away.

He was safe, Oliver was safe. “Well you’ve been missing out” he got to his feet, pillow abandoned “How about I show what all the fun is about?” He gestured to the multi-coloured fort, Oliver quirked a brow. “Go on, you can’t go your whole life without experiencing this.”

He shrugged, ducked his head and disappeared in the fort. “It’s cosy in here” he called out, voice light with laughter.

Barry followed, finding Oliver making himself at home among the parade of pillows. “You should let me take a picture to send to Felicity.”

“Oh God, please don’t” he laughed “she’ll use it for leverage.”

Barry chuckled, anxiety completely evaporated from his veins. “Can we not talk about it?” he asked, voice tightening “just for a while, can we not talk about it, please?”

“Of course, Barry” his smile wavered. “Did Sara tell you I am now the mayor of Star city?”

“They let you be mayor?” he exclaimed teasingly “that’s really great, Ollie, you’re just what the people need.”

“Well I’m trying to be” he answered honestly “Thea has been helping a lot and I couldn’t have done it without her.”

“And what about Felicity, you guys are still together right?”

“We’re engaged actually” he ducked his head, hiding a light blush and bashful smile “I’m lucky to have found someone like her. She’s my light; I wouldn’t have been able to have defeated Darhk without her.”

Blue eyes and a crooked smile flicker in Barry’s mind, he feels his own blush redden his face. Len had been his anchor from the moment he flung himself out the precinct doors and collided right into him. Truthfully he’d been on his mind a long time before that. Len had gotten under his skin from the moment they met and even though they were enemies, to begin with, he also saw a light burning brightly behind his snide comments and icy façade. He imagined someone warm, someone, better and he was right. All those roaming thoughts could now be a possibility, the curious questions could, at last, be answered, he just had to get better first.

Len would make him better; he’d chase away the nightmares and anchor him to the now so he didn’t drift away on dark tides. He would be his home, not today and not tomorrow, but one day, he could be. After the wounds had healed, after the scars had faded he could set free the feelings that had been brewing from their very first meeting. He’d keep it in his sights, those far off better and brighter days. Tonight he wasn’t there yet, wounds still fresh and scars raw and red against his skin held him back, held him in the dark.

“Congratulations, Oliver, I’m happy for you both.”

“Thank you, Barry.”
“I um…” he wanted to share something positive with Oliver, he wasn’t sure if Joe told him that he was pregnant. It was impossible to see that he was through the layers of clothing he wore. Would Oliver react badly like his father or would he stand by him? This was Oliver, he’d been there for him from the moment he got his speed, he’d shaped him into a hero, into the hero he had been, he’d stood by his side unflinchingly. “I… I’m having a baby” he didn’t quite have the courage to meet his eyes “It’s… its Zoom’s but I don’t know, I guess I don’t see it as his anymore. It used to feel like there was a darkness growing inside of me, something monstrous… I don’t feel that now.”

“If it's part of you, Barry then it couldn’t possibly be anything dark or monstrous,” he said earnestly “you have always been filled with light, it’s what made you the perfect hero.”

“I’m not a hero anymore” he declared solemnly.

“You still have the heart of one” he assured, “don’t forget that.”

“It’s hard to remember at times” he confessed, “I get lost in the panic and the fear and the memories and all I can see is the darkness stretching out ahead of me.”

“When I got back from the island I felt the same way. I was lost in anger and darkness, it nearly drove me insane” he revealed “it nearly got me killed. Then I met Felicity and John and the darkness got a little lighter. I’ve only really started to recover the most this past year but I was being stubborn and throwing myself into my crusade instead of facing the things I’d been through. You are much smarter than me, don’t let the darkness take over your life, face the pain even when it hurts.”

“I try” he whispered, “it’s different for me; you couldn’t know what it’s like to be in my shoes.”

“No, I don’t but I’m here if you want to tell me.”

“I’m not ready” he snapped, anger suddenly boiling in his blood, people kept pushing and pushing, when would they stop? “I’m kinda tired; I want to go to bed.”

“I’m sorry, Barr, I didn’t mean to upset” he apologised, looking miserable.

“It’s not your fault” he sighed “I’m just tired, it’s been a long day.” He scurried out of the tent, waiting at the opening for Oliver to come out after him. He crawled out and rose to his feet before Barry, looking over at him with sorrowful eyes.

“I’ll let you get some sleep,” he said “just, promise me you’ll call me if you need me? I will be here, whenever, wherever.”

The anger waned; he sagged without it to hold him up. “Thank you, Ollie, that means a lot to me.”

“Can I give you a hug?” he asked tentatively.

Barry embraced him, winding his arms snug around his back, “maybe you could stay a little longer? I think Iris was cooking tea, you could join us?”

“I’d like that very much.”

“Great, you’re just, ah, going to have to let go.”

“Right” he stepped back, a somewhat awkward apologetic smile gracing his face “had to hug you for Felicity as well.”
“Have you told her?” he didn’t want to have to announce to the world all he’d been through, he didn’t want to burden his friends with the knowledge but he wouldn’t ask Oliver to keep this from her. “It’s okay if you have. I don’t want you guys having secrets between you.”

“I told her a little but not all” he replied “and thank you, I know she’d understand if I did, though.”

“People can tell” he murmured, looking down at worn timber flooring “or they’ll be able to tell” He lifted his gaze to his stomach, envisioning the bump that would form in the coming months. The thought no longer made him ill or fearful, for a fact, he felt a thrill of excitement. “C’mon, let’s go see what’s for dinner.” Carefully he laced his fingers through Oliver’s and dragged him from the room, ignoring the ghosts howling from their glass prisons as he passed them by. Tomorrow, tomorrow he could leave, just one more night of ghosts shrieking at his door, for one more night, he could keep it together.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter will start to include the flashbacks and focus on Barry's struggle with the aftermath of everything Zoom put him through. If the chapter is late again then I apologise in advance, I have an anxiety disorder and some things happening around me have set me off and I don't want to write unless I can give it my best efforts. If the next chapter is late the story hasn't been forgotten, I'm just taking some breathing time so I can deliver my best work to you.
Take It All Away

Chapter Notes

Warning: This is a slightly dark chapter and it contains mild torture and rape in the flashbacks. I will also be continuing the flashbacks in the next chapter. I'm also back in full swing so the chapters will be back on schedule :)

You've stripped me down, the layers fall like rain
It's over now, just innocence and instinct still remain
You watched me while I slowly disappeared

Red – Take it all Away

The anticipation is killing him. He's been waiting for this, biding his time and playing the friend, the hero, waiting and waiting and planning for this very moment. He's finally going to have Barry's speed and once it's pulsing through his veins he is going to claim his prize. It's so close now, Barry is slowing down and the veil is filing with red lightening, it's so close he can almost taste it. He'd never intended for this happen, it's Barry's fault, he shouldn't have been so charming with his heroism, kind smile and eyes that sparkle with hope. He shouldn't have been so trusting. He really should have seen the malicious intent lurking in his gaze, felt his desire crackling along his skin, in the same manner, the lighting crackled within it.

It's Barry's fault that Jay changed his plan. At first, he just wanted his speed, to be the fastest man on every earth but Barry Allen was just so disarming, he made Jay feel things he hadn't felt in years, feelings he'd locked away because even he was afraid of them. He wasn't scared now; the feelings thrilled him, even more so than the speed force ever could. God, it is no wonder he can barely contain the sullen expression he wears in the midst of Barry's friends. If they saw a glimpse of what lied underneath then they would know what his true intentions were.

He wanted more than the speed, he wanted Barry, he was going to have him and he was going to have him right now. It was done; Barry had collapsed to the floor, gasping for breath, trying to refill his human lungs. Caitlin and the others were rushing to his aid; they couldn't protect him for long. He snatched the veil from Harrison Wells and injected it into his arm without hesitation, he couldn't wait any longer. Oh, what fun it was going to be breaking and bending and twisting The Flash into his very own image.

The lighting zaps around him, zipping through his bloodstream like the world's best drug. Laughter bursts from his mouth, he felt giddy, exhilarated, oh the wait and the games had been worth it. He's mind cleared when the new speed settled within him. He looked through the glass at his prize, he was still gasping for breath, splayed out on the floor like he was ready for him. Jay was ready, he was starving and he couldn't wait to sink his teeth into the soft flesh of Barry's neck, to wrap his fingers around his delicate wrist and bury himself deep in his body. He really needed to leave now, he could feel himself getting hard and as fun as it would be to fuck Barry in front of the traumatised faces of his friends he'd rather they'd be alone. He wanted to take his sweet time after all and he knew with thrilling excitement that Barry was going to be a fighter.

“Well thanks for everything,” he says to Wells and Cisco, voice masked with sickly sweet kindness,
“I’ll be taking my prize now.”

It was fun watching the confused expressions that shifted to shock as he sped from the room; it was such a delight to watch the horror unfold around him. He wished he could be here to witness their shocked faces when he took Barry instead of Caitlin like he imagines Cisco currently fears. That had been all for show, just a little song and dance really, a mere distraction from his true desire. With ease he plucks Barry from where he is splayed, takes him right from Iris’s outreached arms, he throws him over his shoulder and runs.

It’s Barry’s fault, it truly is. He should really learn that wearing tight leather will draw the wrong kind of attention. He shouldn’t bat his pretty lashes and lick his pink lips and expect Jay not to want him. He shouldn’t be so smart or excitable or loyal, he shouldn’t be all the things that Jay never got to be. It’s okay, though, it’s all going to be okay, because soon, very soon, Jay is going to tear that dangerously distracting suit from his body and pin him to the nearest available surface. He is going to learn how good it feels to be inside him, he is going to destroy everything that Barry believes in; he is going to mould him into something dark, something wickedly beautiful.

It’s Barry’s fault, he shouldn’t have been such a big damn hero.

XxX

Len, Sara and Barry pull up to a picturesque dark timber cabin that is nestled amongst soaring tree trunks; their leaves decorate the land below in patches of deep reds, burnt oranges and gold. In the far distance, the lake shimmers like a lost treasure, inviting and mysterious and no doubt bitterly cold. Autumn is in full swing. The town they’d just stopped in was bursting at the seams with fall festivity, jack-o lanterns adorned every doorstep and porch, skeletons, spiders and ghost hung or clung to every available tree, archway and lamppost, Halloween had arrived early in Apple Grove.

They’d stocked up on food and gas before heading the further twenty-five minutes to their destination. The townsfolk are kind, if a little nosey but it could be forgiven since it seemed the most exciting thing to ever happen was the comet that landed in the lake six years ago. It was full of old world charm and no doubt values, so Len and Sara declined the offer to come to the barnyard fall dance and headed back to the car stifling a fit of giggles. Waiting within the dark warmth of the car was Barry, huddled safely within Len’s parka.

At last, they can climb out of the cramped car and make their way inside; it’s been a long day. The road stretching out before them, offering them a million places to travel. A million places to hide away and wait for the cold, lonely dark winter to pass. The cabin is silent, chilly, the fireplace is devoid a crackling fire, the wood creaks and sings as the autumn breeze wrestles to get in, then it’s silent once more. Sara sets to work lighting the fire, Len heads toward the kitchen to make coffee to chase away the fatigue from the long drive.

Barry tiptoes up the staircase, the wood creaking beneath his booted feet, when he gets to the landing he finds a sitting room with two grey couches facing a wooden coffee table. The centrepiece of the room is the impressive window that overlooks the woodland behind the cabin. The best thing about standing here, among the cold frigid air, old style furniture and overuse of wood, is that there are no ghosts mounted to the walls. They are empty save for the painting of a vase filled with red tulips hanging to the right of the grand window. For the first time since escaping he feels like he can breathe, there are no past selves shouting out at him from their glass prisons, fighting for his attention, demanding answers.

For today, for a moment, for now, he feels free, he feels okay. The memories are far off clouds, a storm drifting away to reveal a beautiful crisp autumn day. For now, he feels light, unburdened, his strings tying him to Central City and all the pain that unfolded there have been severed. Out here in
the deep woods, tucked away safe in a cozy cabin he can be Barry, not the Flash or the excitable and doting Barry Allen, just Barry, the man left behind in the rubble of Zoom’s destruction.

For the moment he doesn’t want to think about the last four and half months, it’s all he thinks about, it’s there when he goes to bed at night and it’s there when he wakes first thing in the morning. It is forever a part of him, woven into the very fabric of his being, a poison he can’t get out. For a while he can play pretend, he’ll go downstairs, step outside and walk towards the trail that leads to the lake. He’ll think of nothing else but the crunch of leaves beneath his feet, the warm sun beating against his back and the feel of hundred-year-old trees against his fingertips.

He can play pretend for today, it hurts too much to be thinking the same thoughts over and over; being suspended in the fear is exhausting. He doesn’t remember a time when he didn’t feel it trickling through his veins, a slow and steady poison consuming all of him. It sits alongside the chill in his bones, the deep-rooted cold that not even the hottest water can reach. The cold is friends to the tears, the nightmares, the imaginary eyes staring at him from the shadow and the ghostly fingertips that wake him in the dead of the night.

He’s tired of all these thoughts, all the emotions rattling around inside his head, demanding to be felt, always demanding to be felt. He wants to be better, he wants to shake off the rust and step out into the world anew. For today all he can do is pretend, pretend the chill is just from the crisp autumn air, pretend the jittering sensation in his body is from too much caffeine and he can pretend he doesn’t feel eyes staring at him from the shadows when he descends the stairs.

When he reaches the bottom he finds a fire warming the cabin, Len and Sara sitting by it drinking coffee. They look towards him, affection smiles gracing their faces, he feels safe here, standing before the roaring fire and under the watchful eyes of his friends. It’d be lovely to curl up against Len on the sofa, allowing the fire chase away the chill in his bones. If only he didn’t feel so restless, he needs to stretch his legs, explore, find those brighter and better things he’s been desperately seeking.

“Would anyone like to go for a walk?” he doesn’t want venture out into the world alone, the woods are vast and monsters could be lurking in the undergrowth. As long as he’s with Len and Sara he’ll feel safe and if he feels safe he’ll be able to keep up the charade.

“That sounds like a wonderful idea” Sara set her mug down and climbed to her feet readily “after five hours in the car my legs need a good stretch.”

“I always enjoy a good stroll through the woods” Len offered them his trademark smirk.

“Sometimes I don’t know when you’re being sarcastic or serious,” Sara said.

“Sara, I am always serious” he replied, rising from his chair and zipping his parka to his chin to keep out the autumn breeze “now, ladies first.”

Sara rolled her eyes, striding past Len and out the front door, the wind sweeping in leaves behind her. Barry hesitated, waiting for Len while watching Sara disappear around the side of the house. When he could no longer see her he turned his full attention to Len, who was watching him over the rim of his mug.

“Are you two okay?”

“Yeah, we’re fine” Len waved it off, setting his empty mug down he moves towards him, closing the space between.
Barry felt his heart rate spike, not in apprehension but something else, something almost forgotten. A warm hand found his own, fingers lacing together, slotting together perfectly, his breath caught in his throat. Len smiled tenderly at him, stepping around him, guiding him towards the front door and out into the world. He trailed a few steps behind him; fingers still laced tightly together, leaves crunching loudly beneath their boot feet as they ambled towards the path.

Sara could be seen up ahead, golden locks flowing behind her like a cape. Falling leaves tumble from the interlocking branches above; down they come like multi-coloured rain to cover the ground below. Len lets go of his hand, scooping up a pile of leaves and running after Sara who is oblivious to her fate. She must have been lost in the beauty of the woods because Len gets the drop on her, she shouts in surprise, whirling around to face him with an outraged look on her face.

Leaves dangle from wispy strains of blonde hair; they cling to her coat like brightly coloured accessories, playfully she slaps him, shouting threats at him she’d never carry out. Barry jogs towards them, laughing heartily at their child like behaviour. It’s been far too long since he’s felt anything remotely close to carefree and today he is pretending, today he picks up a hand of leaves and rushes at his friends, covering them in foliage. Their laughter dances on the wind, an all-out war breaking out.

It feels like a normal autumn day, they are three friends escaping from the bustling city, they are unburdened and they are free. Everything feels normal, the sun filtering in through the trees, the ground beneath his feet, the leaves tumbling down over him like confetti. There is a shift, a force within pulling him away from his friends; the woods turn dark, his vision tunnelling. The leaves splinter and shatter, reborn into red leather that rains down over him like blood.

The world shutters and shakes, the forest floor is ripped out from beneath him, sunlight washed away in a swirl of darkness. He’s not standing in the woods anymore; he’s back in the asylum, staring right into Zoom’s cold hard eyes. He goes to scream for Len and Sara but they are not here, they are still standing on the leave strewn path, laughing in the sunlight. He’s alone again, trapped, terrified and helpless, hopeless. Zoom moves towards him, angry, hungry.

Barry screams.

XxX

Barry is frozen in place, he feels detached from the situation happening around him. It all happened so fast, he was on the ground at Star Labs, lungs heaving for air, Iris reaching out to him. Then it was gone, he was gone. The world blurred around him into something unrecognisable, greys and blues and blacks until it finally became something tangible. The gloomy asylum snapped into focus, Jay’s dark eyes the first solid thing he saw.

“No more Flash” Jay snarled, ripping the emblem from his chest, throwing it away like it was trash, it lands far off in the distance with a clang. Next, he tears the suit open, exposing Barry’s bare chest to the cold damp air. He speeds around Barry, freeing it from his arms and coming to stand before him again. “No more hero.” With a wicked grin, he tears the shirt in half, rips again and again until it’s no more than shreds in his hands. "You belong to me now" threads off leather are thrown into the air, raining down over Barry like confetti from the world's saddest parade.

There was no time to get his bearings; Jay had torn his shirt to shreds before he had even regained his balance. Now he’s watching from afar as Jay runs clawed fingertips down his chest, the sting hurrying him back into his body. He punches him without hesitation, swaying slightly under the force of the momentum.

“You can fight me all you want Barry,” Jay purrs, mouth twisting into a wicked grin “you can give
it your all but you have no speed” he backhands him across the face, it knocks him backwards, vision clouding with tears. “For months I have waited, longing to feel your speed pulsing beneath my skin” a fist to the stomach has him doubling over, gasping for air “then I started wanting more.” Fingers wrap tightly around his throat, pulling him close, close enough to feel the dampness of his mouth ghost across his skin. “I started wanting you” he nips painfully at Barry’s bottom lip, copper taints his tongue “I have been dying to be inside you.”

His words are ice in his veins, they turn to bile in his gut and the send shivers racing up his spine. He’ll not let his happen; he is a hero, speed or no speed he is getting out of here. “Go to hell, Jay!” He spits directly into his eye, he lets go of his neck and Barry turns to run, where he doesn’t know but he’s going to run for his life. He hasn’t even made it two feet when Jay appears before him, a predatory glint in his eyes that rips the air from his lungs. He can’t run, he can’t hide, all he can do is fight and fight valiantly he does.

In the end, his heroism isn’t enough, his fists and teeth and nails aren’t strong enough to set him free. He fights, pleads, screams, begs and cries until Jay wraps his hands crushingly around his throat, trapping the screams in his lungs. His body trembles beneath Jay’s, the pain consumes him, the only thing he is aware of is the brutal thrusts, the mattress growing damp between his legs and the rattle of the cot as it buckles beneath their weight.

Jay whispers filth in his ear, he bits bruises into soft delicate flesh, leaves finger marks on thighs he viciously forced apart and rams into him so violently he fills like he’s going to split apart. Barry doesn’t stop struggling when his fists fail him he wiggles and struggles fearlessly beneath Jay. It makes him squeeze cruel fingers tighter around his throat; black dots dance dangerously in his vision, for days after his throat his ringed purple. He gives it his all and Jay takes and takes until Barry can’t fight anymore. He’s bloody and bruised, gasping for air through a crushed windpipe, Jay cumming deep within him, he feels like he’ll never be clean again.

When it’s over he collapsed heavily onto him, the air smells of sweat, sex and fear. Jay has won; he’s beaten the hero. He lets out a satisfied sigh, running lazy fingers across the darkening bruises that blossom on Barry’s throat. It seems like hours that Jay lies on top of him, admiring the damage he’d done with a pleased little smile. The mattress shifts, giving one last squeak in protest and he is gone; leaving him alone.

He can't move. He feels so cold, skin turning to stone. He can't breathe. Can't feel. Can't believe. He is suspended in disbelief, brain hopelessly trying to deny the horror that just unfolded. Numbness overtakes him when denial falters. It wraps him in a comforting embrace, whispering to him that everything is fine, nothing happened, nothing happened. He almost believes the lie, until he goes to move. His breath catches in his throat as pain flared between his legs. It feels wrong. He feels wrong. Dirty. The sticky mess on his thighs makes him gag, makes him tremble. All his bones begin to shake, he's gasping for air and each pull of breath feels like fire in his throat.

He's trembling violently, the cot rattles beneath him, blood pools between his legs. He still can't move. He wants to run. He wants to scream. All that he can manage is a pitiful sob that escalates to a gut-wrenching wail. He’s gasping in ragged breaths between each shuddering sob that jars his body and makes the pain worse.

He can't stop crying.

He feels so cold.

He's hysterical.

He’s going into shock.
The world snaps back around him as violently as it was ripped away. He's no longer lying on the blood-stained cot; there is solid ground beneath him. The air no longer smells of sweat, sex and fear, the gentle breeze blowing against his skin smells of damp earth and smoke. The asylum has fallen away to reveal the woods, he's sitting beneath a tree, Len and Sara stare at him through wide concerned eyes.

"Are you with us, Scarlet?" Len's voice is hoarse, face a mask of distress.

"I think so" the words feel sandpaper in his throat, his face damp from tears.

"Do you remember what happened?" Sara asked.

"I remember leaves falling" his chest tightens, eyes closing as he takes a deep shuddering breath "then suddenly they weren't leaves at all." Behind closed lids, he can still see the crimson leather cascading down around him. He tried so hard to forget that day, to forget the moment the hero started to die. If only he hadn’t been so stubborn, if only he hadn’t loved his friends and family so much then maybe he would have let the shock kill him.

He didn’t though, with strength he no longer possessed he’d fought his way out of the panic, heaved himself up from the bloodstained bed and continued to fight. His strength burnt bright for a while, he pushed the pain away and distanced his mind from the trauma he’d endured. When Jay came for him he didn’t go down easily, he knew he could never win but he couldn’t live with himself if he didn't at least try to protect himself. Jay seemed to enjoy it for the first few times, making Barry bleed in new and wonderful ways and leaving him a broken ragdoll on blood covered sheets. After the first week Jay grew tired of the resistance, there wasn’t a part of Barry that wasn’t bruised and sore and yet he never gave up.

One day Jay came in, dragging chains menacingly behind him, eyes darkened in rage. Barry was chained, alone and left to starve for a week, water all he was given and the rat’s scurrying around his only friends. When Jay returned he found him barely conscious, begging for food and end to the silence, he thought he’d won, he thought he’d broken the hero’s spirit. He had been wrong, a few days later a fully feed and rested Barry continued to fight when he fucked him into the mattress. It wasn’t until three weeks later that he finally broke him. After that day he never called him Jay again, he stopped resisting when he came for him, on that day the hero finally died.

He reopens his eyes, vision blurred by tears. "I don't want to talk about it." The woods no longer look beautiful; the sun trickling through the branches is cold against his skin. "Can we just go back to the cabin, please?"

Len and Sara hesitate, sharing a meaningful look that Barry can't decode. They nod in unison, helping him to stand on quivering legs, keeping their hands planted firmly on him until they are sure he can he can walk unaided. In silence they make their way back to the cabin, their carefree afternoon floating away like the autumn leaves.

XxX

Drip...

Drip...

Drip...
It stopped, the room fell quiet and Jay, Zoom, walked away, leaving him dangling from an old beam, rusty manacles digging painfully into his wrists. He did not cry, there were more tears to be shed, he no longer felt the excruciating pain, numbness had overtaken him. All he was aware of was the constant drip, drip, drip of the leaky pipe. At first, it felt like a friend, someone to keep him company in the darkness, soothe his misery and dry the tears. It grew louder as the darkness pressed closer around him, drip, drip, drip; it was an enemy crawling under his skin, striving to drive him mad.

Each splash of water hitting the ground made him tense, muscles spasming under the effort. Pain made its return, it was like nothing he’d ever felt before, his skin felt like fire, muscles throbbing and shaking violently from the abuse. He tried to focus on the dripping, tether himself to something so he wouldn’t have to feel the immense pain wrecking his frail body. He listened for the dripping so he didn’t have to hear the voices in his head, the voices whispering that they’ll be good for now on, there will be no more angering Zoom, no fighting, just lie still and take it because they can’t survive this again.

Drip…

He’ll be good, please, he won’t try escaping again.

Drip…

Please god, make it stop, he’ll do anything. No more bravery, no more unpicking locks and throwing fists and kicking and biting and fighting. He’ll lie still, he’ll get on his knees, he’ll bend over. He’ll eat when he’s told, sleep when he’s told and wake when Zoom wants to be entertained.

Drip…

He won’t play at being a hero anymore, he’s not a hero, he’s a broken man suspended from an old beam by rusty manacles listening to a leaky pipe slowly drive him mad. Above all that he is Zoom’s and he will do what he’s told. He promises, he promises.

Drip…

Just make it stop or he’s going to scream.

XxX

It’s an ungodly hour when Len is woken by a terrified scream. He’s out of bed and racing towards Barry’s room before he has even blinked the fog from his eyes. He finds Barry tossing violently under the covers, crying out as he struggles to wake from the terrors that plague his sleep. Sara materialises at his side just as Barry’s terrified eyes snap open. Len turns the lamp on and the orange glow illuminates Barry’s flushed tear-streaked face, he doubles over gasping for air.

They have been living in this tiny cabin in the middle of the woods for two weeks now. The days
are tranquil and the nights broken by harrowing screams. Since the day they arrived Barry started acting different, withdrawing further into himself and distancing himself from the trauma of the past four months. It all started that day in the woods when he collapsed to the path after Sara threw a handful of leaves over his head. Previously Barry would open up if he was upset or woke from a nightmare, he didn’t reveal much but he gave snapshots, snippets of stories that broke Len’s heart to hear. He would always listen, no matter how much rage or sorrow his suffering field him with. He’d always listen and do is very best to comfort Barry, to assure him that he was safe and loved.

Now he didn’t speak of his pain, he’d closed the curtains tightly to seal away his past and Len was left worrying that he was hurting himself more. He was no stranger to evasion, there was a door within his mind labelled Do Not Open and behind it was a room stuffed to the ceiling with repressed childhood trauma. Denial was an old friend of his, shoving things aside and pretending he was fine was his number one act, it’s why he was so cold after all. Barry had never been the bury your feelings and move on with your life kind of guy, from the get-go Len could see he was the kind of person who sat down and talked openly and honestly about their feelings. He’d admired that about him, he’d wished he could talk about his emotions that easily, it’d be nice to face his past and finally come out on top.

This new version of Barry was holding back, this new version wore a fake smile and paraded around like he hadn’t spent four months being raped and tortured. It had been nice to see him smile at first, to have him accompany them into to the town and on walks to the lake. It was fine until it wasn’t until the nightmares grew monstrous and new triggers seemed to develop daily. It would have been grand to have Barry smile, to hear him laugh only when he smiled there was no warmth in his eyes and when he laughed it was hollowed out.

Now Len is being reassured by the impostor Barry that he is fine, they can go back to bed; it was just a bad dream. He’s so deep down the rabbit hole that he’s switched off all emotions; his gaze is blank as he stares at challenging at Len and Sara, almost daring them to demand he put a stop to this. Len thinks they should put a stop to this; they need to sit down and get Barry to feel again because two weeks as an emotionless zombie is too long. He gets why Barry has locked himself away from the pain, he truly does and he hated seeing the misery in his eyes, the discouraged hunch of his shoulders and the ever present tremble of fear but it was better than the empty vessel he has become.

The problem is that snapping him out of this state before his mind is ready could be dangerous and honestly, they are over their heads here, they could really use some help. Only they are too stubborn to ask for it and too protective of Barry to let anyone else near him. So they are stuck between waiting and debating on what cause of action to take next. Tonight they pretend to believe the lies; they shut his bedroom door and walk back to their separate bedrooms.

In the morning they are the first up. Len’s watching Sara over the rim of his mug, savouring his coffee and finding the right words to convince Sara they need to act today. It’s Halloween tonight, they are supposed to be heading into town to join in the local festivities. Over the past few weeks, Apple Grove has been getting ready for their annual All Hallows Eve festival; their town is big on festivals and holidays. Up in their remote cabin, Halloween has slowly been trickling in. Outside their carved pumpkins adorn the porch, inside there are fake cobwebs and spiders decorating the railing and a few skull candles sit in a collection on the coffee table.

It’s all so normal accept that it isn’t. They didn’t come out here to get involved with the locals and their ghost stories and parties, they came here to help Barry heal and while he’s shut off that isn’t happening. The repercussion could be detrimental to his heath and Len isn’t okay with that. He feels like a real asshole for wanting Barry to be miserable again and he knows it’s only been four weeks since he escaped Zoom but by denying everything he is delaying his road to recovery and
it’s going to be one hell of a long road.

He wished he could just let Barry stay in this state of blissful ignorance, he wished it wasn’t ignorance at all and that he’d magically woken up better. He hasn’t. The nightmares that wake them in the dead of the night are the reminder that he is not okay; he can pretend all he wants at day, in the dark the monsters always find him. There is a flicker of the real Barry when he startles awake from a nightmare, eyes alive once more, brimming with haunting memories and pain. Lashes flutter and the emotions vanishes, eyes as lifeless as china dolls stare back at him, mask slipping back into place.

“We need to talk to Barry” Len announces, voice quiet so it doesn’t drift up to Barry. “I know you said we should wait this out but it’s been two weeks.”

“I know” Sara sighed into her morning coffee, “I thought he’d snap out of it sooner but he’s only buried himself deeper.”

“Is there a safe way we can go about getting him to switch back on, for lack of a better term.”

“I think that fits nicely,” Sara replied “he has basically shut off his emotions and it is very much a coping strategy but I think it’s got to the point of being damaging to his mental health. It’s not like I have PHD in phycology, though.”

“I know someone who will have a PHD” Why didn’t he think of Lisa weeks ago, she may have only just started studying recently but she would have access to the information they needed and it would be far more reliable than the internet. “When I go into town I’ll call Lis, she’ll be more helpful than Google.”

“Good idea” Sara approved “I didn’t exactly go through a ‘denial phase’ so I can’t speak from experience this time, unfortunately.”

“What kinda phases did you go through?” he enquired.

“Rage mostly, sadness, depression, panic attacks” she numbered them off on her fingers “all those wonderful things that accompany PTSD.”

“Well once we get past this avoidance issues we can deal with all the rest” Len got to his feet, casting a glance upwards, listening for any sound that Barry had woken. Maybe today he’d come downstairs and unlike all the days before he wouldn’t be wearing a fake smile or force a cheery good morning. Maybe today he’d trudge downstairs in Len’s parka, darkened eyes from lack of sleep would meet his and in them, he’d find Barry looking back. He’d timidly walk towards the table, take a seat and tell them why the falling leaves frightened him, why the sound of a dripping tap had him blocking his ears and rattling so violently it was amazing his bones didn’t shatter.

Len hated that he wanted to find the dejected boy instead of the cheerful one, but he knew the eerily pleasant smile and empty laugh were just lies. He’s sorry Barry has to fall apart in order to get better; it’s wickedly cruel and unfair that healing comes with strings attached. The only way through is through and right now Barry’s stuck somewhere in the middle. Another place he has found himself stranded. Stuck between not okay and okay is a shitty place to be, he might actually be there himself right now. Right now isn’t about him, though, right now is for Barry. He can deal with his shit on some far of Tuesday when Barry has an actual smile on his face.

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Len’s sitting on one of the park benches watching the kaleidoscope of colourful leaves tumble
down from the trees that are only a few days away from being barren. The grass has grown brown beneath the wilting foliage, on the other side of the park, the children laugh in delight as they jump into the raked piles of leaves. The cool breeze whispering through the skeleton branches carries the smells of pumpkin spiced coffee, baking pies and wood fires. Len enjoys the moment of tranquillity, taking in all the autumn day has to offer.

He didn’t come here to bask in the sun and watch carefree children play merrily before heading home to get dressed for Halloween. He came here to call Lisa, the reception at the cabin is spotty at best and he didn’t want to risk Barry overhearing his conversation. When he left he’d just strolled down the stairs, hair ruffled and eyes shadowed from a restless sleep, he greeted them with a good morning in a cheery tone that unnerved him. Maybe it wasn’t the tone; maybe it was the dead look in his eyes and the way he moved like he was on autopilot that he found unnerving.

He hoped Lisa could help them, he didn’t know what else to do. Well, there was the obvious but Len didn’t want to take Barry to see some shrink, what would they even tell them? They couldn’t exactly just come and say that he had been kidnapped by a speedster and taken to another earth where he endured months of torture and oh by the way he was once the Flash. Lisa was the only one he could trust; outsiders help was never an option in the Snart family.

They sure could have used it growing up, though, a friendly neighbour, a social worker, someone, anyone to see the abuse they were going through and save them from it. No one stepped into help, not even their own mother, who’d let them down in so many ways. It was Len who protected Lisa, taking the beatings so Lisa didn’t have too, it was Len who cooked dinner in the evenings and made sure Lisa was up in time for school. He’d always put her first, vowing to never let harm come her away again. In this moment he feels glad that his father is dead, he can’t hurt them anymore and that is enough to set Len free of his past. Well some of it, enough of it.

Barry is still very much haunted by what Zoom has done to him and the sad truth is he’ll always carry it around with him, it cannot be forgotten but in time it gets easier to bear. In time the nightmares trickle away, the fear ebbs and the pain fades, making the world seem a little less grey, a little brighter. He isn’t going to get to these milestones if he stays shut off, though, it’s important to get him feeling again.

“Hey, Lenny” Lisa’s smiling voice answers when she picks up on the second ring. “How’s life in the great outdoors?”

“Well the air is fresh and the trees are tall” he replied sarcastically “it’s actually not that bad.”

“Lucky asshole” she quipped “I have been cramming for finals so I don’t even remember what the wind on my face feels like.”

“It feels cold” he deadpanned “not quite the bone chilling cold but give it a few days and it’ll get there.”

Lisa laughed, there was the sound of pages ruffling and he pictured her sitting on her bed, books spread out around and pen tucked behind her ear. “Are you calling just to check in or is there something wrong?”

“A little of both” he confessed. “I do have some questions for you about Barry, he’s been acting strange.”

“Well Lenny he has just been through hell, it’s normal for him to be acting a number of ways” she stated pages silent in the background now.
“I know that, but this is different” in the distance he watched the kids turn to leave, their mothers calling them from where they sat on the benches drinking coffees and gossiping. “He’s become so detached and weirdly cheerful at the same time. It’s been two weeks of this and Sara and I are worried and we really don’t have a clue what to do.”

Lisa hummed in thought on the other side, “it sounds like emotional detachment. He’ll most likely snap out of it on his own. I’m having some coffee with some class friends later so I will run it by them and see what they think the best cause of treatment is. It is probably just a temporary coping strategy; a person can only take so much.”

“Don’t we know it” he huffed, watching the mothers leave with their children in tow, the park fell into silence.

“We made it, though, Len,” Lisa said, a touch of a smile in her voice “we were screwed up but we turned ourselves around. I am proud of you, Lenny, I am proud of us.”

Tears blurred his vision; he quickly wiped them away before they could fall. No one had ever been proud of him, why would they be? He was just some thief and murder that was going to end up dead in a ditch someday after he crossed the wrong guy. Lisa, Sara, Barry, they looked at him with warm pride; they stood by his side and believed in him even when he didn’t believe in himself. The Snart children had become better than the low life parents that failed them, that was a miracle and it was something to be proud of. “I’m proud of us too, Lis.”

With the fall wind blowing coldly over him, he started to thaw, to move an inch in the direction of okay.

XxX

He didn’t mean to get this lost, he just wanted a day to be okay, to enjoy and forget. One day to push the past four months aside and enjoy a stroll through the woods, a carefree afternoon in the sunlight. He deserved to forget for a while, to be more than the ruined mess he’d become. He’d tried and then the leaves fell down and he was hurtled back to the asylum, after that the memories kept resurfacing and the more he remembered the further he withdrew. One day became two then three and then four and suddenly he didn’t want to feel again, he wasn’t sure he was feeling at all and that used to scare him. The days he felt like an observer to his own body made him feel like he was losing his mind. He doesn’t mind the numbness anymore, he doesn’t mind that he feels like a puppet and an outside force is pulling his strings.

He doesn’t mind it at all.

He’s been able to live again. He’s gone into town, walked through the woods and carved pumpkins for Halloween. He’s smiled and laughed, he’s eating again and sure the food taste bland and his laugh sounds foreign and his smile feels all wrong, but he doesn’t care. He can’t feel a damn thing. Not even the nightmares that tear him from his sleep bother him anymore. There is that first sudden jolt of panic, a flicker of phantom touches and then it’s gone, lost to the numbness like everything else.

Zoom can’t hurt him here in his world of illusion. He has no power here. He’s been set free of the misery, the wretchedness, he moves around in the world like a ghost, there but not there at all. He’s trapped himself in this world of delusion and somewhere there is a voice screaming wake up, let me out, but he holds it captive. Tonight he moves among the gathered crowds without fear, without excitement, he watches the festival unfold around him, see’s all the joyful faces and pretty bright lights without feeling a damn thing. His emotions have drifted away on the autumn winds; an unknown force moves him through the world, protecting him from the things he should be feeling.
The night is alive with ecstatic children running through the streets, people dancing and playing silly games and telling scary stories. He moves through the crowd without fear, music drifts towards him from up ahead, screams echo in the distance from the horror house maze. Len and Sara trail him through the throng of people dressed as vampires, witches, devils and angels, the reach the edge of town where people have gathered to watch the local Halloween play.

The world around him feels so very far away, it’s distorted and twisted and turned into something that doesn’t even feel real. If the world isn’t real then nothing in it is and therefore nothing can hurt him. Nothing can hurt him while he doesn’t feel a thing. Boldly, numbly, he drifts away from Len and Sara, weaving through the horde of people towards the edge of the towering dark woods. His legs carry him out of the crowd, he spins around to search for Len and Sara but they’ve become lost in the mass of masks and darkness. There is no fear, there is no nothing, he surveys his surroundings for a place to sit, the autumn night breeze ruffling fingers through his hair.

Everyone looks the same in the light of the moon and orange glow from the jack-o-lanterns, vampires, witches and ghouls all moulding into one until his eyes land on a glint of silver. A flicker of fear whispers through the numbness, eyes widen as they look up from the glint that is a knife held firmly in a clawed black leather hand. It’s like being pulled over a thousand shards of glass, one moment he is an observer to his own life then tug, snap, pull he is whole again and he is alive with fear.

Eyes trail up to a masked face to meet black soulless eyes. His nightmares have come alive, they’ve clawed and fought their way out of his mind and now they stand before him, real, breathing, here. Zoom is here, he’s crossed over on this hallowed evening, he’s returned and he’s coming for him. All at once he feels everything, fear, sorrow, anger, hopelessness and horror, everything that he'd locked away collides into with the force of a train.

The world is sharp, loud, burning bright in colour and so terrifyingly real and if the world's real then so is the monster staring at him from across the way. Heart pounding like a war drum and adrenaline pulsing through him like fire he turns on his heel and runs into the woods. He runs, runs, runs, the world a blur of branches that rip and tear at his skin and trees that tower over him with hands and teeth. Something in the dark trips him, down, down, down he falls to the forest floor.

It’s dark where he has fallen, no moonlight or glittering stars to pierce the night. Air escapes his lungs, he can’t move, can’t breathe, he’s lost, Zoom is chasing him, he’s coming, he’s coming, he’s coming. He doesn’t feel numb anymore; he is drowning in panic, bones rattling in the way… in the way, the cot used to rattle. Fear consumes him, he’s gasping for breath through corrupted lungs, phantom hands grab at his clothing, hot breath whispers in his ear, teeth dig painfully into his neck.

He feels a knife slicing at the sensitive flesh of his inner thighs, there is an electric currents rippling through his body, seizing every muscle. There are hands prying his legs apart, there is someone forcing themselves inside him. He screams, hysterically fighting away the monster who is not there, trembling legs heave him to his feet and propel him forwards and away, away, away. He doesn’t hear the panicked voices of his friends calling out after him; all he knows is that he has to keep running because if he stumbles he’ll be eaten alive.

XxX

His hearts beating like a hammer.

He doesn’t remember what he’s done to deserve this new punishment or maybe it’s a show of ownership, they all blur together these days. Pain, misery, fear it’s all he knows now. He wants to
die. His gut summersaults every time the sharp edge of the blade slices into the delicate flesh of his inner thighs. Blood trickles down onto the crimson stained mattress, he's gotten very used to the feeling of blood, the way it feels different dripping down his chin compared to the way it feels pooling between quivering legs. Pain has become his life, he lives and breathes it. Misery is his world now; fear has unpacked and made a home in his heart.

He wished it would all go away, he wished someone would take it all away.

Especially now he's pregnant. He's inescapably pregnant and his threats to cause a miscarriage were meet with bruises, broken fingers and promises to kill everyone he's ever loved. He accepts his fate with bitter tears; he has given himself wholly to Zoom. There is no fight left in him. He'll stay here in the dark, with a monster carving patterns into his flesh and wither away in fear and loneliness. He hopes to God he dies giving birth, he could escape and his family and friends wouldn’t have to pay the price.

In this moment he can't handle the sick sensation of the blade sliding into his flesh. He shuts his eyes to find his field of paper flowers and candy clouds; he lies inside himself and watches his purple sky fly over him. Waiting, praying, hoping for it to be over; for someone, something, anything to take him away.
I Feel Numb (Make Me Better)

I feel numb, make me better
I feel numb in this kingdom
I feel numb, make me better
I feel numb in this kingdom

Dauhgter - Numbers

It had been so dark, so very dark; the forest had come to life around him, trees shifting into ravenous monsters, animals scurrying in the night sound like vicious beasts. There was no light to guide his way, he’d run blindly into the wilderness, not carrying where he stopped as long as it was somewhere safe. Time lost all meaning as he ran, not even the bitter cold of the night slowed him in his mad rush to escape the monster stalking him. The world became nothing more than wicked hands reaching out of the dark to shred his flesh from his bones, hungry teeth biting at his legs, tripping him to the cold hard ground.

He continued to run until his lungs burnt and his legs gave up on him. Falling to the ground once more, curling into a ball, praying that he wouldn’t find him. He became lost in the darkness, lost to the world he’d forged in his head. He was safe in his kingdom of delusion. It was different to the numbness of the past two weeks, he’d been emptied of any emotions but still perfectly able to see and be a part of the world around him. Now he was gone, hidden away in his paradise so fear and all its friends couldn’t reach him.

Panicked voices seeped through the delusion, his name echoing in the wind. Again and again, his name reverberated in his head, voices rising in panic and volume. They were getting closer. These voices didn’t belong to pain or fear, they wrapped around him like a familiar blanket. These voices reminded him of safety, warmth, blue eyes and tender smiles; they pierced through his purple sky, ripping it away to reveal the silhouettes of interlocking branches.

He doesn’t remember getting to his feet, everything is dark and his vision tunnels and his mind skips like an old record player. One moment he is alone in the dark woods and the next there is light blinding his eyes and ashen faces running towards him. The world tilts and wilts around him, the ground vanishes beneath his feet and he expects to find himself falling only to find himself rising. Warmth is the first thing he notices, next is the movement that isn’t his.

He doesn’t remember the rest of the journey back to the cabin; it’s a blur of faces, lights and blankets being draped around his numb body. It’s the distant sound of water that chases away the daze, vision clears and he finds himself huddled in blankets, Len’s strong arms wrapped securely around him. He’s in his room, shivering even beneath the heavy blankets, words whisper soothing nonsense in his ear. Sara appears before him, she is speaking but the words sound like they’re floating down to him from above water.

The room is gone; he’s sitting in the steam covered bathroom, watching Sara carefully remove his clothing. He hasn’t been undressed with tenderness in such a long time; Zoom had always ripped and torn away his clothing to get at the already bruised and bloody skin beneath. Tears streak a path down his grimed covered face, time jumbles and he finds himself submerged in the hot bath, warm water cascading down his back, biting at the cuts and abrasions.

Teeth chatter violently though he doesn’t feel cold, he’s too exhausted to feel much of anything. He’s barely conscious, fighting back the tendrils of darkness that strain to pull him into his nightmare world. Blinking rapidly he focuses on the warmth of the water, the gentleness of Sara’s
hand and the sound of his heart returning to a steady rhythm. The wicked fear that had devoured him before has ebbed, leaving him clear minded enough to realise he’d been running from nothing. Zoom was dead and he hadn’t risen from the grave to haunt him, the ominous figure he saw had just been a man dressed for Halloween.

He was still safe. A hand moves protectively to his stomach by its own accord, it rests on warm wet skin and he thinks they are both safe. He lets out a mangled laugh that escalates into a broken sob that is followed by a downpour of tears. The floodgates have been opened and there is no stopping them now, salty tears drip down his chin, getting lost in the soapy water below. Sara soothes him with hushed words of reassurances, he lets her wash away the dirt and blood and help him redress once she is done.

He’s dead on his feet, the bathroom vanishes around him and the ceiling of his room takes its place. He feels bodies pressed up against his own, no fear stirs at the evasion of space, for once the bodies pressed close to his make him feel safe, protected. He drifts to sleep knowing the warmth surrounding him belongs to the people protecting him and for once he does not wake in terror. He doesn’t wake until the morning sun is filtering in through the curtains, casting the three of them in an orange glow. He wakes to find his head pillowed on Len’s chest and for the first time in two weeks he begins to feel again.

XxX

He’s almost perfect. Almost everything he could want. It’s been deliciously fun breaking him, watching the hero die day by day. He’s indulged in his darkest fantasies, thrived on every moment that Barry cried out in pain, begging and pleading for him to stop. It’s been wickedly fun taking him apart, it’s darkly divine to bury himself deep into his body and let the pleasure he reaps consume him. Breaking him had been a beautiful challenge, he was almost sad when the light died from his eyes. Sometimes embers flickered when he hesitated to get on his knees or when he jolted away from his touch. There were only fleeting, though, butterflies of rebellion fluttering by before being squashed out of existence.

In the end, it was easy to get the Flash to crumble between his fingers, to fall apart under the heavy weight of his body. He had his perfectly behaved prize until he was threatening to kill their unborn child. Jay hadn’t known he was a carrier, when he first fucked him he registered that he felt different and it wasn’t until he was buried within him a few weeks later that he realised what it was. He was a carrier, he’d never been with one of them before, he certainly enjoyed it then again he enjoyed all of this.

Afterwards, as he was cleaning himself off he realised he had an opportunity to have everything that was so violently taken from him. They could have a family; he could have a real family for the first time in his life. Imagine how powerful they could be, they could conquer this earth, conquer every earth and live among riches and reign over the multi-verse. It would be delightful and Barry could already be pregnant, it had been a month and Jay hadn’t been able to keep his hands to himself.

He’d have to start being careful where he landed his blows and choose his methods of torture wisely. He didn’t want to give up all his fun; he didn’t want Barry to have those embers burst back into flames either. He’d also need to increase the food he fed him, nutrition was important when it came to pregnancies. He’d been away from his captive for a little over two days now, he was sorting out some issues with his following Meta’s and honestly he needed to step away for a while. He’d hurt Barry a little too much the other morning, fucked him a little too hard against a wall, so he thought he’d best give him time to heal.
He’d give him one more day. He still had a few things to take care of and while he could simply kill the troublesome Meta’s he’d rather keep them around for his amusement. Tomorrow he would start; first, he’d bring back some healthy food to get Barry’s body ready to carry their child then he’d get to the best part.

XxX

The first snowflake daintily flutters down from the sombre grey sky at exactly ten past eleven, after that the sky breaks open and a flurry of flakes descend upon the land below. The temperature drops rapidly; Barry tightens the parka around his shoulders and takes a long drink of his steaming cocoa. From his cosy seat in the conservatory, he can see every individual snowflake dance in the breeze that billows through the trees that now stand grey and skeleton against the dark sky.

Outside gradually morphs into a white wonderland, Len and Sara join him to watch in silence, basking in the serenity of the moment. It can’t last for long, it won’t last for long, he’s emotions have switched back on and the inside of his mind is as dark and morbid as the day outside. Memories that have swum up from beneath the murky water now trouble him; fear is once again king of his emotions. It’s an awful feeling; it reminds him of the night sixteen years ago when he found himself standing on an empty street. It’s the feeling one gets when they’re are scared out of their mind, only now he is suspended in it, suspended on that empty street, suspended naked and bleeding beneath Zoom, trapped continuously in panic.

It needs to go, to blow away on the winter wind and float up, up and away. That isn’t possible of course; these feelings are now a part of him, as much as the scars and the growing child. One hand rests upon his stomach, occasionally he moves it in soothing circles over the small bump, smiling to himself at the comfort it brings. It’s nice to have one thing that doesn’t induce fear, something sweet and bright to pierce the valley of darkness. In his numbed state over the past two weeks he’d been unable to feel the spark of happiness at the thought of his child or the affection he felt swelling within his heart when his eyes meet Len’s.

The switch had been flicked and the emotions rattled through him like a freight train, relighting every nerve, every cell of his body. With the dark storm came the sunshine trying desperately to break through, the little reminders that even though he was hurting there were still things worth feeling for. The nervous excitement for his baby, the curious feelings for Len, the friendship and gratitude for Sara are worth feeling. In the dark it’s easy to lose sight of the way, now he’s seeing the light again, even on this cold and bleak winter’s day.

Seeing what he’d thought had been Zoom last night made him come back to life. Even though he felt icy fear in his veins and every time he closed his eyes a memory flashed in his mind he still felt a small ember sparking back to life. When the emptiness consumed him, all the light and darkness had been taken from him and not having to experience the panic and sadness was wonderful. Not being able to feel those little, important, blink and you’ll miss them moments of joy was horrible. If he had to spend every day in fear, every night enduring nightmares then he had to savour those moments, they were his stepping stones to recovery, the kindle for his embers.

Healing comes painfully, it takes time, missteps and bad days but in the end, whenever that may be, it would be worth it. He was rivers and roads from okay but he was teetering on the edge of being ready to head in its direction. He could start by telling Len and Sara about what spooked him last night, perhaps after he could admit why the falling leaves had left him in a panicked state. In his mind, there is a towering wall filled with boxes, each one contains a painful memory and over time in order to heal he’s going to have to unpack them all. There are rows and rows of them, soaring up high above him.
Where would he even start? There are so many days, hours, minutes and seconds to sort through and each time he opens a lid and sets the story free he’ll re-experience every detail. As the snow drifts down, covering the ground in white, he decides he’s not ready to talk just yet. Maybe tomorrow; maybe he’ll talk on a snowy evening before a roaring in a few weeks from now. Today his legs hurt from running and his body aches in the cold, he’s dreadfully tired and all he wants to do is curl up and watch the first snowfall of the season. Today he can at least feel again and that’s a good start. Tomorrow, well who knows what tomorrow will bring, he just knows that each day will bring a lot of painful memories and tiny moments of happiness.

He holds on for those moments.

XxX

He can’t stop being sick. He’s become far too familiar with the cobweb riddled depleted bathroom that the locked ward has to offer. Every morning he wakes to the feeling of heavy nausea washing over him, taking calming breaths and sips of water do nothing to ease the sensation. He ends up running to the bathroom and vomiting what little food he can manage to eat into the toilet. The first week of his captivity he felt sick, sometimes throwing up after Zoom finished with him. He’d walk away, leaving Barry feeling disgusted and violated, bile already rising in his throat. He’d vomit to purge himself of his touch, his sweat, his cum; he’d sob openly in the bathroom, huddled naked beside the toilet. Over the course of the first week, he got used to feeling dirty, violated and used and the sickness eventually faded away like the hero in him.

This sickness is new, it feels completely different. Maybe he is getting sick. Wouldn’t that be lovely? To die of something as mundane as a stomach bug when he was sure Zoom’s temper would one day be the death of him. Perhaps one day he’d find the strength to end it all himself. There is still a small box of hope in his chest, he closes his eyes and imagines his team busting in with guns blazing, saving him, bringing him home. He still holds onto hope, not as strongly as he used to but still holds on.

Currently, he is sitting beside the toilet, nausea passing through him in waves. It reminds him of the time he went yachting with Iris and some of her friends; he’d thrown up on Isabell Day’s shoes and was deemed unworthy of their friendship. He’d much rather face the kids from high school then be sitting in a grimy old bathroom waiting for his captor to return. He wondered what kind of depravity and torture would be in store for him today. What new ways had Zoom decided to hurt him with? Would he force him to his knees, push him down on all fours or take him right here on the stained concrete floor. It’s sad that he’s almost gotten used to this, he waits like an obedient lap dog. If his friends could see him now they’d be disgusted. He would be as disgraced as he was the day he threw up on a pair of Mary Janes.

Footsteps approaching have him quivering in fear; he counts the seconds it takes for Zoom to arrive. He appears in the doorway, leaning casually against the frame, staring in at him with an unreadable expression. He looks so normal dressed in his brown leather jacket and dark denim jeans, he smiles his James Dean smile and closes the space between them. Barry hates when he acts like this, he’d rather the rage or the lust fuelled Zoom than the charming boy next door act any day.

When he acts like this, when he secures the disarmingly sweet mask in place Barry believes he can reach out to a part of him that is still good. If he looks hard enough he’ll find a pile of smouldering ashes and be able to fan it back to life. There must be some good buried in there somewhere, a ghost of the boy he once was, something, anything for Barry to use to gain his freedom. There are rare moments where he treats Barry with something akin to tenderness.
He’ll on occasion help him clean up after he hurts him after he fucks him and he knows it doesn’t make what he’s doing to him okay, but it’s nice to have his wounds tended too, to have someone bring him his favourite food and warm clothes to wear. It’s a trick, it’s a big game to fuck with his mind and if lets Zoom in then it’s a downward spiral into Stockholm Syndrome after that. Zoom can have his body, he can bruise it, cut it and fuck it but he’ll never give him his mind.

He won’t believe the lie...

He’ll try to believe the lies.

He’s the monstrous villain of this tale and the villain always dies in the end. He just has to hold on, believe that his friends can get to him before there is nothing left to save. He shakes the thoughts from his mind; Zoom is helping him to his feet, body tensing in preparation of the oncoming pain. Zoom doesn’t hit him or start shredding the clothing from his body, instead, he holds out a white plastic device that Barry first thinks is a thermometer.

It’s not. It’s really not. It’s a pregnancy test. Oh God, please don’t let him be pregnant. He’d spent years avoiding the fact he was a carrier, the acceptance of his friends had helped him to feel less abnormal about it but he’d never had the time to really think about what it meant to him. He’d been too busy being the Flash to focus on his other unusual ability and maybe one day he would have been okay with it, that day was never going to come now. He’d never been so revolted by his own anatomy; he wished he’d gone to extreme measures to get rid of his extra parts, now there is no chance. He could be pregnant with his captor’s baby, with the child of the man who has been raping and torturing him for two months.

He wants to remain calm, he really does but his world is crumbling to ash around him and all he can do is stand there and let it. Not this time, something snaps, he’s shouting and raging like a summer storm, it comes fast and wild. A sharp slap across the face has the storm shattering to sickening fear, he’s angered him, he’s going to be punished. He’s shaking violently as Zoom orders him in a deadly calm voice to take the test. He obeys, it’s positive. Zoom is eerily thrilled. Barry wants to die. He wants to purge his body of the vile creature, he’s shouting again, threatening to harm himself and the unborn child.

Hours later when he is shackled to the blood-stained bed, weeping softly into his pillow and body hurting in new ways, he resigns himself to his fate. He’ll bear Zoom’s child, he’ll spend the rest of his life cowering in fear and being beaten and raped. There is no hope left inside his chest now, the box is not only empty but it’s shattered into ten thousand pieces and all the wire, nails and tape couldn’t put it together again.

XXX

The edges of the lake have frozen in the first snowfall; the water is black under the winter sky. It’s bitterly cold standing at the lake’s edge, it doesn’t bother Len though, he skips a stone lazily across the oily surface, watching it skim across the top until finally sinking down into its murky depths. Sara materialised at his side, hands stuffed into her pockets and plumes of breath clouding the air. He hadn’t even heard her approach; last night’s events had been replaying on an endless loop in his mind. He hasn’t been able to rid himself of the panic since he looks at Barry and feels his heart lurch into his throat all over again.

He’d been watching him, shadowing him through the bustling streets, waiting at the ready. When they left for the night he had a terrible feeling in his gut, the kind of feeling he got when he knew a heist was going to go down wrong, the kind of feeling he used to get when his dad arrived him drunk and looking to hurt someone. Lisa and Mick had always trusted his intuition, if he said they should postpone a gig then they did, never once calling it into question.
He knew something bad was going to happen and it did. From his place among the celebrating crowd he saw Barry run into the woods, without hesitation he took after him, shoving his way through the crowd without regard to the people around him. By the time he reached the clearing Barry had vanished, swallowed by the darkness. There was no time to wait, he ran into the woods, screaming his name into the dark, Sara following a few paces behind.

It took almost an hour of running around in the dark to find him and when they did he looked as traumatised as the day he rushed out of the precinct, right into Len’s arms. Len had gotten his wish; there was no more vacant look in his eyes, they were round and full of fear. Whatever had happened had been enough to jar Barry back to life, Len lifted him from his swaying feet, rushing back towards the town. He didn’t let go off him until Sara gently pried him from his arms, taking him to where he couldn’t follow.

He’d sat slumped against the wall outside the bathroom until Sara reappeared, a cloud of steam billowing into the cold hallway. They helped Barry to bed, staying there to offer him comfort, to offer themselves comfort. When he woke in the morning, room lit by golden light, he found Barry’s head pillowed on his chest. Hours later and he can still feel the warmth where his head had rested; he keeps touching the spot over his heart, expecting to find him still there.

“What’s up with you?” Sara’s question cuts through his thoughts “I could see your brooding shoulders from over there.”

“I didn’t know one could have ‘brooding shoulders’” he skated around the question, he was perfectly happy to sort through the mess in his head on his own. It’s what he had always done after all.

“This is about last night, isn’t it?” Sara probed

He doesn’t meet her eyes; instead, he bends to collect a handful of stones, the damp coldness seeps through his gloves. He thought last night that he’d lost Barry that he’d vanished into the darkness forever. Failure and guilt had pounded through him as he stumbled his way through the woods. Unthinkable scenarios played out in his mind; Barry at the bottom of a gully with a broken neck. Barry huddled beneath a tree, frozen solid. Barry sinking down, down, down into the cold dark depths of the river that ran right through town. Gone, he’d be gone and Len would never get to know what they could be, he’d never get a chance to help make him better.

They had found him, scared, cold and bleeding but most importantly alive. As Len sat in the hallway listening to Barry sob from behind the closed door, he finally realised that the curious lust that sparked in his chest all those months ago had spiralled into something else. He was in love with Barry Allen, he was irrevocably in love with him and it was terrifying. Len didn’t love easily or often. His past relationships had all ended in disaster; he could never give enough of himself to his partners. That’s why they left in the end or he’d cut it off before it got messy, he didn’t want that this time, though, he wanted to give Barry his heart and soul, not some fickle, complicated mess.

He was being selfish right now, pinning and brooding while he had a job to do. He’d have to bury his feelings for the sake of the mission. Fix Barry, save Barry that was all that mattered, it was the job and he was supposed to be good at doing his job without getting romantically involved. He was already involved, though wasn’t he? His feelings had grown into something akin to love before he had even set foot off the Wave Rider. Did Rip know that? Did Rip know he could compromise this mission because of his stupid heart? Or did Rip choose him because he knew how he felt about Barry? He knew so much about everyone it wouldn’t be a surprise that he knew where Len’s heart lied.
“Len?”

He snaps back into reality, shaking the tangled mess of thoughts from his head and turns to face Sara. “Yeah” he half-lied “I feel like we failed him. We shouldn’t have let him go into town. He jumps at shadows for God’s sake and we let him go to a place crawling with people dressed as monsters.”

“We’ve been playing the nice guys a little too much, I think” Sara sighed. “We put him in harm’s way because we don’t want to deny him things. We let him get around for two weeks as a zombie because we were too scared to sit him down and talk to him. We might have to start playing good cop, bad cop with him and as much I don’t want to push him I feel like we’re letting him down by not doing anything.”

“I feel awful at just the thought of just being firm with him” he confessed. “I’m worried he’ll be afraid of us or that it will make him shut us out again.”

“I think we’re going to have to take that risk” Sara replied, “that is also why I suggested the good cop, bad cop routine.”

“So he only hates one of us, good idea” he nodded in agreement, skipping another stone out across the lake “any chance you want to be the bad cop first?”

“I knew you were going to ask that” Sara took the remaining stone from Len’s hand. “I wish Nyssa was here, she wasn’t afraid to push me to talk and sometimes I hated her for it but she didn’t let me stay trapped in my misery.”

“She also trained you to be assassin” Len pointed out.

“Well, yes but I allowed her to” she pitched the stone across the water, it skimmed the water gracefully, nearly making it to the middle of the lake before succumbing like all the others before it. “I found it helpful, though, I had something to focus my energy on.” She explained “I could let out my rage and my sorrow. I got lost in the training and for a while, I could escape the pain. If I wasn’t feeling sad then I was angry and learning to fight helped me centre those emotions. I had to reign in my emotions or I would lose and I am not suggesting we teach Barry how to be an assassin but maybe we should get him a hobby to focus on as well as getting him to open up more.”

“So we want a balancing act?” Len inquired.

“Basically, yeah,” Sara replied. “I’ve read online that hobbies are very good for people with post-traumatic stress and it wouldn’t hurt us to try some creative therapy either.” She nudged him with her elbow encouragingly.

“Well, I suppose if we’re not talking about our feelings then we’re not being very good role models.” Talking about his emotions wasn’t something Len was very good at, suffering in silence was more his thing. He wanted to be better, he needed to be better if he was ever going to be worthy of Barry’s love. Opening up about his past would help him head in the right direction. “From this day forward we don’t hide things; we talk openly and face our demons head on.”

“I don’t know about you, but I have a lot of demons to face.”

“We all do” his lips quirked up into a smile “but that’s why we’ve got each other. We’re a team, messed up and broken but a team nonetheless.”

Sara mirrored Len’s smile “We’re team, now can we go back to the cabin before we turn into icicles?”
Len laughed, it drifted across the lake and echoed back to them from the other side. “Sure, even I’m finding it too chilly here and Barry is probably wondering what’s taking us so long.”

Together they headed back to the cabin, the lake shimmering behind them like a lost treasure.

XxX

Barry’s face scraps painfully against a brick wall; his mouth tastes of copper and paint. Zoom thrusts into without mercy, it feels like aeons since he was first brutally forced into the wall that he’d walked up to just to get a better look at the moth fluttering against the painted brick. It had been a long time since he saw something beautiful, something free and alive. For a moment he indulged in the fantasy of the moth growing bigger, growing enormous, it would invite him onto its back and flutter its strong wings and take him home.

It did not grow, its golden wings spread out and it fluttered up and out through the cracked, cobweb riddled window. Away it flew to places brighter than here. He didn’t get a chance to walk away, to go back to sitting alone on the rickety blood stained bed. A shadow loomed behind him, unwanted hands pulling down his pants in one swift tug. He didn’t stop the hands or the intruding fingers; he held back a sob as teeth nipped bloody marks onto his neck. Silently he took his punishment, bending forward, spreading his legs, staying still; he endured it all without complaint.

It was his fault after all. He’d been asking for this for months. He wore the red suit, smiled too sweetly, gave too much trust away; he fluttered his lashes and licked his lips in invitation. He shouldn’t have been charming or funny or smart and most importantly he shouldn’t have been a hero. It was his fault, he deserved this. Zoom wouldn’t have ever known he existed if he hadn’t opened the breech; he made Zoom want him with his laugh and his legs and his ass.

So he bites back the sobs as Zoom fucks him violently into the wall. He ignores the taste of copper and paint flecks on his tongue and looks up to the window ledge, where the moth has returned. It sits in a sliver of sunshine, beating its golden wings in time of his beating heart. It’s returned to him, it can’t grant him freedom; it can’t grow enormous and crush Zoom beneath its legs. It can sit there silently, a friend to seek out in dark times.

XxX

Barry wakes with a scream dying in his throat. The cabin is cold, windows frosting over and the fire nothing more than smouldering cinders. They’ve left him; they’ve finally come to their senses and left him. The thought comes without warning; it blows through him like a tornado and leaves him gasping for air. Fear turns his blood to ice; he gets to his feet and races upstairs, a voice of reason telling him that he’ll find Len and Sara sitting in their rooms. Both of rooms are empty, the house feels so cold, his mind is spinning out of control.

He tastes copper and paint on his tongue. His face aches and when he rushes to look in the bathroom mirror he is honestly surprised to not find it bloodied and purpled. There are phantom hands grabbing hungrily at his pants, he looks down only to find empty air. With a deep shaky breath, he lifts his gaze back to the mirror; he notices a fluttering behind him, he can practically hear the wings beating against the air. When he goes to turn an invisible force shoved into him, his face collides into his reflection, spiral cracks splintering beneath his skull.

In the shattered glass he no longer sees fluttering; instead, his eyes find a distorted, ravenous grin. He screams. He screams until his lung feel like they have been drenched in gasoline and set ablaze. He screams until he collapses to the ground in a heap. When he opens his eyes he finds himself alone once more, no moth and no grinning monster. His face aches, his tongue still taste like copper and decade old paint. He gets to his feet and stares at his broken reflection, blood drips
freely down his face, falling with the faintest sound into the porcelain sink

The sound unravels him. He’s suspended in air, arms on fire, body seizing with electric currents. He’s face first into a wall, brick scraping painfully into his soft flesh, mouth full of blood and dust. He’s flat on his back, cot vibrating and rattling beneath him, fighting with fists and teeth. He’s on his knees. He’s alone in the dark. There is hot breath whispering into his ear ‘this is your fault, you deserve this, you asked for it.’ There are sharp teeth at his ear, fingers lacing around his throat.

In the cracked reflection he finds himself no longer alone, Zoom is to his right, to his left, behind him, touching him, invading him, overtaking him. He can’t move, can’t scream, he stays frozen in fear. No one is coming for him. Len and Sara have abandoned him. He can’t blame them, look at him? He’s a mess, he’s broken, hollowed out and all that is left is the ghost of the man he once was. He used to think the Barry’s in the photo frames were the ghosts, now he sees it was him all along.

“I broke you,” Zoom’s words crawl over his skin, leaving goosebumps in their wake. “You were made to be broken. It’s what you deserve, remember?” Teeth bite sharply at his ear “you wore that tight little red suit like a whore, you battered your lashes and smiled with that pretty mouth of yours.” Fingers whisper over his face, stopping to press painfully into the bleeding gash on his cheek. “This is your punishment for not being good enough, for being a hero, for being too smart, for being too trusting, kind, funny, strong, weak, guilty.”

He’s shouting now, the ground where he stands shutters and shakes, glass trickles from the mirror as the world around him explodes. Zoom rages in his ear, voices scream in his head, words overlapping and looping until he feels like he is going to lose his mind. The immensity of the rising screams has Barry crumpling to the ground, feeling small, lost and alone in a storm of emotions. He’s a ship ready to be lost forever to the cold black waters of the sea.

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“Barry, oh my God, Barry!”

“Scarlet, come back to us.”

It feels like he’s been an eternity since he sunk, down, down, down to the darkest depths of the ocean. Voices echo down from the world above, surely they are just tricks, just illusions breaking through the dark waters. They come again and again, gentle, panicked, tender, they call to him. Voices, light beams full of hope breaking through the darkness and showing safe passage to the surface, if he can just find the strength to swim up, up, up. They call to him, they sound like safety and warmth, he blinks open his eyes to find he is no longer in the bathroom; instead, he is sitting on something warm, solid and breathing.

It takes a few minutes for the fog to clear and when it does he learns the thing he is sitting on is Len, being held tightly in his arms. The firmness doesn’t frighten him; he’s wrecked, emptied out once more. There are no more voices screaming in his mind, no imaginary moths fluttering their wings and no more phantom touches against his skin. He doesn’t feel warm, he doesn’t feel cold, there is no trickle of anxiety or spark of joy, there is just the emptiness inside his head, inside his heart.

He doesn’t want to feel like this. He doesn’t want the fear but he can’t live without his precious moments of joy. He wants to feel Len’s warmth against him, he wants to feel the way his stomach fills with butterflies whenever Len is around, he doesn’t want to be a ghost passing through life. He needs to feel, he wants to get better, he doesn’t want to see monsters in mirrors, in crowds and in shadows. He wants to make amends for all the wrong he has done. He wants to show the world he
is sorry for being a tease. He knows he deserved it, but please doesn’t he get a chance to change? He won’t wear tight leather; he won’t bat his lashes or lick his lips in invitation.

*It’s my fault. I feel numb. I deserve this. Make me better.* Thoughts jumble in his mind, around and around they go. *It’s my fault, I deserve this. I feel numb, make me better.* “It’s my fault. I feel numb. I deserve this. Make me better. It’s my fault, I deserve this. I feel numb, make me better.” The words break free of his mind “It’s my fault, I deserve this. I feel numb, make me better!” He’s screaming hysterically, crying like a banshee and clawing at his skin like he can tear himself free.

Hands pry nails from bleeding skin; hands force him down onto a bed that rattles under the weight. He’s pleading, begging, please; not again, please, stop, not again. The weight is gone, he’s left sobbing, hurting and alone on a mattress that feels softer than it once did. He blinks, swallowing the sob in his throat; he’s not in the asylum. He’s not lost on some God forsaken earth. He’s in a tiny cabin deep in the winter woods. Moments before he was on Len’s lap, he wants to find himself there again. He doesn’t deserve to be, he doesn’t deserve Len or Sara, he’s ruined and it’s his fault.

“Barry, hey no, shh” Sara is at his side, draping a blanket over his shivering body. “‘It is not your fault.’”

He wanted to believe her, but he just can’t. “It is my fault” it’s a whisper, he’d never said those words aloud before and he hates the way they make his mouth taste like blood and ash.

“No, Barry, don’t ever think that okay?” Sara implored “I thought it too and I was wrong, so wrong! Whatever mistakes I had made in my life were not worthy of such cruelty.” Tears sparkle in her eyes, she absentmindedly swept them away. “Barry it’s not your fault, please believe me.”

“She’s right, Scarlet.” Len appeared at his other side; face twisted in distress “whatever Zoom put into your head is a lie, you didn’t deserve this, any of it.”

“You didn’t deserve it” Sara repeated, taking his hand into her own “you didn’t ask for it. Just… repeat after me: It’s not my fault” she emphasised each word with a firm yet reassuring squeeze. “Keep saying it, okay? Put it on repeat and play it over and over until you can believe it.”

He couldn’t, he wore the wrong things, acted the wrong way, he had made Zoom want him. “I don’t know if I can” he whimpered “I want to believe it, I do, I just feel so numb. I don’t want to be like this! When will it stop?”

“It’ll get better, Barr” Sara soothed “I know it’s awful now. I know that your heads a mess and your heart hurts like it’s never hurt before and I wish I could make the pain stop, I do,” with this she pressed a kiss to the back of his hand “but it’s not going to for quite some time.”

“We’re here for you, Scarlet” Len added, wrapping his strong hand around Barry’s frail one, mindful of the broken finger. “We’re always going to be here for you but you have to do all the hard work, no matter how much we wish we could do it for you.”

“Where do I even start?” he asked, words aggravating his shredded throat.

“You start with ‘it’s not my fault,” Sara said determinedly.

“I… it” words feel heavy on his tongue, they feel like lies even though there is a part, deep down and untouched by Zoom, that knows them to be true. “It’s not…” A heavy wave of tears threaten to break free, every emotion is at war within his head, *within his heart.* “It’s not m…” Zoom had wanted to break him, mould him so they would fit together seamlessly and he had done so with fists, nails, teeth and without noticing his deadliest weapon had been his words.
Slowly, slowly he’d chipped away at Barry until he was at the point of believing it was his fault, that he deserved everything that he did to him. Who was he going to believe? The monster that took and took, broke, bent and shattered him or the two people who stood by his side through every nightmare, breakdown and bad day? He looked at Sara, the girl who’d been hurt just like him but came out the other side stronger than ever. He looked at Len who had gone from his enemy to his friend, his anchor and the solid ground to which he wanted to rebuild on. He opened his mouth and set a small piece of himself free. “It’s not my fault.” He repeated it over and over.

He said it until it became tangled together, he kept saying it until a small part of himself believed it.
Hey, everyone! I feel a bit unsure about this chapter; I actually ended up switching things around so I hope it flows nicely. I would have liked more time to polish it off but I am going away tomorrow to celebrate my birthday with friends, I won’t be back for a week so there will be a delay in chapters sorry! I wanted to give you lovelies an early update before I take off :) Once I get back the story will continue.

Again I do hope this was okay, I don’t have a beta unfortunately and I ran out of time to polish it up. In the meantime, I have added another song for you all to enjoy and I leave you lovelies with a challenge. What will our broken hero’s get each other for Christmas?

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So fill me up and let me try
To show you beauty from inside
I pray I will; I pray I might
Still be somebody worth the fight

Broods - Worth The Fight

He’s running down empty corridors, it’s too dark to see, but he knows with certainty that he’s sprinting through the halls of the asylum. It’s pitch black no matter which direction he turns in; he can’t see a damn thing yet he knows that somewhere in the dark he is lurking, waiting, watching. All he can do is run, run, run. It doesn’t matter how far or how long he runs, he is unable to get away. Wherever he goes the monster in the dark is waiting to greet him.

There is no escape. The halls come alive with deafening screams, reverberating off the walls, crashing over him like a tidal wave. The doors swing open, light spilling out into the darkness to blind him. When he can finally see again, he wishes for the dark. Behind the doors, he finds himself, strung up naked and bleeding to a ceiling, withering and crying beneath Zoom on a rickety bed, face first into a wall, on his knees, screaming, crying, begging. Everywhere he turns he finds himself at Zoom’s mercy, he runs and runs, but there is no end to the suffering, it stretches on in every direction.

He’s lost in a never-ending nightmare. Out of the shadows, he appears, dressed in his mockery of a superhero costume. There is nowhere to go; every door leads him back towards the pain he’s been trying so hard to escape from. There’s no place left to run, nowhere safe to hide; there is nothing left to do but scream.

XxX

It’s still dark out when eyes open, and a harrowing scream pierces the air, rivalling the hoots of the owls and calls of wild dogs. He’s not alone in the dark, Len and Sara are by his side in a matter of seconds, soothing him with gentle words and comforting touches. It’s the same show every night; he wakes from a nightmare with a scream, throat parched and lungs coated in gasoline. It takes a few gut-wrenching moments for him to remember that he is not there anymore.

Each night it seems to get worse, nightmares twisting and warping into something beyond
horrifying. His memories shatter and shift until they are nonsense, when he goes to sleep at night he tumbles down into the darkest, deadliest wonderland. The repressed memories escaping from the locked doors he’d subconsciously sealed them behind have been difficult enough to deal with, now he was plagued by this monstrosity of a nightmare. He feels like he’s going insane, not even Len and Sara climbing into bed with him can ease the dread in his belly and the fear in his veins.

When fatigue wins out, eyes drifting shut the dark corridors flicker to life, head filling with a thousand screams and ten thousand versions of himself begging, crying, dying. Even in the daylight, whether he is sitting before a roaring fire or relaxing in a hot bath, he still feels those eyes on him. All he wants it to be free of the darkness, the fear, the harrowing nightmares. He’ll tell his stories, relive the torment over and over in the hope that soon he’ll be free of their hold over him.

There may be boxes being unpacked, stories unleashed into the cold winters air, but they always find their way home to him. They seep back through the cracks in his skin, returning to their overturned boxes and crawling back in. Late at night, anxious thoughts find him; they whirl around his mind like a hurricane, destroying the hope found in the day. Then morning light comes, a sliver of pale yellow illuminating the darkness to reveal safe passage home.

Bathed in the morning light, with his guardian and anchor by his side, the darkness releases its wicked grip on him. In the light of day he always finds hope, by nightfall, though, the monsters are pounding at the door. In his dreams he will find himself once more in a corridor, surrounded by screams and shrieks. Somewhere in the blackness, he will be, waiting, watching. His life has become a carousel ride, and there is no getting off anytime soon.

He just has to make it through the dark, fight his way through the monsters, memories and nightmares in his head. If he can hold on until dawn then he’ll rise from the ashes reborn, he’ll be able to say he slayed his demons, found light in the darkest hours. It’s easy to believe these things in the light of day, he can believe that he’ll win this raging war, but when night settles, and darkness takes over the land he starts to lose his way. Of course, this is just a metaphor; the darkness finds him at any hour, claiming him, reminding him, suffocating him. It’s a constant battle between believing he will be okay, that his life is worth fighting for and the spiralling dark thoughts that leave him thinking that none of this is worth it.

Wind him up and watch him spiral out of control, where his thoughts land no one knows. There is a war inside his mind, and one day soon a side will win. He’ll either grasp hold of the light in both hands, or he’ll finally tilt forward and plummet to the ground below.

XxX

Two days later

Snow falls heavily outside the window; the glass is frosted over and the skeleton branch scraps hauntingly against the pane of glass. It’s only the third week of November, but Lake View and the town of Apple Grove have succumbed to winter. They’ve been here nearly five weeks, Len has grown familiar with the woods surrounding the cabin, he could walk to and from the lake blindfolded, and he knows several of the locals by name. Len isn’t usually the kind of guy who stays in one place for long. After he left home at sixteen, he bounced around from place to place until he ended up in jail which of course is where he met Mick and his life of crime really started.

Len didn’t have a house to call home; he didn’t have a coat rack or designated place to leave his keys. He had abandoned buildings, empty warehouses and the back seat of cars. There was no place to call his own. For a while he thought maybe the Wave Rider could be a home, he could get a coatrack and a place to rest the cold gun, but after Mick died, it didn’t feel the same. He could
have never really been comfortable among the futuristic tech and sterile environment anyway.

He’d given up hope of finding a place to call his and then Rip walked in and sent him on the most important mission of his life. Now he’s sitting in a cosy cabin deep in the snow-covered woods, and for the first time in what must be a lifetime, he feels like he’s found a home. He knows it’s only temporary, one day soon or maybe some far off day when the first flower wakes to spring, they’ll return to Central City. He won’t mind, though, it’s not the red timbered walls or roaring fire that make this place feel so welcoming. It’s Sara sitting in the space beside him and Barry, who sits opposite them, snuggled up in a blanket and his parka.

It’s the third Wednesday since they’ve started their annual meetings. Each week they sit down upstairs on the grey couches, and Barry reveals, relives, a small piece of the trauma he went through. It’s awful for everyone. Barry walks away teary-eyed and emotionally wrecked. There are few days of him lying around sullenly and looking miserable then he perks up again only to repeat the process. Len hates doing this to him; it seems cruel to force him to sit down and go over the horrors he endured, despite Lisa and Sara assuring him that it’s better for him to get everything out. Barry never protests, he grabs the red woollen blanket from the couch and wraps it around his frail frame like a cocoon.

They started off small, getting him to reveal a lesser trauma before moving up to the bigger things. Not that anyone thing outweighed the other, even the smallest of Barry’s suffering mattered, but they didn’t want to jump straight into the absolute worst thing. The first time they started their sessions was the day after they found Barry crying hysterically in the bathroom, mirror smashed and bloodied. They sat down in the upstairs quarters and slowly, carefully got Barry to open up about what had upset him Halloween night. It turns out there had been a man dressed in dark clothing, he’d taken one look and saw his nightmare come back to life, in his panic he ran headlong into the woods.

Sara started keeping a list after that, taking notes of the things, objects or sounds that triggered Barry. It was helpful, and it was long. The following week they asked about the leaves, it took Barry a long time to find the strength to answer. They waited patiently, ready to offer comfort when the moment arose. With haunted, tear-stricken eyes Barry told them about the very first-time Zoom raped him. Each word felt like a punch to Len’s gut. Through sobs Barry told them how Zoom had torn his suit to shreds, throwing it over him in a parody of confetti. He told them how scared he was, how much it hurt. He said he fought so hard, but he was not strong enough in the end.

He cried loudly, whole body trembling under the effort of the heavy sobs and laboured breathing. Len stored away his rage, later he walked to the edge of the lake and screamed. He screamed for Barry, for Sara and for himself. In that moment he moved to sit next to Barry, who immediately climbed into his lap. They stayed like that for hours; Barry quietly weeping onto his shoulder, Sara rubbing soothing circles on his back and snow falling silently outside.

Today would most likely end the same way, to counteract things Sara had started getting them to do activities together to help ground, Barry. Over the past two weeks, they had been immersing themselves with cooking, arts and crafts and walks through the snowy woods. It wasn’t a magical cure, sometimes they struggled to get Barry interested but when they succeeded his mood improved. They were performing a balancing act and it was more difficult than any heist Len could ever dream of pulling off.

“Are you ready, Barr?” Sara asked, offering him a chance to elect out, he never does.

Len can’t believe how brave he is, facing trauma after trauma. Reliving every horrible, sordid thing
he’d lived through. The love he harbours for him sings in his chest, it might not be the right thing to think, but he’ll be glad when the days comes that he can tell him just how much he loves him. He’ll wait as long as it takes, he’ll let Barry heal, let him find himself once more before he confesses his true feelings and if, if Barry feels the same then he’ll shower him with love and affection.

“T’m ready” he forced a brittle smile. He’s wrapped tightly in a blanket, fingers nervously pulling at threads.

“You get to choose what you want to tell us,” Sara reminded him.

Len admired her strength, her dedication to Barry; he also wholly appreciated her taking charge here.

“There’s so much to choose from.”

Len could only imagine, four months of torture is a lot to live through, having to sit down and talk about it, relive it, must hurt like hell. It hurts him like hell to just hear what he’s been through; it leaves him angry and restless. He wants to hurt somebody; he wants Zoom to be alive again just so he can kill him once more, slowly this time, he wants him to hurt in unimaginable ways. There is no one to hurt, though, there are only the woods to pace through and soaring trees and a frozen lake to hear his screams. He’s known rage before, he hated his father, he felt nothing when he killed him, but his hatred towards Zoom is endless.

He knows he can’t let it consume him, he is dead and Barry is alive and fighting to survive. He has to let go of the anger; it will not serve him well in the future. If he wants to be there for Barry, if he wants to be with Barry then he can’t hold onto this. Barry is tearing himself painfully and slowly free from Zoom’s hold, and Len must do the same, the bastard has taken enough. He vents his frustration to Sara, Lisa and innocent trees that taste the fury of his fist.

When they sit together, each Wednesday Barry isn’t the only one who cuts out a piece of the past. Len shuffles through his long list of painful memories, plucks one out and heads down to the frozen lake. He tells his story to the trees, the snow and deer dashing through the woods. His past floats up, up over the black ice, getting swept away by the wind. He returns to the cabin, to Sara and Barry, a little less burdened, a little more hopeful and step closer to being worthy of them.

XxX

“There’s so much to choose from.”

There is too much to choose from. There are days of isolation, where he feels like the ravenous hungry will drive him mad if the loneliness doesn’t get to him first. There are days of humiliations, depravity, torture and rapes. They are all placed in individual boxes, stacked neatly on a towering shelf in his mind. Which does he reach for today? Does he tell them about how Zoom used to act sickly sweet at times, parading around like he didn’t just force Barry to his knees and order him to swallow like a good boy? Does he open the box titled ‘rapes’ and relive another time Zoom fucked him so hard that he bled for hours afterwards? Or maybe he tells them about how after he became pregnant Zoom made sure to be gentler, never pleasuring him but at least not tearing him apart.

Does he count all the times he broke his fingers? Bit, clawed, and punched him? Does talk about how when he wakes in the dead of the night he can taste copper, ash and cum on his tongue? Will he speak about the scars marring the inside of his thighs? He could tell them how after he couldn’t walk for a day because they pulled, twinged and bled under the bandages Zoom tenderly applied like he hadn’t been the one who had just disfigured him. There is so much more, electrocution, a
red positive plus sign, morning sickness, near constant rapes, hunger, thirst, loneliness. There is just so much, and he is so, so tired.

“Maybe we should leave it for today” Len speaking has Barry drifting back to the moment, he doesn’t know how long he’s been sitting here for.

“No, it’s fine, I want to do this” and he does, no matter how hard it is and no matter how much it hurts he wants to get better, he wants to be better. “I just don’t know where to start.” The first two times that they have done this Sara had asked him a specific question. It was a lot easier than standing before his towering shelf of torment and selecting one at random.

“Would you like us to ask you something like we did before?” Sara asked a knowing look on her face.

“Yeah, I think that’ll make it easier for me,” Barry said, feeling some of the tension drain from his shoulders. It was only temporally relief of course; it would be washed away the moment he had to start recalling his torment.

“The other day you seemed to get visibly upset when I left the tap dripping.”

It was Len who spoke. Barry remembered the event clearly, they’d been standing side by side in the bathroom, Len was shaving, and Barry had just finished, he’d never been able to grow more than stubble. As much he wanted to let it grow, since Zoom had always kept him clean shaven, he couldn’t stand the annoyance of it. He was drying his hands as Len turned the tap off, he was feeling fine then there was the drip, drip, drip of water, and he was hurtled back to the empty, cold, dark room.

His breathing grew laboured, heart fluttering like a bird in his chest and his legs threatened to buckle beneath him. Len sensing his distress set aside the razor and steered Barry from the room. He sat him down on the couch, draping the red throw over his shoulders. Comforted by the warmth of the throw, Len’s calming words and the silence of the room he was able to free himself of the panic. At the time he hadn’t been ready to talk about it, the panic attack had left him weary and miserable.

Today he would unpack this trauma, rip off the lid and spill the contents out into the world for all to see, even if every word felt like shards of glass on his tongue. He took a deep breath, folded his arms around his knees and readied himself. With eyes closed, so he could not see the hurt his words would bring, he told them how he picked the lock of the ward he’d been held in. He mentioned how he found Caitlin, Killer Frost, and how they struck a deal. He helped her escape her cage, and she was going to make them an ice path to freedom, only Zoom appeared and killed her right before him.

He had to open his eyes; behind closed lids, he could see her lifeless gaze, hear the gurgled breaths as she choked on her own blood. It wasn’t until a few days later when his body wasn’t cramping and seizing that he realised the full weight of seeing his friend’s doppelganger die. It takes a few minutes of fighting tears and the hands of panic for him to be composed enough to carry on. He doesn’t know how to say it, so he tears the Band-Aid off before he can choke on the words.

“Zoom electrocuted me with a cattle prod” he forces the words out, not stopping or else he’ll break.

“He strung me up, and he electrocuted me. I thought I was going to die the pain was that excruciating. He placed it in the most sensitive places, under my arms, the back of my knees… between my legs.” There’s no holding back the flood, the memory ripples through him, setting free a wildfire of emotions. One moment he is safe, sitting on a worn-out sofa, the next he is cold, numb and hanging from a beam in the dark. The world unravels around him, leaving him unsure of
the reality he is in. Strong arms embracing him and delicate fingers lacing through his own anchor him to the real world.

This is real he thinks, leaning into the embrace and clasping the hand holding his I escaped. This is real. This is real.

Mind clearing, heart rate ebbing, he finds the courage to go on. “He left me the dark for hours after, my arms went numb and all I could hear was a dripping pipe.” There, one more painful experience unboxed, only what did he put in its place? Or did it stay there on the shelf, collecting dust and cobwebs; memory sneaking out every chance it could get to haunt him, to remind him that he would never be truly free of it? What was the point of all of this if the memories he recalled still frightened and unravelled him?

“What’s the point of this?” Barry demanded, “every time I have to do this I feel worse, I feel awful. I’m not going to be any less upset when I hear water dripping next.”

“Trust me, Barr I know this is frustrating and it basically feels like rubbing salt in wounds but it will help you in the long run” Sara explained, tenderly stroking the hair from his eyes. “This also helps us identify triggers so we can avoid them. When you are ready we can try and introduce you back to these things, little by little, so we can hopefully change the way they make you feel.”

“Like exposure therapy?” Barry inquired.

“Yes. Nyssa used it on me” she replied, a fond smile gracing her face at the mention of her ex-girlfriend “and it did work. It’s not fun and we’re not going to do it anytime soon. We need to keep this up in the meantime, though.”

“Okay,” Barry sighed, worn out and ready to crawl back into bed and hide away from the world for a while. “I’ve had enough for today.”

“You did really good, Scarlet” Len praised, offering him a tender smile.

“Thanks” Barry offered him a thin smile in return, “I feel a little overwhelmed, do you mind if I go lie down for a bit?”

“Of course, Barr.” Sara said just as Len said, “We’ll be right downstairs if you need us, okay?”

“Okay, thanks.”

Barry untangled himself from the blanket and Len’s arms, trudging away from them with heavy shoulders. When he lied down on the bed with a weary sigh he could still smell Len’s aftershave on his clothes, he found it comforting. He breathed in the spicy scent, placed both hands over his growing stomach, starting up lazy circles to soothe himself and the baby. Pushing aside the newly freed memory he chased away the darkness with thoughts of his unborn child. His feelings grew stronger day by day; the fear and repulsion have been replaced by excitement and devotion. Reliving the past has reminded him how much he loathes Zoom, somehow saying the awful things he had to endure out loud makes them even worse, it reaffirms that Zoom was a mad monstrous man.

Barry is not. Barry is remembering that he didn’t deserve this, he didn’t ask for this. He is remembering that people love him, they still see a fire burning in his eyes, they see someone worth saving. He’d given up, he’d teetered on the edge of oblivion and even though he’d never toppled over he was still suspended there. He’d been waiting to fall this whole time; he’d been expecting the impact of the ground below when he should have been leaning back towards the hands
reaching out for him.

He may not have super speed anymore, he may never get to be a hero again, he may be hollowed out and broken but he was learning that he was still somebody worth the fight. He was splintered and haunted, days and months away from okay, from better, but he was going to fight for his life. For their lives. He wasn’t going to fall; he was going to win this war. This new mindset comes over him like a tidal wave; this new determination is accompanied by a fluttering in his stomach that he knows is his baby moving. It’s a strange yes wondrous sensation. At first, he didn’t know what was happening, he feared for his child’s well-being until Len reassured him that it was normal, apparently, Lisa had been a real flutter and later a kicker.

In the quietness of his room, he found a match to strike. He needed to get better not only for himself but for his child. He needed to be better so he could give it all the love it deserved. If he wanted it to be happy, safe and loved then he had to raise it. No harm would come its way, he’d protect her and cherish her with every breath; he’d show Zoom that he hadn’t taken every last piece of goodness from him. He was going to keep her.

He is going to love her.

He is certain that it’s going to be a girl. She’s going to have dark locks, hazel eyes and yellow lightning skittering over her skin.

She’s his brighter days.

She’s his road to recovery.

XxX

Before Sara was the Black Canary and before she was an assassin, she was a painter. She’d been painting for as long as she could remember, even taking lessons and spending long summer days dreaming of owning an art gallery in Paris. Sara had always been the artist of the family; she was the girl with her head stuck in the clouds, paint on her fingertips and dreams in her heart. It’s strange remembering the girl she used to be, all that carefree innocent swept away by the sea and stolen by hands of cruel men. She was reborn a killer, a warrior, the Black Canary.

She hadn’t had time to paint in years; she’d dedicated herself to learning a number of fighting skills and weapons training. The girl with paint on her fingertips and a dream of one day going to Paris was laid to rest. Today she gets to unearth that part of herself, reach inside and find the talent she once had. With a steady hand, she paints a sunshine yellow tent onto a white canvas, the entrance open to reveal the silhouettes of two little-lost girls.

When Len walks into the room, placing a coffee at her side, she can feel his blue eyes inspecting her work.

“What?” she demanded, “It’s not finished.”

“I didn’t say anything” he moved away, taking a seat on the couch behind her so he could still see her work. “I just never knew you had such talent.”

“Well now you do” she returned to her work, brush gliding over the rough canvas to create a blackbird.

“Birds escaping from a tent;” he smirked, “how very hipster.”

She could practically feel the sarcasm in the air. “If you don’t shut up I am going to pour a tube of
“That’s harsh,” he said with mock hurt. “Also I kid, I do remember you telling me about your little sunshine yellow tent, but I get your point. I will sit here and drink my coffee quietly.”

“Good” the bird began to take shape, her hand quivered slightly as she started on the second. “I miss it” she found herself saying, heart constricting as memories of two happy little girls shimmered in her mind. “We spent hours and hours in it; playing games, having tea parties.” She’s said these things before, while they were sitting on the front porch, looking up at the glittering sky. Still, the words want to be spoken, remembered. “We loved it so much that we never actually took it camping, we didn’t want it to get ruined.” The second bird is done, a small black canary flying free of the mouth of the tent, chasing its big sister out into the big open world. “I don’t remember what happened to it.”

“And the birds are you two flying away from the safety of your tent?” Len was behind her now, warm hands resting comfortably on her shoulders.

“Kinda, yeah” she looked up at him, smiling warmly at him. “The tent is our innocence’s; the Canaries are who we became. We broke out of our little tent so fearlessly and never looked back; we spread our wings and soared.” Her hand drops to her knee, a splash of paint dripping onto her pants “I’m the only one left flying now.”

“You’re not alone, Sara” Len reassured her “you’ve got us.”

“I know” she brushed away the tears threatening to spill, swallowing down the swell of emotions. “So I have been meaning to ask you and Barry what the plan is for the holidays.” She decided to change the subject before grief could wrap her in its cold embrace.

“Well, I don’t think any of us are feeling all that thankful” he replied honestly.

“Yeah, I figured we might give Thanksgiving a miss” she set aside her brush and reached for her coffee. “What about Christmas, though? I had Olly ringing me the other day and asking if I thought it would be a good idea if he rented out a lake house nearby for Christmas.”

“What did you say?”

“I told him to let me ask you and Barr before confirming anything.” she took a sip of her drink, savouring the bittersweet coffee. “I think he wants to rent out the same place we stayed at a million summers ago.”

“Are you okay with that?”

“I thought I wouldn’t be but I don’t know” she shrugged “I guess it might be kind of nice to be somewhere that Laurel was. She loves Christmas and she loved that house, I think it might be nice.” She shrugged again, feeling naked under Len’s ice blue gaze. She wasn’t used to revealing this much, how could she really complain, though? Poor Barry had to relive his torment every time he went to sleep at night and then they forced him to relive it all again every week. “What are your feelings towards Christmas?”

“Love it” he grinned “love the food, the cheer, all the pretty lights and the snow.”

“Really?” she drawled out, quirking a brow in scepticism.

“Fine” he rolled his eyes “I hate it. Christmas was shitty in our home, no delicious food, pretty lights and love and cheer didn’t show up for the holidays.”
“I’m sorry” she rose from the chair, moving to sit beside him on the sofa in a show of support. “This Christmas will be better.”

“What about Barry? Will a big Christmas really be good for him?”

“We’ll run it by him.” A crowded house full of Christmas cheer sounded daunting to her, it had been a long time since she’d celebrated any kind of event with friends and family. It could be too much for all of them, at least if Oliver hosted Christmas at the lake house they’d only be a five-minute drive from their sanctuary here. “We can always leave and come back here if he starts getting overwhelmed” she reasoned “It might be good for Barry, for all of us to experience some joy.”

Len sighed dramatically. She couldn’t hold back the grin; he was doing it purposefully to amuse her. “Fine, call Oliver and tell him Christmas hasn’t been cancelled.”

“Why thank you Mr Grinch” she laughed “this means we’ll have to buy presents, though and you’ll have to invite Lisa.”

“So you can sleep with her again?” he narrowed his eyes at her but she knew he harboured no ill feelings towards them.

“Well, if she comes all wrapped in a bow” winking at him she shot to her feet before he could push her off the sofa. “I’ll have to go into to town to make the call, reception up here sucks.”

“It’s the wilderness, dear, what do you expect?”

Sara swatted at him playfully before returning to her unfinished painting. “Once we’ve asked Barry I’ll go into town and call Olly. Do you want to ask him when he wakes up?”

“Sure.”

Sara nodded, returning to her work, her little sunshine yellow tent sat lonely on its white background, the two black canaries ascending towards an invisible sky. It needed some more work, perhaps a sprawling forest for the two little girls hiding in the tent to explore and maybe a big open sky for the two canaries soar in.

XxX

Barry’s tucked away in a secluded corner of Apple’s Grove tiny library. In truth he’d rather be back at the cabin, sitting before the roaring fire and drinking hot cocoa with Len and Sara but he’s forced himself to come out of hiding and venture into the town so he can use the library’s Wi-Fi. Last week when he came downstairs after growing tired of the solitude of his room, Sara approached him and asked how he felt about celebrating Christmas with Oliver and his team. He hadn’t been thinking about Christmas at all, usually by this time of year Iris has the house decked to the halls with Christmas décor and he’d already drunken far too many of Grandma Esther’s eggnogs. He had always loved this time of the year, Joe and Iris always made Christmas magically and with the extension of Cisco and Caitlin the holidays had gotten even better. So much has changed since he sat around the dining table in his home and enjoyed a feast and the festivities with his friends and families. The last holiday he tried taking part hadn’t gone so well, then again maybe Halloween wasn’t the best thing to celebrate after escaping from capture. Christmas was all about joy, pretty lights, snowball fights and being with friends and family. After everything he’d endured it would be nice to have a little cheer back in his life, it would be nice to spend Christmas with the
people he thought he’d never see again.

He had agreed to have Christmas with Oliver and Team Arrow, as long as his family and team could also come along. A few days later everything had been organised, everyone would be gathering at the house by the lake for Christmas. Which is why he is now braving the town library, it’s only four and a half weeks to Christmas and he has yet to buy a single present. He usually always knew what to buy Iris and Joe, he may have had a habit of leaving the shopping to the last minute but his gifts were always a hit.

This year he couldn’t seem to think of one single thing to give them. It’s not like they would have changed dramatically in the four months that he was gone. Iris would still love listening to Florence and The Machine and reading a gripping thriller, Joe would still appreciate fine whisky or a novelty item proclaiming him to be ‘the words best dad’. They hadn’t been changed the way he had been, they hadn’t had someone climb inside their head, their bodies and take them apart brick by brick. Deep down everyone was still the same, they still liked the same food, movies and sports team. Barry didn’t know who he was anymore, not on a fundamental level.

It didn’t matter who he used to be, what mattered was who he became next. Today he could accept that he was still a mess, that he was anxious and tired from endless nightmares. He could accept that he’d probably feel the same way tomorrow and the next and a lot of tomorrows after that. One day, though, maybe in the first days of spring or on a hot summer’s day he’d have the strength to be the next version of himself. Today he could only be the anxious mess Zoom hands cruelly crafted.

Today anxiety thrummed in the back of his mind, leaving him jumping at every sound and casting nervous glances around him, despite the fact it was quiet and isolated where he sat hidden behind the history section. Empty places tended to make him feel as uneasy as crowded ones; the only time he truly felt safe was when Len and Sara were by his side, his watchful guardian and anchor. They were in town shopping for decorations and getting the weekly groceries, he wasn’t sure how he managed to convince them to let him stay in the library alone but they did begrudgingly leave him to do his online shopping.

He should have asked one of them to stay. He should have asked Len to stay, Len who felt like safety and hope. Before Zoom swept in and shattered his world, thoughts of Len had often filled his head, snuck into his dreams. The infamous Captain Cold had worked his way deep into Barry’s subconscious, thoughts of him would drift up out of the blue, wake him in the night, hard and craving something he knew he wasn’t allowed. He had tripped on Len’s unusual charm and for the love of God, he couldn’t get back up. When he was the Flash he knew he could never act upon his curious feelings, he was the city hero; he couldn’t exactly start anything with his enemy.

Len wasn’t his enemy anymore, he was his friend, his anchor and Barry was no longer the Flash. Whatever he had felt for Len had been forgotten once he was in Zoom’s clutches, every moment had been consumed in pain, misery, fear and he hadn’t known him well enough to find him in his world of make-believe. He knew Len now, he knew that his favourite colour was blue, his middle name was James, he loved spy movies and hated orange juice. He had been given the chance to get to know the good, honest man he always knew was just below the surface.

His feelings for had Len sparked once more, there was no more curious, confused lust, what he felt now was a deep devotion. It was terrifying to feel such strong emotions for someone so soon after everything he’d been through but he couldn’t help what he felt. It was easy for Barry to lose himself to his heart, to become tangled up in the thoughts in his head; it was just who he was. At least that hadn’t changed; Zoom hadn’t cut away every part of him.

He’d still managed to wreck him, to twist and break him, leaving him a disaster. Len wouldn’t
return his feelings. He may consider him a friend but who would want him now he was ruined, scarred and used up? Whatever the new found feelings he harboured for Len were he had to shut them away, he had to lock up his foolish heart before it could suffer more heartache. His mind was in ruins, he was plagued by nightmares and jumping at shadows, he wasn’t fit to be with anyone.

Len was there for him, he knew that well, he would dry his eyes and hold him tight through the long nights. He was his friend and that was it. His head was a mess, his heart was a mess, for all he knew he was probably just seeking comfort in the wrong way. For God’s sake, he saw ghosts in the mirrors and monsters in shadows; he couldn’t trust himself to make sense of his own head, let alone his heart. Shaking away his muddled thoughts he returned his attention to the task at hand.

He’d settled on buying Iris a gift card for her favourite bookstore when he heard approaching footsteps. Startled he whips his head up, expecting, always expecting to see him. Tension drops from his shoulders the moment he realises it’s just Len, who is laden with brown paper bags stuffed with sparkling decorations. Letting out a shaky breath, deflating like a popped balloon, he relaxed back against the cool wall, smiling inwardly at the sight of him. Len didn’t seem to notice him startle at his appearance or he was being polite and not saying anything about it. Either way, he is now sitting beside him, close enough that he can feel the warmth redating off his body.

“It looks like you bought the whole town” Barry quipped, motioning to the overstuffed bags

“Sara has been taken by the Christmas spirit” he replied mournfully “I fear we’ve lost her.”

Barry chuckled, enjoying the reprieve from his troubled thoughts.

Len grinned at him. “How’s your Christmas shopping going, Scarlet?”

The use of the nickname gives him butterflies, he quickly stomped them out. “Slow. I can’t seem to think of one meaningful gift and I am usually really good at this.” He gestured at the screen “I am a great gift buyer but I keep coming up blank.”

“I’m sure Joe and Iris would care if you got them a unicorn,” he remarked, “I think, for them, having you home is gift enough.”

The butterflies were back, beating their tiny wings in time with his pounding heart, looking up at Len with his crooked grin and ice blue eyes he could almost forget the world. Almost. All he has to do is lower his gaze and catch a glimpse of his wrists to be reminded that he is damaged goods. His mood darkened, the happiness he just felt drifting away like smoke through his fingers. “I know” he murmured, “I just wanted to, I dunno, I guess I’m still trying to make everything seem normal.”

Normal, as in he hadn’t just spent four months in hell.

What was the chance of that?

Nothing about his life had been normal, from the beginning his existence had been mapped out to be everything but ordinary. His life had been shaped by unknown hands; villains had been waiting for him in the darkness long before he even became The Flash. Tragedy found him at every turn; he’d rise up only to be torn down. He tried so hard to be a hero, to do the right thing and now he’s sitting in a quiet library, thinking about how much he likes Len, how he’ll properly never return his feelings because he is marked and tainted. Tumbling thoughts and shifting emotions have panic clawing up his throat, abandoning his task he rushes out into the cold winter’s air.

It always comes without warning, one moment he is managing then the wrong thought floats up or memory sneaks out of a shadowy part of his mind and his world splinters around him. Taking deep breaths he tries to calm himself. There are no hands closing around his throat, his heart isn’t going
to be burst free of his chest. Breathe, breathe, breathe, he’s been here before, it will end, he just has to fill his burning lungs. There are no faces passing him by, the town vanishes in swirls of white, he’s on knees gasping through constricting lungs.

Strong hands rest on his back, a voice calls to him through the mist, he follows it home. Gradually the fog ebbs, town, faces and winter sky coming back in screaming colour. Exhaustion overtakes him; he lets Len lead him away from the library and back to the car. He’s sitting in the backseat, plumes of breath visible in the crisp coldness of the interior; Len is at his side, rubbing soothing circles on his back.

“Sorry, I was fine then I just” he paused, struggling for the right words “I just lost it.”

“You don’t have to apologise,” Len assured. “We’ve been dredging up a lot of stuff lately, it’s perfectly reasonable for you to have panic attacks.”

“I’m so tired of all of this” he confessed, burying his face into the crook of Len’s neck, breathing in his scent. “It’s frustrating going from being relatively okay to full-on panic mode. It’s all just so tiring.”

“I know, Barr” he whispered, folding Barry into his embrace. “You’ve got to give yourself more time. It’s going to take a while before you start to feel even close to okay. You are going to have to be patient with yourself.”

Barry sighed heavily, sagging against the warmth of his friend. “I’m not very good at waiting. I hate all the in-between stuff, I wish I could press the fast-forward button and be at the ‘better’ stage, already.”

“I know” he repeated, “So do I, but we can’t. We’re going to have to take the long way round.”

“At least I’ve got you.”

“Always, Scarlet” lips ghost over his scalp in a feather-light kiss “Always.”

Silence falls over them, Barry thinks about mentioning the nightmare that has been chasing him from sleep ever since he saw Zoom reflected in the shattered glass. He’s about to open his mouth and tell him about the dark halls, the doors swinging open to reveal every terrible thing that happened to him when Sara calls to them through the window, arms filled with groceries. The moment is shattered, Len moves away and slips out to help Sara with the bags. She hands Barry a plush toy reindeer with a bright red nose, he quirks a brow at her, a flicker of a smile gracing his face.

“It’s for the baby,” she says with a heartfelt smile “but it can keep you company in the meantime.”

“Thank you, Sara” he hugs it tight to his chest, feeling happiness swell within his heart. “I think she’ll love it.”

“She?” Sara’s brows furrowed in confusion, “I didn’t think we were finding out the sex until Caitlin came at Christmas.”

“It’s just a gut feeling” he answered, one hand slipping behind the reindeer to cover his abdomen.

“Care to put a wager on that?” Len chimed in, a playful smirk on his handsome face.

“Sure,” Sara agreed, climbing into the passenger seat “I put fifty on it being a girl.”
“No, I was going to put money on it being a girl,” Len said, starting the engine and cranking up the heat to blast away the chill.

“Maybe we should involve more people” Sara suggested.

“I think Barry gets to decide that,” Len lifted his gaze to meet Barry’s in the rear-view mirror.

“Do I get the money?” he enquired “because I’ve heard babies are expensive.”

“Sounds fair” Len agreed.

“Then yes, but I am certain it’s a girl.”

“Let’s not tell them that” Sara recommended, “we don’t want to sway them.”

Barry chuckled, hugging the reindeer tight to his chest while the other lazily stroked his stomach. He could never thank Len and Sara enough for this, they had become his guardians and anchors; they had formed a bond that would last a lifetime. He knew that no matter how long or dark the road ahead was he could count on them to be there every step of the way. They would make sure he made it through the dark and arrived safely on the other side. Together they would help him to rebuild, they would brave the memories and nightmares, slay the beast and monsters. Together they would come out victorious. With them, by his side, he could win the war raging within his mind.
Hello everyone :) Thank you for being patient with me. I got back from away a week ago and then I had to write this chapter but everything is back on schedule. I even have the next chapter halfway finished since I overwrote this chapter. I hope you enjoy and thank you for waiting.

Just close your eyes  
The sun is going down  
You'll be alright  
No one can hurt you now  
Come morning light  
You and I'll be safe and sound

Taylor Swift - Safe and Sound

His room is silent in the morning hours, not even the branches whisper across the glass. Snowflakes lazily cascade from the sombre sky, downstairs the cabin is alive with chatter and Christmas spirit. Christmas Eve has bought Caitlin, Cisco, Joe Iris, Wally and Lisa to their hideaway, their presence chasing away the serenity of the woods. He’d sat around downstairs with them, enduring their hugs, joy and questions for as long he could. He was exhausted from lack of sleep, worn down by nightmares and anxiety. The dreams won’t stop, the memories keep pouring out from the dark recesses of his mind, leaving him to startle awake with his heart in his throat and fear in his veins.

There are still days where he wants to give in, give up, close his eyes and let it all go. He keeps fighting, keeps facing the painful memories every week and braving the war within his mind. Tomorrow morning he’ll put on a smile, dress in red or green so he can appear to be in the Christmas spirit. He’ll fake his way through it, it’s just one day, he can make it through the Christmas cheer, probing questions, concerned glances, crushing hugs, noise and crowded spaces. Being surrounded by people jolly with the holiday spirit is the last thing he wants to endure but he will endure it for his family and friends. They at least deserve a magical day even if he can’t find the wonder in the season this time around.

For now, he’ll hide away while he can. Downstairs still buzzes with commotion, it’s only mid-morning and already everyone has been into Grandma Esther’s eggnog, leaving them with bright red cheeks and laughter bursting from their lips. It’s strange to find the cabin alive with sound, for so long it has been silent apart from the harrowing screams that disturb the still nights. He’d grown accustomed to the silence, the solitude, long before he arrived here with Len and Sara. Four months of long lonely dark days had left him feeling insecure in big gatherings; small ventures into the town had made him anxious and the noise rising up from downstairs had him resisting the urge to dive under the bed.

God knows how he was going to make it through tomorrow when just the sound of people had anxiety wrapping its cruel hands around his throat. Taking several deep breaths, placing both hands on his stomach he focuses on the feel of the smooth roundness, visualising his little girl. Caitlin
and Cisco had surprised them with an early visit four weeks ago. Originally they were supposed to wait until Christmas until they performed the second ultrasound, but Caitlin had felt that since it was standard practice to have a scan at around twenty weeks that they should make the early trip.

They arrived without warning, appearing in the snow-covered driveway in the Star Labs van, jumping out to greet them with big smiles. Barry hesitated in the doorway at first, watching Sara go out to greet them and usher them towards the inviting cabin. Caitlin made it to him first; smiling up at him, big brown eyes sparkling with warmth. Without hesitation he pulled her into his embrace, the hug was made slightly awkward by the growing bump between them and when they stepped apart she placed her delicate hands against his stomach.

“You’re getting big,” she remarked, hands gliding tenderly over the rounded flesh. “I know we’re early and to be honest it was a last minute decision on my behalf but I felt it was best I do scan around the proper date.” She explained, “Plus I heard there is a betting pool on the baby’s sex so now we’ll be able to know for sure.”

“My money is on a boy” Cisco announced when he reached them “Cisco junior, has a nice ring to it, doesn’t it?”

“Cisco, I told you Barry doesn’t want to name his unborn child after you” Caitlin shot a stern glare his way “and you are wrong, it is a girl.”

“How can you tell?” Cisco challenged “the last time we looked at it, it resembled a sea monkey,” he looked up at Barry, adding. “Again, sorry.”

“By the way, his stomach is sitting” Caitlin answered before Barry could tell Cisco that his child was not a sea monkey. “Let’s just go into the van and end this debate right now, shall we?”

“The van?” Barry asked, looking over at the parked vehicle that camouflaged with the white backdrop.

“Oh yeah, Harry and I had to instore the ultrasound machine in there under this one’s strict orders” he gestured at Caitlin, who rolled her eyes good-humouredly at him. “It is now a moving obstetrician’s lab.”

“Are you going to change the name on the side?” Sara interrupted, “Star Labs, you’re local and leading obstetrician.”

“Do not give her ideas” Cisco warned, “I swear; Star Labs is only months away from being Caitlin’s OB clinic.”

“Hey, I have been preparing and studying for the birth okay” she defended.

“Well that’s all well and good but it’s freezing out here,” Sara said. “So why don’t you and Barry go do what you need to do and Cisco and I will go into the house and make some coffee. Len will be back shortly with the groceries so when he returns I’ll make you guys some lunch.”

“Sounds good to me” Caitlin agreed, taking Barry by the hand and leading him towards the van.

When the back doors swung open bright lights illuminated the usual dark space, revealing a fully equipped medical room. It was a tight fit but they had managed to fit in the ultrasound machine, a bed for Barry to lie on and a chair for Caitlin. There were also a few other medical equipment pieces that Barry only half recognised. Caitlin stepped in first, offering him a helping hand and leading him towards the bed, once he was lying down comfortable she closed the doors to lock out the chill. The room was comfortably warm even when he lifted up his jumper and undershirts,
exposing his scars and stomach to Caitlin.

“I made sure to add a heater” she motioned towards the vent above the bed. “I knew it would be freezing in here without it and this is going to be cold” with that she squeezed a sizable portion of gel onto his abdomen, making him flinch at the touch. “Sorry, I should have warmed it up first.”

“It’s okay, I’ve had worse” the words tripped out of his mouth before he could trap them back in. Biting his lip, he looked away to avoid seeing the hurt darken the sparkle in Caitlin’s eyes.

“How have you been?” her words were heavy, laced with a million questions. She asked ‘how are you sleeping? Still getting nightmares? How are the days? Are you coping? Can I help? Tell me so I can help you.’

“I’ve been horrible, I’ve been sad, angry, numb and some day’s not so bad” he answered honestly. “I’m struggling and sometimes I’m not. There isn’t really one word to describe how I’ve been feeling.”

“That’s perfectly understandable, Barry” she reassured, her gaze flickering between him and the monitor. “You’re looking a lot healthier. You’ve gained some weight back which is vital for the pregnancy. You still need to put some more on, though. You need to be eating a balanced diet, so don’t eat too much bad stuff okay.”

“I’ll do my best” he promised.

“Good” she mused, distracted with the dials on the machine. There was a moment of silence then the thump, thump, thump of the baby’s heartbeat filled up every space in the room. “Heart rate is normal, size is excellent and I can’t see abnormalities. Can you see?”

Caitlin shifted slightly and angled the screen towards him. Barry’s breath caught in his throat as he took in the image, she no longer resembled a shapeless silhouette. He could now see her small body, big head, tiny toes and fingers clearly. She was small, pure innocence and beauty. Tears welled in his eyes, for once they were of happiness, not hopeless sadness.

“Congratulations Barry,” she smiled brightly, eyes alight with pride, “you’re having a healthy baby girl.”

Barry turned his gaze towards Caitlin, smile dropping when he noticed the flicker of anxiety darken her eyes. Sensing the change, she quickly wiped away the leftover gel and sat down near him on the bed, worrying her bottom lip between her teeth.

“It’s not about the baby” she explained hurriedly, “she is perfectly healthy and you’re body seems to be handling the pregnancy well. I am going to take some routine blood tests after, I’m afraid.”

“That’s okay,” he sat up, adjusting his shirt and jumper so they covered him, them once more. “Is everything else okay Caitlin?”

“Yes,” she blurted out, stopped, took a deep breath to compose herself. “I mean yes. What I want to clarify is, are you sure that you’re okay with me being part of the pregnancy journey and in the end delivering her?”

“Of course, Cait, I wouldn’t trust anyone else.”

“So you’re okay with me seeing you… naked” she fiddles with chipped painted nail, biting her lip once more in a mix of awkwardness and nervous, despite the fact that she has seen him undressed many times before “and I’m going to have to touch you.”
There it was, the true reason for her fidgeting and apprehension. It was quite astonishing how Barry’s mind had managed to file away these details or perhaps he’d been too busy reliving memories and being plagued by nightmares to actually realise that giving birth might bring on some triggers. He could handle Caitlin seeing him naked, she’d already seen his scars and while he’d much rather not expose them to her again he could live with it. Being touched, though, being touched there petrified him.

When he showered quivering hands ran the softest of washcloths over his scars, nausea made itself known every time he glanced down at the criss-cross lines marring his inner thighs. At times he still felt phantom hands ghosting over his skin, lips teasing, biting and nipping at his neck, in the dark hours of the night he still felt him inside. He felt ill, anxiety awakened, reaching out its oily tendrils to smoother his lungs and lodge in his throat. He couldn’t be touched there; he couldn’t handle fingers pressing inside him, hands hovering only millimetres away.

“Breathe, Barry.”

He felt Caitlin’s hands on his back; he must have blacked out a little because he didn’t even see her move. “Sorry… I do that sometimes.”

“There is no need to be sorry,” she continued to rub soothingly at his back. “Are you okay? Do you want me to go get Sara?”

“No, it’s fine” deep breath, in out, in out “I’m okay now.”

“I’m sorry I upset you” she apologised. “I understand that this is hard for you and Cisco and I will do whatever we can when the time comes to make the birth as comfortable for you as possible. There just isn’t going to be a way around certain things. I wanted to tell you so you could have the time to react to the thought of them before we actually had to do anything physical. I also brought you some information on male births for you to read over, maybe knowing what you’re in store for will help?”

“Maybe,” he mumbled, “I’ll be sure to read through everything.” Knowing the details of the wicked things Zoom had in store for him wouldn’t have been helpful, he’d still dread the oncoming pain. The only difference would be that he’d know the exact kind of torture he’d be inflicting. This was different, though, Caitlin wasn’t going to torture him; she’d do everything in her power to avoid causing him pain or setting off a trigger.

Giving birth while painful wasn’t going to be like the times Zoom raped him, tortured him, broke him. It was going to be scary, there was no doubt about it and it would be difficult to allow Caitlin to see and touch him but in the end, it would be worth it. In the end, he’d be holding his beautiful baby girl. So as scared and uncertain as he was he gave Caitlin permission, promised to read the information she gave him and started to prepare his body, mind and soul for the birth of his little girl.

Back in the present, he smiled tenderly at his abdomen, dancing fingers over the exposed flesh, enjoying the way she reached out from inside to touch the places the fingers had just been. Downstairs the musical laughter and heavy thudding of shoes against timber flooring had softened to a steady stream of chatter. Outside the winter wind picked up, the sky darkening with the promise of a storm.

XxX

The power goes out at eight. Outside the sky has torn open and set loss a blizzard just in time for Christmas. The house rattles and sways in the wild winds of the night, trees crashing to the ground
within the woods booming like cannon fire. Inside has quickly grown cold, everyone huddles around the fire, wrapped tightly in blankets and drinking hot cocoa. It’s too crowded in the living room for Barry, too many bodies infringing on his personal space. He sits before the small hearth in his room, wrapped in Len’s parka, his comforter and the red throw from the couch, flinching every time the cabin shudders in the storm.

He’s not alone in the dimly lit bedroom; Joe had appeared in the doorway moments before the power cut out, leaving them in darkness. They both sit silently, side by side, watching the bright flames flicker and dance. Barry had a feeling that Joe wants to speak about something; he can see it in the way he holds himself, in the deep set of his dark eyes. They haven’t spoken a great deal since he arrived this morning; the overcrowded space has made Barry withdraw again.

Over the last several weeks he’d been getting better. It would be unnoticeable to an outsider, everyone in town thought of him as an anxious and troubled young man; they spoke to him with care and eyed him with caution. There was a difference, though; there were rare but genuine smiles, nights undisturbed by nightmares, days without panic attacks and breakdowns. He was rebuilding, he was beginning again, it was difficult and challenging and he was still miles away from being whole, being better. The nightmares and memories were still lurking, he still suffered panic attacks and breakdowns, he was just no longer consumed by them.

He could see the light, it was still out of reach and the road to it was paved with missteps, bad days, restless nights and months of reliving traumas and facing demons. He believed he could get there, with the help of Len, who made him feel safe, cooked the most delicious meals and had his heart soaring. He’d get there with the help of Sara who made him feel protected, reminded him that he was strong and that brighter days were ahead, just keep fighting and he’ll get there.

He just had to hold onto hope, hold on because one day in the distance future, maybe when the sun is warm and the flowers have bloomed he’ll be alright. Tonight he doesn’t have to be, he can flinch as the storm rages on outside and withdraw into himself because the house is too full and he feels so small. He’ll watch the flames lick hungrily at the air; he’ll enfold himself in Len’s parka and blankets, using them as a shield. Tomorrow he’ll try and pull himself together for his family and friends but if he breaks, if he splinters, it’ll be okay, he is still miles away from that shiny bright day.

Tonight he has to ride out the storm, lay his weary head to rest and face the nightmares he feels brewing below the surface. Come morning light, he’ll be alright. He’ll wake to a strong, safe arm draped over his middle, a hand resting protectively over his stomach. Sara’s breath will be warm against the nape of his neck, he’ll lace his fingers through hers, pressing their joined hands softly against his stomach. Eyes will flutter open to meet beautiful ice blue ones and they’ll chase away the monsters that plagued his sleep. He’ll indulge in the tender smile that is reserved only for him and it will remind him that he is safe and sound.

Tomorrow has yet to come. Right now he is shivering from the cold as the flames slowly shrivel away to burning embers. He would have watched the fire burn to ash if it weren’t for Joe adding another log to the hearth; he’d gotten so lost in his swirling thoughts that he’d almost forgotten he was there. Concentrating had been difficult for him as of late, his thoughts were constantly shifting and changing, spiralling and overlapping until he was left feeling disorientated.

He just had to find something to tether himself too or else it was too easy to trip down the rabbit hole. Mostly he tethered himself to Len, but he wasn’t going to think about the terrifying and wonderful feelings he felt for his former enemy while Joe was sitting at his side. It was safer to put those thoughts away; he’d been over and over them before. Len was his friend, nothing more. He didn’t need damaged goods, end of story. Put it to rest.
“Do you think the power will be back on soon?” Barry asked. He needed to end the tumbling thoughts in his head so he didn’t think about the way Len’s rare touches made him shiver in the best way or the way he could drop his guard and allow him close despite all he’d just been through.

“Probably not until the morning” Joe mused, “I think we’re in for a chilly night.”

“There is a generator in the shed,” Barry said.

“Do you want me to go check?”

“I’m sure Len and Sara are already on it” he replied “I don’t know if it works, though. If not we’ve got plenty of wood; it should last through the night.”

Joe nodded, watching the flames devour the freshly placed log. “I’m sorry your dad’s not here, Barr” he looked away from the fireplace, expression grave. “I tried to reason with him… I’m not going to make excuses for him because he should be here for you. You deserve better than this, then all of this.” He gestured outward at the little cabin, at the snow storm and at all the terrible things he’d been through.

Barry hadn’t spoken to his father since leaving, he’d tried, he had but he’d been adamant that if Barry wanted to keep Zoom’s child then he wanted nothing to do with it. It hurt being rejected by the only true family he had left. He’d spent years believing in his innocence, fighting for his freedom and when he needed his acceptance he turned him away. For years all he wanted was his father back, he fought tooth and nail for his freedom and his thanks was to be abandoned when he need him the most.

Truthfully he didn’t need him, though, not like he once did. He had Len and Sara, he needed them. He had Caitlin and Cisco, Joe and Iris, he had the people that knew him, that loved him and extended that love to his unborn child. He had a family; he had always had a family. Sighing tiredly he let his heavy head drop to Joe’s shoulder, a few moments later and Joe wrapped his arm around his shoulders, holding him close.

“You don’t have to be sorry” he looked up at Joe, at the man who raised him, who loved him unconditionally “my dad is here.”

Joe’s smile beamed with pride and love; tentatively he pressed a soft kiss to Barry’s forehead. “And I always will be, son.”

XxX

“This thing is older than the dinosaurs” Cisco complained, throwing a wrench to the dusty concert floor and raising his hands in defeat. “I don’t think we can fix this man, we’re going to freeze to death out here. Let’s go back inside and wait for the power to come back on.”

Len grunted in annoyance. They had rushed out to the small shed when there had been a lull in the blizzard to see if they could get the ancient generator working, unfortunately after five minutes of trying the machine stayed silent. It’s going to be freezing if they can’t get the power back on and even if everyone sleeps in the downstairs quarters there is a good chance they’ll run out of wood before morning. He didn’t get this far in life to freeze to death in the middle of the Godforsaken woods. Hell, he didn’t get Barry this far to let him down now. So he keeps trying, even though his fingers are numb and his teeth chatter despite the heavy coat he wears.

“The power won’t be back on until morning,” he said through gritted teeth, pulling the cord over and over until finally, it sputters to life. “See I told you it would start” he shot a victorious grin
Cisco’s way.

“Okay, I was wrong” he admitted through rattling teeth “now can we go back inside?” He gestured in the direction of the door that looked ready to blow away.

Len didn’t answer; instead, he turned towards the door, pushing it open with all his strength as the wind battered against it. They raced back towards the cabin, bursting in through the back door, icy wind chasing them in. Yellow light illuminated the small back room, from further inside he could hear the girls cheering.

“Hey, listen, man, I want to thank you.”

Surprised, he hadn’t heard many ‘thank you’s’ in his life and he never expected to hear it from Cisco’s mouth. Looking over at him, he found him standing awkwardly by the door they just came through. “I may like the cold, Cisco but even I don’t want to freeze to death.”

“That’s not what I meant” he stepped past Len, unzipping his jacket and placing it on the empty hook beside his own. “I mean for Barry… for looking after him.”

“You don’t have to thank me for that” he answered honestly, touched at Cisco’s words all the same.

“Okay, well” he looked towards the door that led back into the main area of the cabin “I just wanted to say it.”

“Okay,” lips twitched into a small smile. “I guess I owe you an apology.” If he was going to be in Barry’s life for now on and if he wanted the chance to be something more one day then he was going to have to start mending fences. He’d put Team Flash through a lot of crap and he could be the bigger person here and apologise for it.

“What for?” he asked, eyebrows rising to his hairline in bewilderment.

“For what I put you and everyone through in the past” he replied. “I wasn’t a good person and Barry made me see differently. I guess you could say he saved me.” And he had. He saved him with his courageous heart, dazzlingly smile and kind eyes. He saved him when he told him that he saw good in him, he saved him in so many ways and Len would never stop trying to save him in return. Barry found a way into his heart; he raced past the icy exterior and made himself a home there. He believed in him when no one else did, he pushed him towards being a better person, a stronger person and now that he’d found his true strength he could allow the coldness inside him to finally thaw.

“Well, Barry’s good at saving people” Cisco smiled fondly “he’s a hero like that.”

He truly was, even without speed. He fought valiantly every day for months, surviving torture and rapes. He held himself together when others would have crumbled. He was still fighting every day, now his trauma was different but just as painful. He faced it with courage and strength. Len didn’t doubt that Barry would make it through this, his resilience had already gotten him so far and on the days he couldn’t fight his battles then Len would fight them for him.

He’d allow him to be weak, sad, angry and lost. He’d let him break down, fall apart and on those days he’d carry him through. Barry was Len’s hero; he was the first person who believed in him, who thawed the ice in his heart. He gave him something to hold onto, something to fight for and it was terrifying and extraordinary. He may never be The Flash again, he may never get to be the smart-mouthed, sweet kid he ran into a lifetime ago but he’d still be his hero, he’d still love him.
more than words could ever say.

One day he’d have to find the courage to tell him. When the nightmares stopped, when Barry went more than a day without a panic attack, when he didn’t jump at sounds and see ghosts in mirrors. There would be a far off day when he could confess to Barry everything he felt and if on that day if Barry told him he didn’t feel the same he would still stay by his side. He’d stay by side until the end of time itself. In this moment it’s getting late and now the cabin has its power restored it’s time to call it a night.

XxX

It’s the witching hour when Barry wakes, clothes sweat soaked and heart slamming into his chest in a desperate attempt to break free. The cabin is silent, the fire nothing more than ash with not even the faintest of a spark to be seen. Outside the branches scrape ever so slightly against the frosted glass, the storm has ebbed to nothing more than a whisper. Taking deep breathes he fills and empties his lung, concentrating on the way the air rushes out and pulls back in. It’s a miracle he didn’t scream himself awake after the God awful nightmare he just found himself in. It’s a miracle he’ll take otherwise he would have woken the whole house.

After all this time he should be used to having strange and terrifying dreams. He should be used to finding himself in the asylum, once more at Zoom’s mercy. There have been a handful of peaceful nights scattered over the past few weeks. It’s wonderful to sleep through the night without the twisted memories and darkened halls of the asylum to taunt him, to chase him from slumber. There is one dream that stands out among the rest, one that isn’t a memory but a conjured up nightmare.

Over and over he finds himself in the dark corridors of the asylum, he’d become well acquainted with them in his last month of capture. Zoom had broken him down enough that he allowed him out of the ward he’d been locked in since the beginning. He’d spent many hours wandering the lonely corridors, the one’s that hadn’t crumbled to dust or were blocked up by mountains of furniture and/or rubble. There wasn’t much to see, the place was in ruins and everywhere he went he could hear the screams of the damned.

If the walls could talk they’d have the most horrifying stories to tell. People had been suffering there long before Zoom used it as his own prison. Barry tried to block out the howls of the past as he searched through the remains of the building. Looking for hope among the rubble, wanting to find it somewhere on the moss covered walls or see it reflected in the grimy barred windows. There was never any hope to find, the place itself was tainted by all the wrong doing that come before. Even before it appeared in his dreams it was a place of nightmares.

In his dreams he is always running, running from him. The cell doors swing open to reveal every wicked and sordid thing done to him. He stands frozen in the middle of chaos, Zoom strolling towards him, face concealed by his cowl. He gets closer and closer and Barry can’t stand the fear anymore, his mouth opens as a scream rips free of his lungs and shatters the nightmare around him. Tonight he did not scream, but he feels it suppressed in his chest, yearning to be free. Swallowing it down is all he can; it claws at his throat on the way down, a beast begging to be freed.

At last, he can take a breath without feeling it burn in the pit of his throat. He rolls onto his side, hating the way the dampness of his clothes feels against his skin. He could find something else to put on but it would involve having to crawl over Len and he doesn’t want to wake him. Even if he is probably already awake. They’ve become so attuned with one another that Len is often awake before Barry even wakes from a nightmare.

He’s restless now; the dream has taken away any chance of getting more sleep. Frustrated, cold and sweaty he decides to wake Sara instead, he doesn’t know why he chooses this ungodly hour to seek
her out. He just has to talk to someone about the dream. It’s bothering him more than the others, it’s not even the worst nightmare he gets but he feels like there is something significant about it. The others are memories dressed up, warped and twisted until they are so horrifying that when he wakes he can’t stop shaking and feeling violently ill until morning.

Firmly he taps at Sara’s arm, she mumbles something then her blue eyes slowly blink open. They had been drinking before bed, no wonder they didn’t snap awake when he did. Yawning widely Sara sits up, switching on the lamp, Barry squints at her and Len stirs. He is usually the lightest sleeper, it’s odd to find him still slumbering, not that Barry doesn’t appreciate seeing his peaceful face.

“Bad dream?” Sara whispered, brushing away a few strands of his sweat soaked hair.

Barry nodded, not trusting his voice just yet.

“Want to go downstairs and get a glass of warm milk?”

“Yeah and change” he motioned to his sweat soaked shirt, shivering.

Sara climbed carefully out of bed, allowing him to move freely from the middle to the edge. “Do you want to wake Len?”

“I am awake,” Len said groggily, rolling over to face them. “How much alcohol did you put in that eggnog?” this was directed at Sara.

“I didn’t make it” she replied, hands held up in defence. “It’s a West family recipe. You’re just a lightweight.”

“Just because you could drink a pirate under the table doesn’t mean I’m a lightweight” he defended.

“Grandma Esther always had a bit of a drinking problem,” Barry added, “You should taste her trifle.”

“Sounds like a woman I’d like to meet,” Sara said, shrugging on her robe “I’ll go get the stove going to warm the milk, see you down there in a bit.”

Barry rose to his feet, making a beeline to the set of drawers that held his clean clothes. Pulling out a clean shirt and singlet he moved to head towards the bathroom, pausing as he made his way past Len. “Are you okay? I know how difficult this time of year can be.”

“I’m just peachy,” he smiled tiredly, “How are you? It’s getting a little crowded here.”

“I’ll be okay” he returned the smile “Go back to sleep. I’m going to get changed then head downstairs for a while.”

“You sure? It’s no trouble if want me to join you.”

“I’ll be okay” he offered what he hoped was a reassuring smile. They shared everything lately. Whenever he woke from a bad dream or needed to talk about a bad memory he’d talk to them both and it’s not that he was leaving Len out. He would eventually tell him about the recurring dream, nightmare; it’s just right now he looked so tired. He’d been awake through every one of his bad dreams and restless nights, even when Sara suggested that she stay up with him while he finally got some rest.
Tonight he could barely keep his eyes open, he’d pushed himself to his limits and Barry had taken enough. Tonight he could sleep. He could talk to him about the nightmare after he figured out exactly what made him so frightened of it. It wasn’t the darkness or the pain filled screams, it was the leather-clad figure walking out of the darkness. Surely it was just Zoom under the mask, surely he couldn’t terrify him more than he already had.

It was Zoom, right?

There weren’t any more monsters lurking in the dark to find him, to hurt him. Feeling sick at the thought of finding an evil equivalent to Zoom has him hurbling the thought deep into his mind. Taking a shaking breath he looks back at Len who is eyeing him cautiously. The fear evaporates; Len would never allow such evil to find him again. Long legs carry him towards the bed, taking Len’s hand into his own, placing it against his stomach. He knows Len will never let harm come to them.

“You sure you’re okay, Scarlet?”

“You sure you’re okay, Scarlet?”

“Yeah, I mean,” a smile tugs at the corner of his lips as he takes in the sight of him, “I will be” Butterflies stir awake when Len rubs his thumb soothingly over his stomach, heart soaring in his chest when a tender smile plays at his lips. Even if Len could never reciprocate his feelings he would always stay by his side. He knew without a doubt that he would keep him, them safe until the end of time itself. “We will be.”

XxX

If Len has to hear ‘All I want for Christmas’ one more time he was going to shoot someone with the cold gun. Of course, he can’t actually do that, he has to smile politely and appear poised among the glittering Christmas decorations. He doesn’t belong here among the shiny tinsel, twinkling lights and musical laughter, he’s tarnished steel and broken down glass. He doesn’t fit among the sparkling people gathered around him. This was a stupid decision; he should have stayed back in the cabin, knocked back a few beers and watched cheesy Christmas movies until Sara and Barry returned.

Instead, he put on the new jacket Sara bought him for Christmas and braced himself for a day of being surrounded by people who didn’t know the first thing about him. He was grateful Lisa was here, though she’d been giving most of her attention to Sara. It’s not that he was bothered by their courtship, he loved them both and if they were happy together then he could be happy for them. He just wished he had someone by his side.

Barry had stayed close when they first arrived but after an hour or so he could see the anxiety evaporating from his body. Tentatively he drifted towards his friends, joining them at the table as they played a board game that Cisco found amongst the trashy romance novels. He could get up and join them, try to be sociable and actually enjoy the Christmas cheer. He couldn’t seem to find it in himself today, maybe it was because he felt uneasy surrounded by people he didn’t know or perhaps it’s because today he really missed Mick. Not that he’d admit that to anyone, not Sara, not Lisa, he may have gotten slightly better at opening up but he wasn’t ready to talk about this. Not right now anyway, not when everyone was brimming with cheer and laughing from too much champion.

It was enough to admit to himself that he missed his friend today, more so than others and it wasn’t like he had wonderful, sparkling Christmas memories of them. He had been there on a handful of Christmas’s, drinking beer and playing with the flames of candles. Now he was gone, died saving a bunch of people he didn’t even like. He died a hero, he died for Len. He was ready to sacrifice himself that day, it would be worth it to destroy the Time Masters, prove that there were no strings
on him. At the last minute Mick knocked him out and he woke up an hour later on the Wave Rider, friend dead and Time Masters and their stupid oracle blown to kingdom come.

At first, he was livid; the stupid bastard took away his glory. He did the heroic thing when he despised the thought of ever being one. He went and died and left him all alone, that thought had guttered him. He was alone in the world, no one else understood him like Mick did. Then Sara walked in with a bottle of whisky and half way through the bottle he realised he wasn’t alone, he wasn’t like Mick, he could belong with these people. He could survive the world without him.

Of course, that didn’t mean he couldn’t miss him, especially on a day like today. Sitting around morbidly wasn’t really his, though; he never stopped to drown in his sorrows. He was a fighter, marching on even when the world was heavy on his shoulders. Getting to his feet he made his into the dining room, taking a seat next to Barry, who greeted him with a heartfelt smile. Taking centre pride on the table was a candelabrum, its red candles unlit. Retrieving the lighter – Mick’s lighter - from his pocket he stood up to light them, silently thanking Mick for saving him so that he could be here to save Barry, to protect him, to love him.
Look After You

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

You've begun to feel like home
What's mine is yours to leave or take
What's mine is yours to make your own

Oh my baby
I'll look after you

Christmas lights reflect in the glass, Sara watches them change from green to red to blue to pink. From where she stands it seems like they are shining from the deep dark depths of the lake. When she adjusts her gaze the reflection of the fairy lights draped along the wall behind her snap into focus and the illusion dissipates. She prefers the illusion, pretending that there is something magically and unexplored at the bottom of the frigid water. She’d been coping just fine, drinking champion, eating far too much food and enjoying the company of her friends, old and new, then she spotted a ghost standing out by the shimmering lake.

The winter around her vanished, snow melting away to reveal bright green grass, grey sky swept away and replaced with a cloudless summer blue one. She stood barefoot on the dock, warm sun beating down against her back, a sly breeze riffing fingers through her tangled hair. Laughter trickled towards her from the pier’s edge. Stepping closer she found bright eyes staring up at her, a wide grin gracing a sunburnt face. There she was, alive, glowing, young and free and completely unaware of the future stretching out before her.

‘Come in, chicken, the water is perfect’ she called to her, head tilting back in bliss.

On that day all those summers ago Sara had dived in, they’d crawled out hours later, starving, sunburnt and happy. Now the water in the lake is inky black and the pier is dusted in snow and a few boards sag under the weight of the white slush. If she walked outside, if she dived right in she wouldn’t find her sister waiting for her, there’d be nothing but darkness and coldness to greet her. The lights bouncing off the glass and into the water are not a beacon; there is no treasure under the murky surface.

With one last look, she tears her gaze away from the frozen world, returning her attention to the bustling house around her. People are scattered about the downstairs quarters, Oliver is in the kitchen with Joe, Barry and Len are playing some board game with Team Flash and Felicity and Thea. Lisa had gone upstairs to answer a phone call from a college friend and that gave Sara a chance to start missing Laurel. At every turn a memory of that bright, carefree summer shimmered in her mind, leaving her feeling bittersweet.

Reminiscing was nice, if not slightly painful. She hadn’t stopped and thought about all the fun and adventures they’d had growing up. Her grief had consumed her at the start and now that it didn’t sit so heavily on her chest she could look back at their past with a sad fondness. It hurt to not see Laurel walk in the front door or find her by the Christmas tree. Half of Sara still expected to round a corner and find her there, dressed in her favourite sweater and offering her cookies.

Laurel didn’t walk in the front door or appear by the Christmas tree, she wasn’t waiting around the bend or at the bottom of the lake. She was gone and Sara was the last Lance daughter standing. Her father had arrived a few hours ago, skin three shades too pale, eyes haunted and breath smelling of
cheap booze. Felicity’s mother, Donna, engulfed her in a big hug, planting a sloppy kiss on her cheek before heading further into the house to find her daughter.

Her father hugged her, crushing her against his frail body, she held on tight, biting back tears. When he let go he straightened his shoulders and handed her a neatly wrapped box, inside was a gold pendant engraved with ‘sisters forever’ flipping it open she found two small pictures inside. One was of them from a year ago, after they’d been reunited, they had their arms wound tightly each other, afraid to let go because they knew what could happen if they were separated. The other was of them when they were kids, they smiled with toothy grins at the camera, faces pressed close together, a backdrop of sunshine yellow.

She could have cried, collapsed to the floor and fell all the way to the centre of the earth but when she looked up to meet her father’s broken gaze she knew she had to hold back the tears. Instead, she thanked him. He smiled wearily, taking the necklace from her and draping it over her neck, it rested over her pounding heart.

Trembling fingers trace over the engraving, fresh tears spring to her eyes and it takes all her strength not to them free. In the distance she hears footsteps, strolling out of the empty room she nearly runs straight into her father. She wasn’t sure how long it was since she disappeared from the festivities, she’d lost herself in memories and a deep dark lake.

“How much have you been drinking?”

“It’s Christmas, everyone’s drinking” he deflected.

“I mean apart from today?” She pressed, not bringing up the fact that he shouldn’t be drinking at all, even if it is Christmas. They both already know this, no point mentioning it and starting an argument. Today will be the only day she’ll let it slide. “Please, daddy, you have to look after yourself.”

“I have been looking after myself” he defended “maybe not the best but I have been trying. It’s hard, you know, it’s really hard.”

“I know” Sara took his trembling hand into her steady one. “You have to try, though, for yourself and for me.”

“Thank you” softly she kissed his stubbled cheek.

He smiled at her, grasping her hand tighter like he was afraid to let go. “Listen, baby, I wanted to tell you how proud I am of you. Saving the world, looking after Barry, it’s made me so proud of you. Not that I wasn’t proud of you before but this is a lot less scary than you being in the League
of Assassins.”

“I’m proud of me too” she admitted. “I didn’t want to be a cold-hearted assassin, I stopped feeling remorse or empathy and that was not a daughter to be proud of. I’m closer to the girl I used to be. I know I’ll never get to be her again but I can find parts of her alive inside myself again.”

“I don’t think any of us ever get to be the same person twice” he replied. “We are constantly changing and that’s okay, we’ve just got to remember who we are deep down.”

“Well said” she praised. “Now how about we go get some food into you? And maybe lay off the champion and eggnog.” Laurel wouldn’t want you to be drinking she added silently.

“Yeah, that’s a good idea.” He agreed “whatever they are cooking smells amazing and I am starving.”

“I have been told Oliver is cooking the turkey,” she said, “Apparently he has become quite the cook.”

“God I hope so because I still remember the food poisoning from the chicken he cooked Laurel for her birthday.”

The room darkened. Sara cast her gaze back towards the lake, seeing the sunny sky, crystal blue water and a blonde haired girl teetering on the edge of the pier. “I feel like she’s here with us… maybe it’s because I have so many memories of her here” she mused. “I honestly feel her at my side.”

“She’ll always be with us, baby,” her father reassured.

“I know” she whispered, voice straining as grief constricted in her throat “I just miss her.”

“So do I.” Strong arms engulf her in a warm embrace, “I’m not leaving you, Sara. I’m right here.”

“Neither am I.” Sara promised, tears making tracks on her freckled cheeks “I’ll come home in a few months. I need to stay with Barry a while longer yet, I can’t leave him before he is ready.”

“I understand” easing back he brushed a stray tear away with a gentle sweep of his thumb. “I know what you’re doing right now is important, so take all the time you need. Home will always be waiting for you.”

“Thank you daddy” she smiled tearfully “I love you.”

“I love you too, honey” the corners of his lips twitched into a brittle smile “Let’s go get some lunch, yeah?”

“Right, yeah, of course.” Wiping her eyes she got up and followed her father out of the room, casting once last at the lake before leaving. The blonde haired girl stood barefoot on the slush covered pier, snowflakes frozen in her damp hair. Smiling, she backed away towards the edge, gracefully she tipped backwards, lost to the icy waters below.

XxX

After lunch, Barry retreated upstairs to find an empty bedroom to hide away in. Collapsing to the bed with exhaustion he let out a shaky breath, feeling the nervous energy fizzle out. Today had been long and gruelling, armed in a red sweater, a fake smile and anxiety strumming in the background he’d made it through opening presents, two board games and sitting around a table
surrounded by far too many people. When the table was cleared and everyone momentarily

distracted he took the opportunity to retreat, needing a quiet, empty room desperately.

It’s not like today hadn’t been fun, it had been at times. There were scattered moments where he
felt okay, where he got lost in the silly games they were playing. For brief moments he was able to
forget the past, for a few precious heartbeats he was just Barry Allen, celebrating Christmas with
his friends and family. Then a trickle of fear crept up his spine, spreading its cold tendrils
throughout his body and the moment would slip away. Instead of losing himself to the misery or
succumbing to the anxiety he found something to ground himself too, fighting past the panic.

This process was repeated until finally he was too worn out to keep up the battle. The noise grew
immense, he felt nervous in the midst of his friends and escape was the only solution. Slowly he
 eased himself out of sight, sneaking away as everyone else cracked bonbons and laughed loudly at
the terrible jokes found inside.

Once he’d found himself a quiet place to rest he sent a text to Len saying he’d gone upstairs to get
some air. He didn’t want them to think he’d disappeared; it was just easier to leave quietly rather
than announce to everyone that he needed some space. They wouldn’t judge him or force him to
stay but they’d all stop what they were doing and turn their attention his way, making him shrink
up under the heavy weight of their concerned stares.

Before they had all gathered around the grand dining room table for lunch Cisco and Felicity had
been repeatedly asking him the sex of the baby and of course, anyone nearby who’d put money on
the bet stopped to listen. One moment it was just a few of them sitting around the table playing
some terribly inaccurate survival game and the next the room was overflowing with people. No
one seemed to notice the sudden rapidness of his breathing or the way his hands quivered and his
eyes darted around nervously. Well, no one but Len, who placed his arm casually along the back of
Barry’s chair, just the tips of his fingers whispering across his shoulder.

It was enough for him to find the strength to address the crowded room. He told them he was
expecting a girl, a wave of ‘congratulations’ followed, plus a few half-hearted curses at being
wrong. He did walk away with five hundred dollars so it wasn’t completely awful, even if the hugs
and people coming up and rubbing his stomach made him feel uneasy. Afterwards, he struggled
through lunch; the anxiety from that point grew stronger until he felt a panic attack brewing below
the surface.

In the comfortable silence of the lavish room he’s hidden away he feels the nervousness float
away. Making himself comfortable on the bed, eyes drifting shut, enjoying the cosiness of the soft
warm the blanket he’d enveloped himself in. He won’t stay long; he doesn’t want to risk sleep, risk
finding himself once more in a twisted nightmare. Last night when he’d ventured downstairs he
found Sara sitting on the couch, a glass of warm milk with honey waiting for him.

The air was frigid without the fire, only a few smouldering embers glowing in the dark. Sitting
down, Sara wrapped them both in a thick woollen blanket, taking a sip of milk helped ease away
the chill deep inside. They stayed silent, nothing but the sound of gentle breathing and a whisper of
wind to disturb them. Half way finished with his drink and feeling more grounded than when the
nightmare ripped him from sleep Barry shifts his gaze towards Sara. She’s leaning casually against
the armrest, twisting a loose thread around and around her finger, making the tip turn red.

“Are you okay?” he found himself asking, reaching out to unravel the cotton from her cold finger.

“I’ve been better” she admitted, eyes dark and shimmering with a sea of emotions. “I will be okay,
though.” With a flutter of lashes, the sea is swept away. “How are you holding up?”
“I am honestly running on nervous energy” he replied. “Not that it’s been awful having everyone here. I have missed them. It’s just different…” Whenever he was preparing to reveal something or relive a trauma it felt like a dark shadow descended over him, opening up a bottomless bit in his gut and setting every nerve on fire. Air would die from acid drenched lungs, a dry unmoving lump would form in his throat and every word forced around it felt like shattered glass in his mouth.

“I feel different” he continued “everyone is mostly the same but here I am, so completely changed and it makes me feel like I don’t belong.” Opening up always felt a little like dying. Insides melting and skin shredding away with each story told. When there no more words to be said – for the time being – his body would stitch itself together again, leaving him a mangled mess. The foreboding feeling would eventually drift off like smoke being carried away in the wind, only to return again the next time he had to dredge up the past.

“You still belong, Barry” Sara reassured. “I understand where you are coming from, though. It’s hard readjusting. I remember feeling like I had to relearn every inch of me and sometimes the old parts didn’t fit anymore and I had to find replacements for them.”

“Some days I think I’ll never be whole again” he confessed, looking down to the ugly scars wound tight around his wrists like thick vines.

“You will be, it’s just going to take time” she consoled. “You’re so strong, Barry. The way you are pushing through, even when we can see you’re hurting, is inspiring. You are resilient. I know you’ll be okay.” Delicate fingers cup his chin, tilting his head upwards so he can meet Sara’s blue eyes. “You’re still in the relearning stage; it’s going to be rough for a little while longer.”

Barry nodded, taking a long drink of his milk, trying to soothe the nervous in his stomach so that he could speak about the nightmare. “I keep having a recurring nightmare.” Sliding over, Sara wrapped a comforting arm around his frail shoulders, an unspoken encouragement to continue. “I am in the asylum, I’m running and everything is pitch black, but I know I am being chased. I stop eventually because my legs can’t carry me any further and I can’t catch my breath then suddenly all the doors burst open… light illuminates the hallway and all I can hear is screaming.”

He’s started to tremble, breath tight in his chest, words glittering glass in his mouth. “When my vision clears I can see where the screams are coming from. In every room, I find myself, being tortured, being… raped. I go from door to door to door and in every room, I find myself at his mercy.” Panic sparks to life, vision tunnelling, heart pounding like a war drum and skin growing colder than the fresh snow outside. Sara’s soothing words wrap around him, seeping deep into his skin, expelling air from lungs and calming the pounding of a racing heart. Holding onto Sara, anchoring himself to her, give him the strength to carry on.

“I turn away from whatever horrible memory I am looking at. I try to look for a place to run or hide but there is no escape. I am suspended amongst every horrible thing he did to me. I stand in the centre of the corridor, looking out into the distance and I see a silhouette approaching me.” Breathe in, breathe out, in and out “I can’t move, I’m petrified and all I can do is open my mouth and scream. That’s when I wake up… that’s what woke me up before” he added. “I just… I feel like something is wrong, though, like the monster in the dark isn’t Zoom.” Shaking his head, he hides his buries his face in Sara’s neck, breathing in her scent calms his thudding heart.

“Maybe what you have to do is unmask him” she suggested “find out who is beneath there and take away their power. Take away the dreams power.”

“How would I even do that?” he murmured.

“I’ll help you” she promised. “Not tonight, though, I’ll have to sort a few things out first. Right
now, I think we should head back to bed, tomorrow’s going to be a big day.”

Barry lifted his head, feeling the fatigue crawling in “I’m nervous… I shouldn’t be nervous. It’s stupid. They are my friends and I know they won’t hurt but I can’t help feeling like I am going into battle.”

“You’re allowed to feel these things, Barry,” she soothed “and if it gets too much we will come back here immediately.”

“I know” he nodded “thank you.”

“You don’t have to thank us” she smiled “we put you above everyone else, don’t forget that.”

“I won’t” he mirrored her smile, though it felt lopsided, feeble.

After that they untangled themselves from the blanket and made their way back upstairs, crawling into bed, and falling asleep the moment their heads touched their pillows.

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Back in the lake house’s lavish bedroom, Barry had lost the fight to stay awake. He’d succumbed to sleep not long after lying down, thoughts of last night following him into the dream world. He doesn’t dream of the asylum. Instead, he dreams of running through the woods, snow thick and crunching loudly beneath booted feet, dark sky looming ominously above. Without a doubt he knows he is being chased, something quick and dangerous is at his heels, something voracious.

The forest stretches on as far as the eye can see, tall trees soaring up towards the clouds, skeleton branches reaching for the warmth of the hidden sun. The ground is blanketed in snow, not even the faintest of undergrowth can be seen through the heavy coverage of slush. There is nothing alive in these woods, no animals scurrying around or birds flying overhead. It’s an empty forgotten place, undisturbed by anything sweet or brightly coloured.

The only sound is the beating hearts that belong to the boy being chased and the monster hunting him down. In this forest of rot, there is no hope to found, not even a flutter in a tree or spark in the snow. The snow that is no longer white under running feet. It doesn’t crunch under the heavy footfalls, it screams. Glistening white has turned crimson, the grey bark of the trees slips away like rotting flesh, oozing blood so dark it’s almost black. The woods come alive with wailing cries, angry moans vibrate the ground below.

There is nothing to do but keep running, through the blood-soaked snow, past the trees that bend and snap like writhing corpses. Up ahead, between the contorting trees is a cabin. It’s unaffected by the rotting world around it, even the smattering of snow on the front porch is pure white. Quickening his pace he races towards safety, legs burning, lungs screaming. Towering trees stretch out their clawed branches; spindly fingers shred clothing, tear fresh and spill blood.

Behind him, the monster lets out an ear-splitting shriek. It nearly brings him to his knees but he lurches at the cabin, stumbling up the stairs and throwing himself through the front door. Inside is silent, dusty and cobweb riddled. It’s better than facing the wicked forest outside, even if there is no bed to crawl under or cupboard to hide in. Taking a step makes the floorboards groan in protest, they seem to bend and give under the weight of him.

This is still better than facing the monster, then running forever in a forest alive with malicious trees. Hopefully, someone would come along, someone strong and brave and bold enough to slay the beast, to rescue the damsel. Time has no meaning here; when he’s searched through every
room, desperate to find a warm blanket, a blue parka, a glittering piece of hope, and returned the living room its dark outside. That’s when the cabin comes alive. Safe haven swept away with a whimper, a thud, a tremor.

Dark timber walls bleed red; windows rattle and shake until the glass shatters. When it scatters to the floor it is no longer sharp edged glass, its crimson leather. Panic is a visible force wrapping around his legs, thick vines creep out of the spaces between the floorboards, coiling up trembling legs. There is no hope to be found, no hero appearing out of the chaos to cut away the vines, to slay the beast. Fear is palpable in the air; it’s ash on his tongue, a thick substance blocking the scream crawling up his throat.

The monster is inside now. The door had not burst off its hinges nor had it been ripped opened. It’s simply not there anymore. Neither are the walls. Instead, the towering trees and their grabby hands surround him. The roof has vanished, a moonless sky stretches out above him and yet he can see the snow clearly at his feet, make out every piece of tattered red leather. There are hands on him now, ripping at clothing, touching, clawing, bruising.

Cold calloused hands roam wherever they desire, going places they are most certainly unwelcome. The world shifts and he is on his hands and knees, there is warm breath ghosting over his neck, fingers digging cruelly into the soft flesh of naked hips. There is something inside him, ripping him open, making him bleed, making him scream. There is nothing but immense pain, it sets every nerve on fire, it sucks the oxygen from his lungs and takes the scream from his lips.

Pathetic whimpers are the only things able to free themselves into the hellish forest. Time has no meaning among the chaos; he is on his knees for what could be minutes or centuries. There is no one around to rescue him, the trees do not wish to help; they seem to thrive on his suffering. There is not a scurry or a flutter. There is just the pain, the cold snow that turns crimson between his legs and the faceless trees. Then there is something, a voice, a name carried on a breeze he cannot feel.

It grows louder and louder, no one but him noticing. It comes from everywhere and nowhere. He reaches for it, stretching out one arm towards the bodiless voice. The world shutters and shakes, trees reach out their gnarly arms, spindly fingers trying to grasp hold of air. The beast behind him, inside him, holts its brutal thrusts. The voice calls his name and the forest vanishes in a wisp of smoke. Again the voice calls to him, the monster screeches.

‘Scarlet, you’re safe, you just gotta wake up.’

That’s all it takes. He knows who the voice belongs to and with renewed strength he leaps away from the monster, falling into the nothingness surrounding him.

XxX

It takes an age for Len to calm Barry after his nightmare. It was Wally, the kid Joe had just learnt about, that raced downstairs to find him. He hadn’t talked to the kid once, didn’t know anything more about him than his name and that Zoom had taken him to trick Barry into giving him his speed. That’s all he knew and he hadn’t exactly made the effort to go and introduce himself. He hadn’t really made much of effort with anyone and yet somehow he found himself talking with Oliver Queen.

He honestly didn’t think he could like Oliver, despite Barry’s devotions to him. Oliver Queen, however, was an okay guy; he was someone that Len could actually see himself getting along with. They’d been talking when Wally appeared, with wide terrified eyes like he’d found a spirit haunting the lake house. In a rushed sentence he said he’d been upstairs when he heard screams, he went to investigate and found Barry in the throes of a nightmare.
Len immediately took off, leaving a worried Oliver and Wally behind. Once he was clear of the loud chatter and irksome Christmas music he could hear Barry’s mangled screams and whimpers drifting towards him. He shouldn’t have indulged in the champion and beers. He never liked drinking, mostly because his father was a raging alcoholic but also because it dulled the senses and that made him feel vulnerable, a feeling he deeply despised. Following the broken sobs and guttural screams he found Barry in a bedroom at the far end of the hall, thrashing wildly on a king-sized bed.

Carefully he sat down on the edge of the bed, whispering words of comfort, hoping that they would reach him. The thrashing subsides, still his body twitches and whimpers escape passed chapped lips. He keeps talking, fighting the urge to pull him into his arms. When he woke up he could, if he did so know he’d frighten him. It takes time and patience to wake Barry from one of his nightmares, gentling coaxing him awake is a lot safer than forcing him back into the waking world.

Len is consumed by the task that he doesn’t hear the footsteps creeping towards the bedroom door, it’s only when a floorboard creaks that he becomes aware of the presence. Wally is standing nervously in the doorway, asking if he can help. On the bed Barry lets out a pitiful cry, fingers curling in the sheets and legs kicking out at an invisible force. He politely tells Wally that isn’t anything he can do; they just have to wait for Barry to wake up. He really should order him away, he needs to focus here but there is a look of determination in his eyes and Len knows without a doubt that he’ll refuse to leave. He wants to help, he wants to make up for being part of the reason Barry is lying here fighting to wake from another tormenting nightmare.

“Scarlet, you’re safe, you just gotta wake up.”

For a heartbeat he goes still, no whimpers, no twitching limbs, even his fingers let the sheets slip free. He is about to wake up, it’s going to be ugly and he can’t allow Wally to see. They need their privacy. Barry deserves to come undone in the quietness of his arms. He orders the kid to go and get a warm glass of milk and to tell Sara what is happening. Nodding he turns and runs off, a moment later Barry’s is startling awake and Len opens his arms for him. Allowing him to crawl onto his lap and fold himself impossibly small against his chest, which is becoming increasingly difficult with his growing stomach.

It takes an age to get Barry to settle. Whatever he had been dreaming off had deeply disturbed him, he hasn’t been this distressed from a nightmare in a while. They will talk about it later when Barry feels safe and the dream isn’t freshly imprinted in his mind. For now, he’ll hold him close, gently rocking them back and forwards, whispering words of comfort until Barry is still against his chest. He’ll keep him safe in his arms, he’ll be a barrier between him and the world and all the wicked things lurking within it.

Silence is broken by approaching footsteps, Barry tenses against his chest, fingers grasping at Len like he was afraid he’d let go. He’ll never let go, not now, not ever. Sara calmly walks in with a frazzled looking Wally carrying a glass of milk in an unsteady hand behind her. He’d forgotten all about the kid, the determined look to help is fizzling out, now he just looks desperate to do something. Len can see the quilt shining clearly among the scared, frantic look.

The poor kid feels responsible for this. He’d been the leverage, the bait dangling before Barry’s nose. Zoom had found a perfect bargaining tool, Barry’s speed for the kid and since he was a hero he gave up his powers and unknowingly gave himself to Zoom. Wally blamed himself, Team Flash blamed themselves, Barry blamed himself, Len only blamed Zoom. He was the monster in this story, he plotted and toyed and manipulated his way into their lives and when the opportunity arose he took it. He took Barry, he hurt him, broke him and even months after escaping capture Barry was still haunted by him.
Shaking the raging thoughts from his mind he returned his attention to Barry, who is gradually
relaxing, breathing evening out and eyes drying. Sara is next to them, holding one of Barry’s hands
and rubbing soothing circles over his back. Wally is hovering in the doorway like a little lost boy.
Len motions him forwards, he steps towards them hesitantly, like he is approaching a wounded
animal that will go rabid at any moment. Between him and Sara, slowly, cautiously Barry unfolds
from Len’s lap.

“I’m okay now” his voice is hoarse; he licks chapped and sore lips.

He throat must be parched from screaming. Sara retrieves the warm milk from Wally, offering it to
Barry who drinks it greedily, spilling some onto the red button down shirt he’d worn just for today.
Len thumbs the wetness away; the movement drawing Barry’s attention towards Wally.

“Wally?” he is startled, the empty glass of milk would have crashed to the floor if Sara hadn’t been
holding onto it as well.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to frighten you” he quickly apologised. “I came looking for you and I found
you having a really bad dream so I went to get Len” he stumbles for words “and… sorry, I just
wanted to help.”

Barry offered the kid a brittle, tear stained smile and because he was a better person than Len could
ever hope to deserve he said. “Thank you, Wally.”

“It’s nothing” he waved him off “I’m just glad I could help.”

“You did good Wally” Sara praised, before turning her attention back to her charge. “Do you want
to go back to the cabin, Barry?”

“Yeah, I’d like that.”

“Okay, are you alright to come downstairs or do you want me to go down and let everyone know
we’re going to leave?”

“Can you go first?” he sounded so small, so lost again. “I’m not… I don’t want to be crowded at
the moment”

“Do you want me to do anything?” Wally asked. Len could see he was eager to help even if he was
unaware that he was in way over his head. “I can go tell them if you want?”

“We’ll both go” Sara rose, striding towards the doorway. “Are you able to go get our car? The
engine might need warming up before we can leave.”

“Sure, I mean, I don’t have a license but I know how to start a car.”

“Perfect, let’s go.”

Len watched them go, cradling Barry against his chest, listening to his rapid breathing slowly even
out. They don’t speak, he knows Barry lied before; he is never okay after a nightmare. It can take
hours if not a day for Barry to come around. The way he clings to him, fingers white from grasping
tight, says more than words could. The nightmare has unleashed a tidal wave of memories that are
no doubt accompanied by a range of emotions.

It will some time for him to break out of his post nightmare state. Some of the nightmares leave
him anxious, they’ll have to be careful around him, keep him away from loud sounds and bustling
places and make sure to give him extra comfort. Other times he will fall into depression,
withdrawing into himself and hiding away. Len and Sara will be patient, it’s important to let him feel everything; they only step in if the depression stretches on.

It will be anxiety they are up against this time, Len could tell from the moment he walked in the room. The nightmares that cause the dark depression are the silent ones, they have Barry waking up dead-eyed and pulling away from their touches rather than seeking them. Those dreams are deadly, they aren’t violent and bloody like the others, they are loaded guns. They star white lies and poisons words and all the wicked untruthful things Zoom forced into his mind.

Bruises eventually leave no trace; scars fade with time and can be hidden, cruel words sink deep, leaving ugly marks that can’t be seen. Zoom used every weapon in his attempt to mould, warp and break Barry and it was the filthy lies that cut the deepest. Len knew that fists hurt, blades sliced deep, bruises could last weeks, but they were just fire, words were gasoline. Enough people had damaged him with their words for him to know how deadly they were. What Zoom had done was different; he’d wielded them like fists, like sharp knives digging deep into delicate flesh, carving away at Barry until there was almost nothing left.

Erasing that kind of damage wouldn’t be easy. They’d come along but there were still rivers and roads to go. Len watched Barry fight his demons every day, watched him struggle to find a way out of the darkness. Len reminded Barry constantly that he hadn’t deserved this, he didn’t ask for it and it sure as hell wasn’t his fault. He wasn’t so sure Barry believed him at times, he could see his hazel eyes clouding with doubt, he could practically hear Zoom whispering lies to him from the grave. There was still a long road paved with nightmares, panic attacks, bad days, worse days and scattered okay days ahead of them. Right now it’s time to take Barry home, away from the lake house with all its glittering, tinsel, shiny lights and Christmas cheer.

XxX

The bathroom mirror has fogged over, water slightly too hot pours into a tub close to overflowing, to spilling its lavender scented water across the tiled floor. Barry sinks into the hot water, shivering, there is a chill deep in his bones that won’t go away. It’s been there since the start, it would be there even if it was a blistering hot summer’s day. It’s there and it won’t go away. No matter how hot he makes the water, no matter how many blankets he wraps himself in. It’s as much a part of him as his scars are.

Hopelessness engulfs him; the nightmare has left him feeling dismal and uneasy. Take one step forwards, take several steps back. He wants to scrub his skin raw, take the flesh from his very bones so there is no more sensation of gnarly hands and spindly fingers. He wants to sink under the scolding water and scream, letting the water fill his lungs until stars burst behind his eyes and he can’t see the pieces of his suit like blood on the forest floor.

He can still feel hot breath whispering across the nap of his neck, phantom hands shedding clothing and roaming to places they don’t belong. It still feels like there is something inside, tearing and forcing its way in deep. He wants to be clean; he needs to scrub away the crimson snow, the smell of him. He wants the soap to erase every horrid thing that happened to him, he wants the water to wash away the scars, purge him of the darkness Zoom left buried deep inside. He’ll sink below the surface, he’ll let the blood tainted water pool into lungs, cleansing and purifying.

Before he can submerge into the depth there is a flutter, a sharp jolt in his abdomen and the desire to drown, to give in to the sorrow in his bones, vanishes. There is only him and the beautiful life reaching out to him in this moment. Quivering hands caress the wet skin of his stomach, breath held until another jolt has it rushing out in a broken bittersweet sob. The water will not pour into his lungs, choking the life from him. No; he’ll breathe in the sweet scented aroma and keep both hands
planted firmly on his stomach, waiting for the comforting flutter of his daughter. He’ll try to chase the sorrow from his bones; he’ll do his best to calm the storm raging in his mind.

“Hi baby” he whispered. “I’m sorry. I get a little lost in my head sometimes. It’s a good thing I’ve got you to remind me to come back.” She is still now, the water has grown tepid and the condensation has evaporated from the mirrors, leaving only the corners misted. Barry rises to unsteady legs, he’s starting to find balancing an issue and it won’t be long until he needs help for such a simple task. Pulling the plug he lets the slightly pink water swirl down the drain.

He gives himself a once over in the mirror, taking note of the small abrasions left behind by the furious scrubbing. They are pitiful little marks compared to the mangled flesh of his inner thighs, the thick keloid scarring spiralling around his wrists and the stark white burn marks left by the cattle prod. Quickly he redress’s in one of his oversized hoodies, hiding the ugly scars and red, bleeding skin from prying eyes. It does nothing to hide his bump. He doesn’t mind, it’s the only thing Zoom left him with that he no longer hates.

His love for his daughter has grown immensely. Lately, it felt like she was just his, he knew how she was conceived, of course, he did, it wasn’t something he would never forget. She wouldn’t be anything like Zoom, though; she wouldn’t have his rage, his hatred, his wickedness. She was his, she was Len’s, she was Sara’s. She would be good, she’d be amazing. She wasn’t even born yet and she was helping him fight the darkness. If it weren’t for her jarring him back into reality before then he would be choking on copper water.

He couldn’t lose his mind like that again; he couldn’t go running headlong into woods or let his haunting thoughts drive him to the edge. For months his body belonged to someone else, it was used for amusement and pleasure. Skin, flesh, lips, hands, legs, they hadn’t belonged to him. He was just a toy, a piece of property to beat, bend and break. Zoom had owned every inch of him, inside and out. He pulled the strings and Barry sank to his knees, opened his mouth, swallowed. He was a marionette performing the most obscene dance. Tug that string and he’ll spread his legs, twist that string and he’ll lie still, strum this string and he’ll fall apart.

The strings were threaded deep, working their way free day by day and now he finds them gone. He can reclaim his body; it no longer belongs to the wicked monster who sought to shape it into something ugly. It belongs to him, to his little girl growing inside and it’s for her that he must take care of it. No more clawing at skin when panic overtakes, no more showers so scolding it felt like he might faint. He has to look after it for her; he has to look after himself for her.

A devoted smile graced his face as he looked down at his stomach, at her. “I promise I’ll do my best to be better for when you are born, okay?” He vowed, “I love you and I will look after you.”

Chapter End Notes

I am not a hundred percent happy about the ending and I planned to write a lot more but I have unfortunately come down with a terrible cold so I am going to take a few days off to rest. I don't want to give you lovelies something that isn't my best. Fingers crossed I will be better soon so I can get back into it. The next chapter Barry will me unmasking the man from his nightmares and spending some quality time with Joe, Iris and Wally. Oliver will always make another appearance since I do love his
relationship with Barry.
Thank you for reading and I will be back once this awful cold clears up.
Sara is the first up. The cabin is comfortably quiet first thing in the morning; birdsong echoes through the trees, the wooden chimes from the front porch jingle their sweet melody. Outside is a beautiful day, cloudless blue sky stretching above the snow-covered treetops, beaconing those to come outside and play in the freshly fallen snow. She could take Lisa to Apple Grove, they could skate over the frozen pond, hand in hand, she could help Sara forget the twisted, disturbing dreams that plagued her sleep.

The visit to the lake house yesterday has unearthed memories, the ghost she was following around has in returned followed her home, crawling deep into her subconscious. She dreamt that she was standing at the end of the pier, teetering right on the edge. She tipped forward, diving deep down into the abyss. There was nothing to see, it was too dark, the water was freezing, turning her to ice, a lost treasure to be found in the spring. Then there was movement, a flash of something white in the distance. She wanted to give chase, to follow it wherever it may lead but her limbs wouldn’t work.

Soon the frigid water would fill her lungs and she’d sink like a stone, maybe never to be seen again. There is a flash of white again, the water stirs around her frozen body and a name escapes from her mouth in a cloud of bubbles. Out of the murky depths, her dead sisters appeared skin as white as snow, eyes as black as night. Her chest fills with hope, she will be saved, Laurel will take her hand and swim them back towards the surface. They’ll gasp in hot summer air, let out carefree laughter and climb out onto the pier, collapsing side by side under the yellow sunshine. Laurel does not guide her to the surface, the hot summer air does not fill her lungs and there is no trickle of laughter. Her dead sister wraps a porcelain hand around her ankle and drags her deep, deep down into the nothingness of the lake.

Sara had woken with a scream building in her chest; coughing and sputtering the imaginary water from her lungs. Len and Barry were woken by her disturbance; they were quick to offer comfort but she pulled away, got up and left the room. She knew they’d both understand, so they let her go without a fuss when she returned an hour later they were asleep again. The next day they’d probably usher her upstairs to the red couches with their old throws and sit her down in the place usually reserved for Barry. It would be far more difficult for her to open about her demons, her hidden guilt and troubled dreams. She learnt to hide her emotions a long time ago, she was trying to be better, to relearn how to talk to people but it wouldn’t come easily.

Barry had been an open and honest person before Zoom laid his wicked hands on him. In the wake of the trauma he may have struggled but Sara could see in the end he would confide in them. He
just needed a safe space, enough time put between him and the terrible things and he would start talking to them. She’d spent years hiding behind a mask, lurking in the shadows, and in the darkness, she lost herself. The Sara Lance that hadn’t stepped foot on the Gambit could easily express her feelings; she could dig deep and find the source of the problem, take it out, examine it and fix it.

Then the ship went down and the wild sea swept her away for a second time and she woke up on a beach in the midst of heartless men. Nearly ten years on and she still hasn’t been able to find that free spirited girl who liked to party and kiss girls and boys and go on boats with their sister’s boyfriend. She didn’t miss that part, the selfish child who thrived on having the attention of an older guy, an older guy whom she’d always secretly wanted, who belonged to someone else.

If she never stepped foot on that damned boat then maybe right now she’d be back in Star City, making chocolate chip pancakes with Laurel, watching her father read the morning paper and listening to her mum hum a little song. She did step foot on that boat, she did wake up on an island where she found herself learning the true unkindness of strangers. She wasn’t back home, she was in a tiny cabin deep in the woods brewing coffee and helping Barry make it through to the better days she never really found.

All roads lead here, to these people, to this life, and if she stripped away all the pain and misery it wasn’t so bad. It was something worth holding onto, worth fighting for and if she had to sit down and talk about a strange dream to stay part of it then that she could do. She wanted those promised brighter, better days. Laurel would want that for her, she wouldn’t drown her in the deep dark waters of a frozen lake. Dreams said a thousand different things, Nyssa had taught her that.

This reminded her, she’d promised Barry to help unmask the stranger lurking in his nightmares. It would be highly unlikely that Apple Grove would have the ingredients for the dream tea but the next town over might. She didn’t need Nyssa’s tea to figure out her own nightmare, going to the lake house and walking among the past had woken something inside her. Perhaps it was guilt? She’d left her sister to travel through time and maybe, just maybe if she’d been there Laurel would still be alive. Or maybe they’d both be dead and that’s what Laurel had been trying to show her. Maybe there was a point in time where there were two dead girls haunting a frozen lake.

Perhaps it was just a strange dream that meant nothing, it was brought on by seeing ghosts and walking old footsteps. These twisting, circling thoughts are the reason they get Barry to talk about the things he’d been through. It’s easy to drive herself mad with these thoughts and what help is she going to be if she is screaming the house awake in the late hours of the night. Len and Barry had been there for her last night, ready to listen, to comfort. If she couldn’t find a quiet moment alone with them then she could maybe talk to Lisa, who made Sara feel something exciting and almost forgotten. She hadn’t ventured down this path since Nyssa and their relationship while strong and beautiful wasn’t exactly healthy.

They were two assassins in love; it was never going to end well. Nyssa had been what she needed at the time, a person to lean on, a friend to offer comfort in the darkest hours. Those hours had passed; Sara had found the light, thanks to Laurel, which wasn’t surprising. She just needed those better days and maybe those better days involved Lisa. That she couldn’t be sure of, but what she did know for certain is that they involved Len and Barry. She couldn’t shut them out, not now, they’d come too far. For them, she would try, for them she would open her mouth and speak about diving into a dark cold lake and finding her dead sister waiting.

XxX

Joe was woken by Cisco’s snoring. They had been cramped into a small attic bedroom for the past
two nights. If Joe stretched out his arm he could almost reach Cisco, shake him awake and tell him to shut up. The space between them was just a little too far; his fingers were millimetres from the bedframe. There’d be no shaking him awake, he doubted it would work even if he could reach. Cisco had passed at the moment his head touched the pillow, he slumbered soundless until about twenty minutes ago when the freight train snoring started.

On the bottom bunk below Cisco, Wally slept soundly, curled into a ball under the mound of blankets. Somewhere downstairs Barry slept with Len and Sara, he felt very far out of reach. It had been nearly three months since Barry came home to them, though to Joe it just felt like yesterday. He’d been home a week and then he was gone, disappearing to a far off town with an ex-criminal and a former assassin. Joe hated letting him go, all he wanted was to lock the doors and windows and keep out the rest of the world, keep it far away from his children.

No matter what anyone said or thought Barry was his son and he should be the one protecting him, helping him pick up the pieces. He couldn’t though, not like Len and Sara could. They had this special bond that seemed to be formed long before they strolled in off their space ship and rescued Barry. It wasn’t some magical link that bound them or some red flowing string of fate, it was the fact they had been hurt by cruel, wicked men. They could help in ways he and Iris could not, they knew what true fear was, they had felt the worse kind of pain and faced the darkest hearts.

Joe was on the other side like he always had been. There were times when he was at work and a case file would land on his desk, he’d open it with bated breath and inside he’d find some poor soul, beaten, raped or murdered. He’d do his job, he made sure the bad guy was locked away and he’d go home to his kids, who wouldn’t ask why he hugged them a little too tight or a little too long. They just knew it had been a bad day so they hugged back with all their strength and love. Joe would sleep deeply that night, knowing the two (now three) most precious people in his world were safe.

Now he doesn’t sleep well at night. Now when a file landed on his desk or the Captain informed him that he was to work with a traumatised kid or rape victim he’d have to walk away, he’d have to say no, he can’t. Some days he can barely make it into work, he’ll step out of the elevator and Zoom will be standing above him, at his side is the frail, broken boy that is his son. Blink and it’s gone. There is a memorial wall for those who lost their life that day. There is no reminder that Barry was there, just painful memories and a desk he can’t even walk by let alone look at without feeling ill.

It always catches him off guard, he’ll be going through the motions then a voice from somewhere deep and dark will crawl out of its cage and remind him that Barry was raped. Not just tortured but raped and he hadn’t protected him. It’s not like he ever forgets that, it’s impossible to forget the day Cisco told them, he’d never felt a storm of emotions quite like that. Up until the day they were gathered around the monitor at Star Labs, watching Zoom violated Barry on top of a desk while being hopelessly unable to help him.

The knowledge was always there. Sometimes it would drift up from some dark part of his mind and he’ll have to stop, take a breath and wait for the chill to leave his bones. It doesn’t happen as often as it used to, months ago when he first learnt that his son was being raped it would slam into him like a truck, knocking the wind from him. Now it feels like he’s stepped into a cold spot, he’ll shut down for a moment, lost entirely in the grief and the panic, unable to hear anything other than his own inner voice telling him things he already knows.

It happened enough times that Iris started noticing and on one miserable rainy day he forced himself to tell her what he was experiencing. She listened to his every word, hugged him tight and told him she knew exactly how he felt. She told him they had to accept that this had happened, as
much as they wished it hadn’t, in her wisdom she helped Joe come to terms with it. It still hurt to think the words, it made his heart physically ache and constrict in his chest but the thought no longer held the same kind of power over him.

Growing tired of Cisco’s snoring and his sombre thoughts, he decided to get up. The house is quiet as he makes his way to the first floor, even the forest outside seemed to still be slumbering. Today he was hoping to take Wally, Iris and Barry into town for some ice skating since Wally had never been. They hadn’t had the opportunity to spend any family time together and he honestly wanted some time alone with Barry. Over the past two days, he never ventured far from Len or Sara. As he crept downstairs he cast his gaze towards their bedroom, he couldn’t see in but he knew if he entered he’d find all three of them sleeping.

He no longer felt as distrusting of them. At the start they were just two people who suddenly rocked up and refused to leave, asserting themselves into Barry’s life before Joe could even say ‘get the hell out’. He didn’t trust or like them one bit. It felt a little like they stole Barry from him and Iris, which he knew wasn’t true. Jay stole Barry; he took and took until all that was left was a shadow of the kid he raised. Len and Sara, no matter his initial feelings towards them, had helped bring his son back to life.

Barry wasn’t the same person he was all those months ago. There still was no easy-going smile or silly jokes; he wasn’t bursting at the seams with life and excitement. However, over the last few days, he glimpsed genuine smiles and found a flicker of light in his eyes. The difference was noticeable the moment they walked in the door; he greeted them with an embrace and surprised them with gifts. There was still a glint of nervousness, a hint of uncertainty, he still didn’t stray far from Len or Sara, mostly Len, but he was better. Not a one hundred percent better, Joe knew it was going to take longer than three months for Barry to work through everything he’d been through. In the end, he had grown to accept that they’d never have the old Barry return.

None of them were ever going to be the same again and that was okay, as long as they found their way back to something better than the grey, sombre days of the start. Someone who wasn’t coming around was Henry. No matter what Joe said to him he couldn’t accept that Barry wanted to keep the baby, his rapist baby he had pointed out viciously. Admittedly, Joe had struggled with it at first too, there was on one on any earth that he hated more than Jay and the knowledge that a small part of him was growing inside of his son was hard to come to terms with. Then Barry handed him a sonogram and talked about his baby, who could potentially have speed, and his ill feelings faded away. She was a part of Barry, one of the kindest, bravest and most caring people Joe had ever known, so how could she be anything less than good.

Henry couldn’t see that. He left the day Barry headed to Lake View, he turned his back and Joe tried and tried to get him to stay, to see reason but he still walked out front door all the same. Over the following months, he kept trying, for Barry, who fought so long and hard for his father’s freedom, who believed in him even when no one else did. The man who was supposed to look after him walked away, shut out every attempt Joe and Iris made.

Eventually, they had to give up. If he wasn’t going to be there for Barry then so be it. Joe wasn’t giving up on him. Even though he ran so far away, with two people he barely knew, he would still be there for him, like a father should. He would support him through every bad day, terrible day, not so bad day and most importantly he’d love Barry’s unborn child unconditionally. He’d allow him to stay here in the deep dark woods for as long as he needed. He’d do anything to make this right, to help him through the aftermath.

He’d help him by doing what he does best: being a good father. He could coddle him, wrap up, hide him from the world and keep him safe from the wickedness; he could do an endless amount of
things to protect him. Not that it mattered, the worst had already happened to him. Joe couldn’t
protect him from the post-traumatic stress or the nightmares that left him terrified. All he could do
was be a good dad and help him find some joy again if it was the only thing he could do then it
would have to be enough.

Entering the kitchen he found Sara staring out of the window, cherry red mug resting against her
bottom lip like she had frozen just before taking a mouthful. Blue eyes snap alive, swivelling his
way, she smiled sweetly over the rim of her mug. After meeting her father again yesterday, the sad-
eyed detective who’d just buried his daughter but had nothing but praise for Sara, his opinion
changed. From what her father told him he learnt that she was a hell of a lot like Iris, if a little
fiercer.

She was free-spirited, kind, strong, courageous and now that he is looking and actually seeing he
can find these things in her. Her gaze is kind, the way she walks says she is strong, confident and
he already knew she was courageous. After all, she raced off to face Jay, a Speedster that could
snap her neck in less than a heartbeat, without hesitation. There was also the fact that even in the
wake of her sister’s death she still rushed out to save Barry’s life, she planted her feet and stayed
strong by his side for all of this time.

He couldn’t dislike her, not after all she had done and would continue to do for his son. Len on the
other hand, well he still hadn’t worked through those feelings. There was a very large, very bright
neon sign that alerted him to what the far off future could have in store for him and Barry. For
now, he’d rather not think about it, Len wasn’t robbing banks or shooting people, he was helping
Barry and that was enough reason for Joe to let him stick around. Though he is pretty sure he’d
have a hard time getting him to leave, which lead him back the neon sign that proclaims very
loudly that Len had feelings for his son and judging by the way Barry clung to him, those feelings
were most likely mutual.

It was something he didn’t want to think about, it was too much to process and it was far too early
in the morning and he hadn’t even had any coffee yet. When the time came, if the time came, he
would have to choose whether he stepped aside and let Barry be happy or stood in his way. He
would have to trust his instincts this time around. Maybe if he listened to them all those months ago
then he wouldn’t be standing in a cabin in the middle of the frozen woods.

If only he listened to the little voice that yelled numerous warnings. ‘Don’t you see how Jay looks
at Barry when he thinks no one is watching? Don’t you feel it? Don’t you see the lust in his eyes?
Don’t you feel the oncoming storm?’ He never listened, though, Jay courted Caitlin and Joe told
himself he was being ridiculous, he was one of the good guys; he was going to help them stop
Zoom. Then Jay died right before his eyes and the warning voice shouted ‘thank God’. He dropped
his guard; he didn’t listen to his instincts, the warning alarms screaming in his head, he’d never
make that mistake again.

“Can I get you a coffee?”

Shaking off the heavy guilt building deep in his chest he turned to address Sara. “Sure, that’d be
great thank you. I had way too much to drink at Oliver’s yesterday, though not as much Cisco
thankfully.”

Cisco had drunk one too many of Grandma Esther’s eggnogs yesterday; they had to practically
carry him into the cabin when they returned late last night. It was amusing until he was running
towards the downstairs bathroom to throw up his guts. Caitlin, tired and tipsy, went to assist. Joe
would have volunteered his help but the idea of climbing into a warm bed was more inviting.
Wally stayed behind to offer help, Joe was proud of him; he was always willing to look after others.
When Barry was taken Joe felt like he gave up one son for the other and Wally could sense that a mile off. It’s why he never moved in, despite there being two empty rooms in the West house. He had never been angry with Wally, it wasn’t his fault. He was just a pawn in Jay’s sick twisted game. It took longer than Joe would care to admit to make amends with his son, the distress and guilt over Barry had broken him, led him down the path to a lot of empty bottles. Eventually, he righted his relationship with Wally, now he just hoped he could fix the tattered remains of his and Barry’s.

“Do you think it will be okay if I take Barry into town today?” he asked, “I thought we could use a little family time and Wally and Iris really want to go ice skating.”

“I don’t see why not” she replied, handing Joe a cornflower blue mug. “It would be good for him to have some time away from the cabin, but if he starts getting anxious you have to bring him back here right away.”

“Does he often get anxious going into town often?” Joe was only now realising he didn’t know Barry’s tells or his triggers if something set him off he wouldn’t know until after it happened. He’d have to keep one eye on him at all times.

“Big crowds set him off, so do loud noises” Sara explained “and don’t leave him alone that can also upset him. He’s been better lately; we’ve managed to teach him how to self-calm but if its somethings really distressing he’ll need some help. To comfort him keep your distance, let him come to you. He likes crawling into Len’s lap for security so don’t be surprised if he does the same with you.” Sara said, bustling around the kitchen, collecting eggs and milk from the fridge and flour and sugar from the pantry. “He can’t go ice skating, by the way, his balance is terrible and a fall could harm the baby.”

Joe could only nod, her words sinking to the pit of his stomach. When Barry used to get upset they sat down, talked about whatever the problem may be and went for pizza and beer afterwards. It had been years since he had to soothe Barry so delicately, the eleven-year-old boy who lost his parents needed soft words and safe arms to hold him when he cried or woke from a nightmare. A year later and he no longer needed such delicate treatment. This was vastly different, it was terrifying and yet Sara said all of this in a calm, even tone like she was reading him a grocery list.

By now they had no doubt grown accustomed to all of this; they would have had their trials and errors, in the beginning, now they worked like a well-oiled machine, which seemed like a stupid thing to think. They were not a well-oiled machine, they were three broken people, jagged edges slotting together to form something safe, something strong. Sara knew Barry’s pain; she’d lived it, even if he was never told outright he knew the same terrible fate had befallen her. Len had grown up in a home with an abusive father; he knew what fists and kicks felt like, he knew that broken bones and bruises healed but the pain remand the same.

Joe couldn’t fathom the suffering the three of them had lived through. He grew up in a good home, he had a safe life. They were linked by tragedy and it created a bond stronger than any other. Maybe for the rest of his life, he’d be on the outside looking in. If Barry didn’t allow him back in, if he continued to put a wall between them then he might never get to be close again. He might deserve it, to be on the outside; after all, he didn’t protect him. He let a wolf in sheep’s clothing sneak into their lives and steal his son, taking him to where he could not follow.

“Joe?”

Startled, Joe snapped back into the present, burying the guilt once more. “Sorry, that was a lot to take in.”
“He’ll be okay” Sara offered him a reassuring smile “he’s strong.”

She wasn’t talking about today, today could be disastrous, she was talking about the big picture. She believed, in the end, he would be okay, he would find his way back to them. But what did the end look like? Who was the new Barry emerging from the ashes? Did he still like Star Wars and The Avengers? Did he still want to work in CSI and help save the city? What came after the storm? Could he even help Barry rebuild or was he supposed to stand back and watch him shake off the rust by himself? Did he sit back and let Len and Sara guide him towards the better days? He wanted to be a part of his son’s recovery so desperately.

“I want to help him, Sara” his chest swelled with determination. Barry was his son and he’d stood by idly long enough. It was time to step up, stop observing and do whatever he could, whatever it took, to get Barry better. “Tell me how I can help my son recover.”

Sara stopped whisking the pancake batter, lifting her piercing gaze to meet his. “It’s going to hurt when he tells you what Zoom did to him.”

“I know” the words are broken jagged letters bubbling up his throat “but I need to know. I need to be able to understand the way you do. I need to know what triggers him or distresses him. I want to bridge the gap between us and this is the only way I know how.”

“I understand, I do,” she said sympathetically “and I am not going to stop you from talking to Barry, he’s your son. I am going to warn you to tread cautiously, don’t push him. It took Len and me a few weeks to get him to confide in us and we’ve come a long way, we don’t want to cause a setback.”

“So where do I start?”

“There is no ideal place to start” she answered honestly “nothing nice or sweet happened to him, Joe. There are just some things that aren’t as horrific as the others.”

Joe faltered, feeling his determination waver. “I can ask about the baby right?” if Henry wouldn’t support Barry through the pregnancy then Joe was going to make sure he knew he was here for him, that he was on his side. If they could start there, if that could be the first stepping stone, then he’d take it. “It seems to make him very happy.”

“That’s a good start” Sara’s smiled “She does make him very happy.”

“Yeah,” a smile tugged at the corner of his mouth, lighting the darkness in the room “that she does.”

“Oh and Joe,” Sara locked her gaze with his; Joe could see the assassin in the depth of the blue “so does Len.”

XxX

Apple Grove is strangely quiet today; the usual bustling cobble-stoned streets are empty of families and vendors, the stores dark inside and closed signs hang on every door. Unlike the shops and malls of Central City Apple Grove doesn’t open its doors for eager Boxing Day customers. The residents stay inside their warm cozy homes, bathing in the after Christmas glow. The few people mulling around are heading to the frozen pond that sits on the edge of town.

Here there is life, joy and musical laughter dancing in the crisp air. Mother’s and Father’s skate close to their young children, young couples hold hands and drift towards the furthest reaches of the frozen pond so they can sneak kisses in private. Iris twirls around the rink with confidence and
grace; Wally totters after her on unsteady legs. From the sidelines, wrapped in Len’s blue parka and tucked away from the masses, Barry watches them.

Joe is at his side, one eye watching Iris and Wally the other keeping him in his sights. When Barry ventured downstairs, lured by the smell of pancakes, he found Joe and Sara setting the table, talking civilly. Before everyone rose and followed the aroma of pancakes to the kitchen, Joe asked him if he would like to go into town today, as a family. Hesitant at first he waited to see if Sara would weigh in, maybe declare him unfit to go or demand that she and Len accompany them. It was ridiculous to be this frightful of his family, to feel uncomfortable and unsafe in their midst. They weren’t going to harm him, it’s just they weren’t Len and Sara and he’d become a little dependent on them.

Maybe that’s why Sara didn’t protest or step in to answer the question for him. Moving on, beginning again, meant he had to learn to feel safe with everyone. It meant he had to let down the soaring walls built around his heart and allow his family back in. Despite the anxiety strumming under his skin, he said yes, he said yes because he wanted his family to be a part of his life. He might not ever be able to open up to them the way he does Len and Sara but he could at least give them his time.

So away they went, as a family, through the winter white woods to the fairy-tale town. From the outside looking in they appear just like everyone else, happy and thriving in the holiday spirit, step too close and the cracks begin to show. An onlooker, if looking hard enough, will see how Iris keeps casting nervous glances Barry’s way, checking to make sure he is still there, still surviving without his proctors. One could see how Joe spends more time looking at the boy beside him rather than his two children gliding around the ice. If someone was looking they could spot with the tight set of Barry’s jaw, the nervous twitch of his fingers and anxiety glimmering in his eyes. If anyone saw any of these things they didn’t stop to point it out, they turned on the skates or booted feet and walked on. Barry tried to keep from imagining what the crowd was thinking of him, tried to convince himself that they didn’t see the secrets written on his skin. They were just ships passing by, they didn’t know about the ungodly things that had been done to him. They did not see the jagged scars on his wrist or even know of the ones on marring his inner thighs. They didn’t see anything, they didn’t look his way, it was just his mind playing tricks.

“You okay, Barr?”

Joe’s concerned tone shattered the troubled thoughts swirling in his head. “Yeah, sorry, crowds just…” he shrugged, biting back the words. Iris and Wally were having fun; if he mentioned the anxiety to Joe he’d probably make them leave. He didn’t want to ruin their day. “I’m okay, just tired.”

Joe gave him a look that said he wasn’t buying his lie but he didn’t push the matter. Instead, he asked, “Are you sleeping alright?”

“Mostly” that was half true. “The nightmares are getting less frequent, though sometimes this little one kicks my bladder or my kidneys and wakes me up.” A fond smile tugs at his lips; his stomach is hidden from view by the oversized parka. She has been kicking and moving more frequently, startling him awake in the dead of the night. It takes a few moments for the fog to clear his mind, she’ll kick again and he’ll let out a small laugh or sharp gasp if she strikes a little too hard.

Joe smiled tenderly, stretching out a tentative hand in a silent quest for permission to touch. Returning the smile Barry took his hand, resting it on his rounded stomach, encouraging her to kick. It took a few moments and a little verbal encouragement from Barry but eventually she did. Joe laughed, wonder lighting up his face. Barry hid the wince behind a smile, her kicks were
getting stronger. At this stage, Caitlin couldn’t determine if she’d inherited Zoom’s speed or not but judging by the forceful, rapid kicks he didn’t doubt that she had.

“She’s going to be beautiful, Barr,” Joe said, eyes sparkling with the affection he’d desperately wanted to find in his father’s eyes. “Have you thought of any names yet?”

He hadn’t, he didn’t need to; there was only one name he wanted to give her. Of course, he’d liked to get his father’s blessing first, he was hoping that he would have come around by now. He hadn’t though; there was an empty spot where he should be. Then again that spot had been empty ever since he was an eleven-years-old boy; he doesn’t know why he should try filling it after all of these years. It doesn’t really matter; there are two new people in his life, two vacant spots filled with love and devotion. Soon there will be a third person, a third place filled with chubby cheeks, hazel eyes and endless love.

“I’m going to name her after my mother,” he said determinately, deciding here and now that his little girl will be called Norah, even if his father objects. He knows in his heart that his mother would be by his side, holding his hand and talking to her unborn granddaughter. He’ll never get to see how her eyes would light up when she first held her grandchild, he’d never get to hear her sing lullabies or tell nursery rhymes. She would never get the chance to know the horrors that Barry had endured, she’d never have to see his scars or hear his disturbing tales. That he was secretly grateful for.

“I think your mum would like that very much,” Joe said, stroking Barry’s stomach tenderly.

“I hope so” shifting under the touch Joe removed his hand, eyes narrowing in concern. “I doubt dad will.”

“He’ll come around, Barr.”

He tried to believe Joe but the smile he offered was riddled with uncertainty. He had to let it go, cut the strings and let it blow away in the winter winds. If Henry didn’t want to support him through this then so be it, he didn’t need him. He had Len, who looked at him like he was one of the most cherished treasures in the world, who whispered soft words late at night to his kicking daughter and who felt like home and safety. He had Sara, who protected him fiercely and guided him through the darkest hours. He was surrounded by people who loved him, who accepted his choice to keep and raise this child. Still, a small part wanted his father’s approval; he’d been chasing it for so long, always desperate to be loved by the man who shut him out over and over.

“I don’t know if he will” he confessed, heavy heart sinking.

“It’s his loss” Joe declared words harsh then softening “Barry, you are my son as much as you are his and I will never leave you.”

“I know” Barry felt the heaviness lift.

“You know you can always talk to me right?”

Barry grimaced; he was hoping to avoid this song and dance. Joe still wanted him to open up and maybe by now he could he tell him something. Shuffle through the memories and find something small to reveal. The bigger things, the thunderous memories that haunted his nights were his to keep. How would Joe feel knowing that he was forced to his knees, forced to swallow, to not bite or he’d find himself with a broken jaw? What would Iris’s and Wally’s reactions be if he told them about the time he was electrocuted by a cattle prod that was placed in the most sensitive places?
He didn’t keep these things hidden to hurt them; he kept them hidden to protect them. He wasn’t shutting them out; he just couldn’t bear to see the pain flare in their eyes when he told them that Zoom once raped him five times in one day in his overzealous quest to get him pregnant. That he broke his fingers and on two occasions his ribs, that he left him purple and blue and bleeding. Those were just some of things he kept from them, things he probably would always keep from them.

Only Len and Sara were privy to the wickedest, cruellest things done to him. The knowledge hurt them; he could see it in their eyes as clear as he could see their own past sufferings. They were the only ones strong enough to carry his pain as well as their own. He couldn’t saddle Joe with the fine details; he couldn’t tell him that he teetered on a cliffs edge, arms outstretched and toppling forwards to sweet nothingness. There was no way he could open his mouth and say ‘I tried to kill myself. I got tired of hurting so I let Zoom use me. I got to my knees and I spread my legs without fighting. Aren’t you disappointed in me? Aren’t you disgusted with me?’

Something snaps inside, there is the tell-tale sign of his heart rate spiking, icy fear spreading from the tips of his ears to the soles of his feet. If he doesn’t ground himself now then he’ll surely break. Whirlwind thoughts have unleashed a storm. The words just thought taste like ash in his mouth. It feels like he spoke them, like they sprung forth from his mouth, wreaking havoc and causing chaos. No words left his mouth; his secrets are still caged deep inside.

This knowledge does nothing to calm the panic coursing through his veins. Swallowing doesn’t dislodge the lump narrowing his airways, the world starts to tilt and wilt and if he can’t calm down he might pass out. He might jump to his feet and flee. He has to settle down, ground himself, name the planets, count backwards from ten, he just has to fucking breathe. Eyes close, blocking out the bright, too big world, lungs heave in the frigid cold air.

He thinks of Len, of dazzling ice blue eyes and a tender smile reserved for him only. He imagines that he is here, calling him back from the brink of the abyss. Holding him in a safe, strong embrace, anchoring him, tethering him to the world so he doesn’t slip away, lost to the mess inside his head. He’d tell him to breathe. He’d cradle him against his chest, holding on tight so he didn’t unravel, disarray of strings scattering in the wind.

Len may love the cold but to Barry, he was like fire. Strong and burning bright, always there to hold him when he shivered, quivered, never letting go even when he wanted to give up. He was there to soothe him, whispering words of reassurance and devotion. Calming him, saving him from the storm. He was a burning light guiding him through the darkest hours, protecting him with his embrace, encouraging him to go further, to carry on. Len meant more to him than words could say, falling for him was unexpected and also terrifying. Barry was riddled with scars, head full of tormenting memories, only just surviving.

He was not ready to be loved, to give such love back in return. He may feel butterflies in his stomach and heart beating in excitement every time he was near Len, but he wasn’t ready to succumb to those feelings, to be overtaken by them. When Barry fell in love he fell hard, he gave every piece of himself away and he was only just starting to reclaim those pieces back. Zoom had taken what he usually gave for free, twisting and warping him with his own love, if you could call such a foul obsessive thing love.

Len wasn’t Zoom, he would never hurt him, not like Zoom did. There was a chance he could break his heart, though, he could not feel the things Barry felt stirring in his heart. Right now he couldn’t handle that kind of rejection. Maybe one day when he was something more than he was now he could he could find the courage to tell him how he felt. Maybe one day when he was no longer Zoom’s broken, tainted leftovers they could be more. Perhaps when he felt ready to love and be
loved there might be something bright and hopeful to be found between them.

As of right now the panic has slowed its rampage, much-needed air finally making its way into aching lungs, filling them up and rushing back out to form plumes in the frigid air. The world settled back into its rightful place, the pond and the dancing, twirling people no longer tilted or wilted. Letting all his troubled thoughts go, deflated and defeated Barry turned to ask Joe if they could leave. He’d had of enough of musical laughter and curious, prying eyes for one day. He wanted to retreat to the solitary of the cabin, lock out the rest of the world and its loud cheerful sounds, crawl under the warm covers and wait for Len and Sara’s return.

XxX

Len hadn’t wanted to leave Barry; he’d made that abundantly clear to Sara. She wasn’t budging, insisting that Barry needed to spend time with his family, it was crucial for his recovery. Len got that, he did, he just didn’t like being separated from him. It had been the three of them for so long now, it seemed strange to have all of these people intruding and trampling all over the little corner of the world they carved out for themselves. Len didn’t like finding himself without Barry; their friendship had grown, tangling them together, putting them on the cusp of something transcending explanation.

Perhaps it was love; perhaps love was too simple of a word to summarise what was bursting to life between them. It didn’t matter what anyone labelled it as, love, pure devotion, admiration, they were just letters strung together to make pretty words. They weren’t pretty, they were blood-stained and haunted, ripped and torn around the edges by the hands of cruel men. This love didn’t develop over the course of a handful of romantic dates. It rose from the ashes, clawing its way out of something violent and bloody, fighting all the way to the break of day.

This wasn’t a sweet summer romance; there were no burning candles or walks along a picture-perfect beach. This love was raw, built through cold winter nights and months of suffering. He’d learnt to love Barry through the cracks in his skin, he fell in love with his strength and courage to push on, march on, even though his world had been shattered. Barry may be the one he was piecing back together but somehow, somewhere, along the way he started piecing him back together too.

Even broken, hurting and tearing at the seams, Barry managed to save a life. Not from his inner demons, those he had learnt to live with long ago, but from the bitter loneliness, he’d let consume his heart. Barry lit a fire, embers burning bright, flames climbing and spreading to thaw the ice. Even in his darkest hours, Barry managed to save a life. After losing Mick, even with Sara by his side, he felt lost, alone. Sure if Rip never sent them on this mission he probably would have been okay. He liked the team and his admiration for Sara might have led them to tangled nights in the sheets but his life would be without meaning, without purpose.

Saving the world is rewarding, protecting time is fun but loving Barry feels something akin to magic. Len isn’t a sappy sentimental person, he wasn’t about to lose the sharp drawl to his words or the desire to steal pretty shiny things, but he wasn’t going to be the cold hearted man who caused mayhem either. For Barry he was going to be someone better, someone deserving of the love that he hoped to a God he didn’t believe in that Barry returned. Someday, months from now, years from now, he hoped they could be more. Len would wait; he would wait a thousand lifetimes.

“Hey Lenny, quiet your daydreaming.”

Len blinked, once, twice, the dimly lit café shifting back into focus. They had driven to Riverdale, a somewhat of a large town on the edge of the river that snaked up the mountain, up, up all the way to Lake View. Unlike Apple Grove the town was lively with bargain hunters, shrieking children
and tired parents. Sara had disappeared into the swarm of people in pursuit of ingredients for her
dream tea. On the drive here she’d looped him into her plan, explaining Barry’s new and chilling
nightmare and how they were going to help guide him through it so he could unmask the monster
lurking in the dark.

Caitlin had also invited herself along. She was concerned about the ingredients and the process of
the ritual; she didn’t want it to be harmful to Barry or the baby. Sara seemed confident that nothing
could cause harm but she allowed Caitlin to accompany her all the same. Len didn’t want to make
his way through a mall brimming with shoving, over-eager shoppers, so he found a quiet café and
tucked himself away in a dark corner. Lisa stayed with him, ordered a macchiato and levelled him
with a look that screamed ‘let’s have a talk.’

Of course, being the fantastic big brother he was, he completely ignored her, letting whirling
thoughts sweep him away. Now she has interrupted them and he has ignored the questions dangling
on the tip of her tongue for long enough. She always gets her way in the end; it’s why she never
backs down, no matter how long it takes. So they talk. She asks him questions and he answers
honestly, finding he likes the way it feels to set free all the things jostling around in his head.

They talk about Sara, they talk about Barry and they talk about what they mean. Lisa is smitten;
she always does fall fast and hard. Sara captivates her; she is strong and fierce but equally soft and
caring. She makes Lisa see the world in a spinning kaleidoscope of colours, there are songbirds in
her heart and butterflies in her belly. The last time she felt like this was twenty-year years old and
Ben Thomson broke her heart and busted her lip, after that whenever she felt butterflies or
songbirds she ran, she ran far away.

This time her feet don’t carry her away, they keep bringing her closer, butterflies and songbirds
rejoicing. It could be something, it could be a winter fling and it will bleed out in the summer. It
could be more; it could grow and stretch out further than the eye could see. Whatever it is,
wherever it may lead, Len is happy for her, for Sara, they are perfect for each other and he
wouldn’t trust his sister with anyone else. Sara is a warrior, a kind-hearted soul and a worthy
companion for his sister.

Len tells her about his feelings for Barry, letting the words float out into the open, drifting away
for anyone to hear. Lisa listens to every word, there is no surprise on her face when the L word
falls from his lips; she merely leans back in her chair and smiles knowingly. Of course, she had
picked up on the infatuation he had for The Flash; she had known his obsession with the Scarlet
Speedster had been driven by a carnal lust. Len liked going after things he couldn’t have, he liked
the challenge, the thrill of the chase.

That’s probably how it would have gone down if Barry didn’t waltz in and say such sweet kind
words to him, sparking the first flame. His kindness made him want more than a game, a night
tumbling in the sheets, it made him seek something he hadn’t sought after in a long, long time.
He’s not sure what would have eventuated if Rip never arrived with his big damn time ship and
flashy promise of being legends. Maybe he’d still be waiting, waiting to find the courage to go
after his hearts desires.

Fate sent him on a journey into a brave new world, shaping him into a brave new man then the
stars aligned and he was propelled back into Barry’s life, shoved right into a situation he’d give his
all to change. If he could undo the past, erase what Zoom had done to Barry then he would, even if
it meant he never got the chance to find a place at his side. Time could not be rewritten, this fate
had been sealed a lifetime before it even came to pass. Their destiny was written long before there
were even around to carry it out. If time could not be changed then Len would do whatever he
could to help Barry. He’d stay by his side regardless of how their journey ended.
Lisa told him with absolute certainty that things would work out; she could see the devotion glittering in Barry’s eyes. It may take time, it would take patience but Lisa assured him that Barry felt the same; it was just buried under the rubble left behind by Zoom. He would like to believe her, she could read people almost as well as Sara could, but the little voice of doubt kept him from feeling the joy of her words. None of that mattered right now; they still had plenty of work to do, a long road ahead of them.

The nightmares may be getting a little less frequent and Barry may be emerging from the ashes but he wasn’t at the end yet. Len would not open his heart to Barry until he was certain he was ready. For now, he’d love him from afar. He’d be a good friend; he’d hold him in his arms, wrap him in his embrace and stay by his side because he loved him. Because he saved his life once and he didn’t even know it.
Conscious

Chapter Notes

Merry Christmas everyone!

Everything I fear, always meets me here
In the early hours dancing with my doubts
I can be a hard light to ignite
All my nightmares feel like real life

Broods - Conscious

Barry can’t remember the last time he built a snowman. Perhaps it was three years ago, maybe four. Time seemed to go fast once he became The Flash, no pun intended. His time was spent battling Meta-Humans, getting faster, hunting for the Man-in-Yellow, fighting more Meta-Humans and getting even faster. Then he tore a hole in the fabric of time and all the Meta-Humans and even the Reverse Flash couldn’t prepare him for the monster that would fall from it.

The monster was gone, slain by a knight and his cold gun. It’s time to move forwards, to focus on the white snow beneath his feet and the unexpected brother at his side. Wally has never had the chance to build a snowman, it never snowed enough in Keystone city and his mother never had enough money to take them on a holiday. So here they are, out in the bitter cold, building a snowman that will most likely blow away in the evening wind.

They build one just the same, adorning it with a woollen scarf, carrot nose and scavenged pebble buttons. Wally stands admiring their work, Barry stands watching Wally, catching traces of guilt glimmering in his gaze. He hadn’t noticed it before today; then again he wasn’t really looking until now. Now that he has he finds shimmering guilt, it eclipses the happiness, the dazzling brightness of eyes seeing a snowman brought to life. There is no need to ponder why his eyes hold such blame, such shame hiding among the spark.

Wally was the pawn used in his downfall, he was the reason he sacrificed his speed, gave up everything he had become. Months ago, when he was trapped alone and in pain too immense for any word to describe, he would have told Wally that he should feel bad, that it was his fault. He blamed all of his friends at some point, he hated and cursed them and hoped they lied awake at night, haunted by what they made him do. Over time the blame faded away, his desperate need to be rescued, to be safe overshadowing the rage. When he was returned, broken, ruined, some of the rage sparked, in the late hours of the night, in the hot waters of the shower, in the isolation of his room.

In the end, those sparks burnt to embers to ashes. The only person to blame for his unbecoming was himself. He let Zoom get close, he believed the lies. He gave up the only thing keeping him safe. There was no one else to blame. So Barry decided to do what any good friend, good brother would do, he absolves him of his guilt. Wally’s eyes flash with uncertainty when Barry says ‘you know it’s not your fault right’. It takes him a moment to realise what those words mean.
“It felt like it was” he confessed, “Jay took me and made you give up your speed than when I found out he took you…” Feet carry him away, to a tree that had been knocked over in the storm a few nights past. Slowly, he turns back around, grief-stricken eyes staring back at him “I’ know it’s not my fault but I still wish I could have done something.”

“I know, Wally” he moved towards him, snow crunching under his feet “but you couldn’t and that’s not your fault. Zoom could have taken anyone, he wanted me and nothing was going to stop him.” A chill runs fingers up his spine and it has nothing to do with the cold. Zoom would have found a way to take him, he was obsessed and Barry had doomed himself the moment he let Jay in. The blame he had placed on his friends and family had been unfair. He fell for the trap; he failed to see the twisted lust in those cold eyes. He was the maker of his own unbecoming, no one else.

“I don’t blame anyone for what Zoom did to me” feeling heavy under the weight of his words he carefully sat down on the fallen oak.

“Sometimes it kinda feels like you do,” he said honestly. “You were home barely a week and then you just took off. You don’t tell dad or Iris anything so it’s kinda hard to not feel a little left out or like you are angry with us.”

“I’m protecting you” There is a sharp edge to his words, bitterness and an underlining of aggression. Wally’s gaze is uncomfortable, he thinks he wants to know, he wants to play at being grown up and be included in the horrific details of Barry’s ordeal. “All of you. Trust me; you don’t want to know what I’ve been through.” Rage pooled in his gut, he was sick everyone prying, forcing and pushing him to open up. The truth would break them; the stories untold would leave them devastated, sick and twisted up inside.

Growing tired of this same old tune he stood up, marching back towards the path that led to the cabin. He didn’t have to tell them anything, he wasn’t bottling up his feelings, hiding from the pain. Every Wednesday he sat down on the old red couch that smelt a little like mothballs and mildew and unboxed another tragedy. Telling Len and Sara was difficult enough, some day’s he wanted to stay in his room and keep the lid firmly sealed because he was tired of feeling the roller-coaster of emotions that followed their little talks. He hated seeing the look of pain flicker in their eyes, the closer they became the more his words hurt.

He’d started now and there was no going back. He’d unpack every box, set free every torturous memory just to find them safely tucked away in their rightful place the next day. That was the downside; the memories didn’t disappear or float away to some far off place where they couldn’t hurt anymore. They stayed in the designated spot, sneaking out to haunt him, to remind him. Maybe one far off day when there isn’t snow under his feet and a grey sky above his head they will lose the power the hold over him. Until that day, if that day does indeed come, the memories still crippled him; left him feeling cold and wretched.

He didn’t want his family and friends to hurt, they’d been through enough. He would protect them because he felt guilty for blaming them, for hating them. He would protect them because that was what he did best; Zoom hadn’t taken everything from him after all. He could still be a good friend; he could let them back into his life without having to share the secrets in his head. It’s not like they didn’t know what had happened, they had seen the scars, heard the screams, they knew what caused the panic and the tears.

They thought they wanted to know it all. They didn’t, God they didn’t want to know what it felt like to have someone thrusting violently inside them, to feel nails and teeth draw blood and have fists and fingers leave bruises. They couldn’t handle hearing that he’d been electrocuted, starved, beat black and blue and bloody. They didn’t want to hear the horrid tales, learn the meaning behind
every scar. They knew enough, he couldn’t tell them more, and if they didn’t stop pushing then the walls would keep growing. The distance would just get larger.

Lost in his turmoil he didn’t notice the snow sagging oddly in the path ahead, he didn’t even hear Wally’s hurried footsteps behind. It wasn’t until his foot disappeared into the thick slush that he realised he was falling. The world tilted, breath catching in his lungs as the ground rushed up to greet him. Thankfully he never landed; strong arms caught him, saving him from the fall. Wally hadn’t caught him in time to stop the horrible twist of his ankle, pain burst to life.

Gingerly he raised his foot out of the hole, wincing at the twinge of pain. Gritting his teeth he reminded himself that he had felt worse before. Tentatively, placing it back on the ground, he tested to see if what was broken. A low hiss of pain rushed past clenched teeth, it probably wasn’t broken but it hurt like hell.

“Is it broken?” Wally asked, hesitant and a little guilty.

“I don’t think so” he replied, “it just hurts to walk on.”

“Okay, let me help you back to the cabin” looping Barry’s arm around his shoulder and wrapping his own around his waist they started to slowly trudge back. “I’m sorry I upset you, I didn’t mean too.”

“I know Wally” Barry sighed “I guess I’m a little emotional right now.”

“I’m a little pushy.”

“Well you are Joe’s son” he offered him a small smile. “Which is why I think you should move back in with him.”

Wally stopped; Barry faltered in his step but managed to right himself. “That was a little out of the blue.”

“It’s been playing on my mind.” Wally had moved in, he had been there barely a few hours when Zoom raced in and took him as leverage. When Barry returned four months later he found the spare room empty. At the time it had completely slipped his mind that Wally had been living there. It wasn’t until a few days later that the memory resurfaced, he never asked why he left, though, that meant he had to find his voice and that was a difficult task back then. Words came to him now, his throat no longer held them, prisoners, he could ask at last. “Why did you move out?”

“I felt guilty” he looked ahead, tracing the curve of the snowed over path with his eyes. “I felt like I was taking your place. Jay had just snatched you away and here I was unpacking my things in the house you grew up in, moving in while you had been taken to some God-awful place.”

“Joe would have wanted you to stay” he knew Joe; he would have wanted him to stay. If he couldn’t protect one son then he would sure as hell to do anything to keep the other in sight, to keep him safe.

“He did but I couldn’t.”

“It wasn’t your fault” he emphasised, “it’s time to come home.”

“And what about you?” he challenged “when are you coming home?”

“Soon,” he felt like he was getting ready to leave, to return and begin again. He needed more time, though, there was still something tethering him to the winter woods, a loose thread caught in a
branch that he hadn’t found the courage to cut free. Maybe the New Year would bring him home, return him to the place he grew up, to the people who loved him. He just needs a little more time.

XxX

Evening falls over Lake View, the world is silent and beautiful in the dark. It’s late by the time Len makes his way up the creaky staircase, trading lightly so he doesn’t disturb the slumbering household. Lisa and Sara had kept him up late, talking about everything and nothing. The rest of the temporary residents had succumbed to sleep early, exhausted after a long day of ice skating, snowball fights and building snowmen. Upon entering the room he found Barry still awake, nose buried in the book Iris got him for Christmas.

Barry lifts his gaze, offering him a tired smile. Len slips off his sweater and carefully gets into bed next to him, being mindful of his sprained ankle. When they arrived home from Riverdale he found Barry on the couch, Iris holding a packet of frozen peas to his purpling foot. Apparently, he had taken Wally out into the woods to build a snowman and on their way back he tripped in a burrow. Caitlin took charge, rushing out to get her first aid kit from the Star Labs van.

Barry was fine, it was a mild sprain and in a few days he would be okay, it did mean he couldn’t particpate in the afternoon snowball fight. Len had a feeling he didn’t mind, running around in the thick cold snow while pregnant wasn’t a wise idea and then there was the time when the autumn leaves had him spiralling into a panic attack. Snow cascading down over him could easily cause the same effect. If they invited him, though, if he hadn’t twisted his ankle, he would have forced himself to go and they might have had to deal with something worse than a sprain.

Len stayed behind, settling in beside Barry, switching on some corny Christmas movie that he didn’t even watch. Barry curled into his side, warmth spreading deep into his skin, deep, deep into his heart. The rest of the world faded away, there was no chatter from the TV or cries of joy drifting in from outside. It was just them, safely hidden in their bubble. Len wished time would freeze, capture them in this moment, stretch it out for all eternity. There were no monsters lurking here, no memories of tragic pasts to haunt them, they were safe here.

Len wanted to keep Barry safe, protect him from the nightmares and the demons running wild in his head. If he could take his scars, the memories then he would. There was no undoing this mess, even with a time ship he couldn’t re-write what had come to pass. These thoughts circled and looped in his mind, the deeper his love grew the more he wished he could rid Barry of his pain. In this moment as the thoughts looped around and around Barry jumped, face crunching in pain.

By now he knew every one of his expressions well. He could see a panic attack a mile off, it was in the nervous fluttering of his eyes, the sharp intake of breath, a twitching finger. He knew true smiles to forced ones, he could tell Barry’s mood by the set of his shoulders. He had witnessed every kind of pain flash to life in his eyes and he knew that right now the reason he jumped, face scrunching in pain was because the baby had kicked. She had been doing it a lot; at times the silhouette of her little foot or hand could be seen through Barry’s flesh.

It was magical, it was surreal. There was beautiful life blossoming to life right before his eyes, there were hands eager to be held pushing against the inside of Barry’s stomach. Something he hadn’t divulged to Lisa was how much he loved Barry’s child. It was strange to hate her conception but adore her so dearly. Her life had begun by one of Barry’s greatest sufferings, the stories he’d been told, the details of Barry’s rapes were heartbreaking, gut wrenching. There was no fathoming the pain he was put through, the depravity and humiliation, it enraged him to think of the wicked things Zoom did to him.

If Len was in Barry’s shoes he isn’t sure how he would have handled the pregnancy, not that it was
even possible for him. Still, if there was some version of reality where he was in this situation he’s not sure he’d find the grace to accept his rapist’s child. From his position as the outsider, he could look past the conception; he could see the beauty, the good, the hero flourishing to life. After all, any child of Barry Allen’s couldn’t be anything less than good, less than amazing. He loved her; he would protect her as fiercely as he protected her father.

“Ouch, baby, please don’t kick my kidney’s.”

Len didn’t hesitate; he reached out to place his hand on Barry’s stomach, rubbing soothing circles to quieten her. “Little one, you can’t keep using your dad as a punching bag.”

“I don’t think she’ll listen to you.”

“She always listens to me,” he said lightly “see she’s stopped.”

They waited, three, two, one. No kicks, she had settled.

“You are a miracle worker Leonard Snart” hazel eyes bright with a thousand emotions meet icy blue ones “I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

He wanted nothing more than to close the distance between them. Press his lips softly against Barry’s, a whisper, pour all the unsaid words into it; fill him up with his love and devotion. It wasn’t time. If he moved in, leant a little close he would frighten him, shatter the moment. Instead, he smiled, a twist of the lips, holding back the true emotions but showing enough to let him know the words had touched him. Opening his mouth he said ‘You’ll never find out because I am not going away.’

Barry’s eyes fill with tears, mouth curling into a heart-warming smile. Lifting his hand, he placed it over Len’s; the baby he later learned was named Nora after Barry’s mother kicked excitedly. In this moment Len understand why the past couldn’t be re-written, why no matter how awful it was, it had to remain unchanged. It wasn’t because the universe was cruel or there were Gods relishing in Barry’s pain, time was unchangeable because someone very important to it was on her way into this world.

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“Did you and Sara get what you needed from the shops today?”

The dimly lit room crept back in, the soft blankets off the bed and the warmth of Barry at his side brought him back to the present. Tiredly he rolled over; Barry was still propped up on pillows, an open book resting against his stomach. Len couldn’t help but smile, he looked at ease, hairy messy and glasses he only just learnt he needed to read, resting on the tip of his nose. He pushed them back into place, long lashes fluttering against the glass.

“Almost everything” In the commotion following their homecoming they hadn’t found the chance to talk about the dream tea and what the ritual involved. He would leave it up to Sara to explain the details since he was a little uncertain about the whole process. “Caitlin has okayed everything so far, so after Sara gets the last ingredient we’ll go through with it. As long as you’re still certain you want to.”

“I am” he declared strongly “I know it might seem like another nightmare but there is something about it, something more real than the rest and I want to figure that out.”

“You don’t have to explain yourself to me, Barry, not ever” he promised, “if it’s important to you then it’s important to me.”
Barry smiled, closed his book, placed his glass on the nightstand and slid down under the covers, lying so they were face to face, cold noses inches away. “Sometimes I never want to leave this place. I like it being just us tucked away from the world and all its horrors and all our responsibilities. I know we can’t stay here, that we have to go back and return to our lives but at least while we’re here I can pretend this is my life. There is no City of Meta-Humans, there isn’t a house where I lost my mother and there isn’t a place where my suit used to be. We’re just us here, no past, no future and it’s nice to forget the pain, to not have to think about what my future holds for me.”

Tired eyes drift shut, warm breath mingling, noses touching. It feels so intimate it might as well be a kiss. Len breathes him in and breathes him out, he smells like lavender and smoke. He smells like home.

“You don’t have to be afraid of the future, Barry” he whispered, Barry’s lashes flutter in an attempt to open but fatigue has won out. Instead, he nods; the tip of his nose rubbing ever so softly against Len’s “I will look after you” Len lays his hand on his round stomach, nimble fingers lace through strong ones. “I’ll look after both of you.”

XxX

It’s been too long since Sara last felt like this, butterflies and excitement dancing alongside a pleasant nervousness within her chest. She prides herself on being confident, collected, she can flirt up a storm with anyone but Lisa is proving to be more than just another good time. Ever since they slept together she’s started having strong feelings for her, they had been communicating throughout the last two months, learning each other’s stories and secrets.

Sara had usually only been able to call her when she went into town, on a rare day, if she was lucky the signal would work and she could call her from here. At first, she just asked questions about Barry, she didn’t doubt herself but it was nice having someone who had access to people who dealt with this kind of thing on a professional basis. Lisa would also stop to make sure Sara was okay; she’d hang on when all was said and done and ask her about her day, the weather, small things that grew into big things.

Stories and secrets were revealed, little things like Lisa’s favourite colours, movies, books and her love for cats and how she planned on adopting one in the New Year. She used to dream of being a professional figure skater, her mum used to pay for her to have lessons and she once had a wall of ribbons to show her victories. They were lost like her innocence, drowned in bottles of whisky and shattered under fists and torn apart by fingers. Len took the beatings for her but he wasn’t always able to protect her things from being destroyed. Winning ribbons were shredded or burnt and a perfect pair of skates were sold to a pawn shop.

Sara learnt that she was resilient, smart and funny. Her heart was made of gold even if it seemed black and hollowed out to outsiders. Sara knew a little something about playing the stone cold killer, the heartless bitch, get hurt enough and anyone would lock up their heart, cage their emotions. She wanted to shake off the rust, unscrew the locks to every door and let those wild, terrifying feelings flow free. It was time to move forward, go forth with hope in her chest to the better days she’d been chasing for so long now.

It was time to stop wanting to change the past and instead embrace the future, the here and now. It was time to bury the fantasies of commandeering the Waver Rider and going back in time to save Laurel, to stop her younger self from stepping foot onto the Gambit. She could undo history, unwind the thread and take it right back to the start. She could take Laurel away from Star City, take her whole family, move them away to some other city a world away and they still might not
be safe.

They could live boring uninspiring lives. For Sara ordinary might as well be a death sentence and Laurel dreamt of changing the world from the moment she was old enough to understand that it needed changing. She had left her mark on the world, she had made it better and isn’t that all anyone can ask for? To make a difference, to be remembered for something great, something heroic. Her sisters legacy lived on, the city knew who had protected it.

Who died for it.

None of these things made Sara miss her any less but it helped heal her heart, it made it easier to let go of the desire to chance the timeline. She could let Laurel rest in peace, even though it hurt like hell. She could kiss the beautiful brunette sitting before her, savour the sweetness of the moment and know that Laurel would want this for her. To be happy, to move on and let go of the last tendrils of darkness residing in her heart. She kisses Lisa fervently, breathing her in, exploring and learning, hands seeking and wondering.

They lose themselves in the moment, clothing falling away, breathy moans loud in the silent hours of the night. They could be caught; anyone could walk down the stairs and catch them half naked. It could be Len or it could be Barry or even Cisco. The stairs remain silent; no one sleepily trudges down them to find Sara with her head thrown back, mouth open in an O and Lisa kissing a trail down, down, down her stomach. If they are heard, if their moans drift up to those upstairs then no one dares come out of their rooms.

Throaty moans and cries of ecstasy go undedicated, this is theirs and the night’s secret to hold.

XxX

Morning breaks and Barry wakes to soft light filtering in through the faded floral curtains and a warm arm draped protectively over his abdomen. Upon opening his eyes he discovers an empty spot where Sara should be, when he drifted off last night she hadn’t been there and when he startled awake from a nightmare her side of the bed was still undisturbed. Had she fallen asleep on the couch? Stayed away to hide the bad dreams she hadn’t yet told them about?

Perhaps she had found her way to Lisa’s bed, slept there in her embrace while Barry slept here in Len’s. She deserved to have something nice and real; someone to love and hold her, to help chase away the pain and the ghosts of the past. The road was too long to go it alone, there were pit stops, breakdowns and detours that could lead them narrowed paths and all the way back to the start. This journey could not be taken alone, life was not meant to be lived without friends and family and a certain someone that made even the darkest days bright again.

He didn’t want to get on this carousel again, he knew he wasn’t ready to love, to be loved but it didn’t stop the butterflies in his stomach or the hummingbird in his chest. There was still too much damage, too many bad memories and haunting dreams holding him back. There were a lot of reasons why he wasn’t ready to embark on his newfound feelings and the biggest reason was fear. Fear of rejection, Len didn’t see him more than a friend, he didn’t want Zoom’s leftovers, he didn’t want to be with this broken mess.

Without meaning he had stepped onto the carousel, the music started and the animals started their mad loop. He had to jump off, untangle himself from these thoughts before they had the hummingbird rocketing into his chest wall, butterflies pooling into cold dread in his gut. Instead, he got up; limping out of the room silently so he didn’t wake Len. He shut the door ever so softly behind him, waiting, listening for a noise from the other side. When none came he turned around, preparing to head downstairs only to be startled by Cisco making his down from the attic.
“Shit, sorry, Barr” Cisco rushed towards him, hair mussed and dressed in Star Wars pants and a Doctor Who dressing gown. “Are you okay? I didn’t mean to startle you.”

“I’m fine” he reassured, rubbing his hand over his heart like it could calm the pounding. “I was just going downstairs. I don’t hear you coming.”

“Sorry, I couldn’t sleep” he replied, “Joe’s snoring was driving me crazy.”

Barry chuckled, moving towards the stairwell. “He said the same thing about you the other morning.”

“I don’t snore” Cisco crossed his arms defensively.

Barry shook his head, he had heard Cisco’s snoring before but it was too early in the morning to waste time going on about it. Hot tea and toast sounded a better way to start this morning, so he started his unsteady decent down the stairs. Cisco offered him some assistance which was greatly appreciated since a sprained ankle and loss of centre gravity didn’t mix well. They made it to the kitchen a little more slowly than usual but Cisco didn’t complain, he sat Barry down at the breakfast bar and went to make his tea and toast.

“So I’ve been meaning to ask, where are Harry and Jessie?” Barry inquired, fiddling with hems of his sleeves, making sure they covered his scars at all times.

“We asked them to come but things have been a little weird” he answered honestly. “When you were taken there was a lot of blame going around, a lot of stupid fights and Harry felt responsible for Zoom taking your speed and Joe was constantly shouting at him and” he waved his hands in a frustrated gesture. “We fall apart, we should have done better and I’m so sorry we didn’t Barry. If we weren’t arguing and being total dicks to each other we might have actually gotten somewhere.”

From the beginning they told him they had tried their best, they worked endlessly to free him, to find a way to him and now it appears that wasn’t always the case. It’s not their fault; he harbours no ill will towards them, not anymore. They had done their best and it was perfectly reasonable that they struggled, that they fought and placed blame on themselves and others. He was home now, he was starting to get better; they could all begin to move on. To what he wasn’t sure, where did Barry fit if he wasn’t The Flash? What use would he be to Central City if he couldn’t fight Meta-Humans and save the innocents?

His speed had brought them together, uniting them as a team and without it, they were just three young adults trying to fix a city that their late mentor helped destroy. What were they now they didn’t have a common goal? Where did they go from here? Did Barry return to his second childhood home and start planning for a whole new life? He kind of had too, he wasn’t the same person he used to be, his life no longer fitted him like a well-tailored suit.

He was a few months off having a child, he had no job and wasn’t sure if he could ever return to the old one. Did he go back to college? Study something new when Nora was old enough for him to leave her, for him to dedicate precious time to tests and exams? God, he didn’t really want to do it all over again, go back and start from the ground up. It was difficult enough rebuilding his shattered mind let alone his entire life. He’d never had a fallback plan, he wanted to work in forensic evidence since the day his father was incarcerated.

His father was free now. They little boy dreaming of freeing his dad had won, only to be crushed beneath the cruel hands of a monster. It was strange to think back to a time before there was darkness in his life, misery and chaos following him around every corner. The last time he truly felt
unafraid was when he was eleven, drifting off to sleep in his loving home, only to be woken hours later by the sound of terrified screams. That was the day the darkness arrived, speeding in from the future, wanting to destroy everything Barry held dear.

Speed had brought him nothing but tragedy. First Eobard Thawne then Zoom, hearts full of malice and heads crawling with wicked things. Eobard took his childhood, killed his mother and let his father take the fall. Zoom hurt him in the cruellest, most twisted ways. Eobard took things from him, taunted him with knowledge of the future and hated him because of a grudge Barry could never fully understand. Zoom took him; he owned every part, every inch of him. He invaded every thought, he ran through him like poison and at the end of it all he was the better villain, the one person who had successfully killed the hero.

But Barry was still alive; he was still breathing, fighting and marching forwards despite the nightmares and the crippling anxiety. He wasn’t lost any more, Len and Sara had helped him find small tattered pieces of himself and with more time and a lot of support he might just be whole again. At the moment there is still ash in his mouth, it’s the foul reminder of cum choking him, suffocating him. There is still rust where Zoom’s fingers left bruises, were they invaded. There are still memories of a cattle prod finding sensitive areas, of a knife sliding over delicate flesh. There are nightmares of being face down on a rickety mattress that smelt like blood, sweat and tears. The memories will never leave him, that he knows but hopefully, someday they will not hurt as much. There has to be a day where the memories don’t paralyse, a night where the nightmares don’t leave him screaming awake. There must be something better than this at the end of the road; something like the desire to get back out into the world, to spend time with friends and family instead of hiding away. There could be courage, strong and as powerful as a lion. Courage to live, to step outside the bubble he’s painstakingly built around him, courage to love and to be loved in returned. The future held so many possibilities, he just had to not give up, not give in and make it.

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“Have you thought of any names yet?”

Barry turned to face Cisco, they had taken their breakfast out to the conservatory, they sat side by on the couch, a blanket draped over them. “I’m naming her Nora, after my mother.”

“I think that is perfect” Cisco smiled “little Nora Allen, our possible future speedster.”

“Caitlin hasn’t figured out a way to know for certain?”

“Not yet, I think we’ll just have to wait until she is born.” Cisco sat aside his empty mug, shifting so that he was facing Barry. “Do you ever want to get your speed back? Not that you need to be The Flash, I love you just as you are but do you miss it? I kinda miss it and it wasn’t even my power.”

There was a part of him that longed to have his speed back, to be able to run hundreds of mile in less than the blink of an eye, to feel the speed force flowing through him like a living thing. He missed that, the way the speed and rapid healing made him feel strong, untouchable, invincible. He wasn’t strong anymore, not like he was then, he wasn’t untouchable, invincible, he never really had been. It was just an illusion, a trick he let himself fall for.

He loved being The Flash, loved playing at being a hero. He dressed in a red suit and went out to face the world like he was some kind of super human. A fancy suit did not make a hero, Zoom had ripped it so clearly from his frame, scattering crimson and everything it symbolised over a dirty cement floor. Hero’s had enemies, people out to destroy them and the great hero’s, the strong ones,
destroy their enemies, the other’s fall. Barry fell. Zoom plucked the hero right from his heart; he beat, tortured and raped The Flash from existence. There was no hero left, no desire or spark to pick up the mental and try, try again.

“No, no I don’t think so” he looked down at his empty mug that rested on his rounded stomach, hiding the tears. “I’m not a hero… I’m not sure I ever really was.”

“You will always be a hero to me, Barry Allen.” Fingers tilt his face up, a feather light touch so they don’t seem demanding but rather a soft encouragement “You survived every awful thing Zoom did to you and you are still surviving, still fighting, if that’s not heroic then I don’t know what is.”

A lump lodged in his Barry’s throat, tears of a different sort making tracks down his cheeks. “Thank you, Cisco that means a lot to me.”

“It’s the truth” he emphasised, wiping away a stray with a gentle sweep of his thumb. “You’re my best friend, Barry; I’m here to remind you of that whenever you need me to.”

He didn’t know what else to say, time and time again he shut everyone out, he pushed them away and added more bricks to his walls. They didn’t care, he could push and shove all he wanted but they weren’t leaving him, they weren’t giving up or letting go. They stood by him; they still loved him even though he wasn’t sure he remembered how to love. They didn’t see the mess, the scars, the ugliness; they just saw Barry, their friend, their fallen hero. Closing the distance between them, Barry pulled Cisco into a hug, hoping it could convey all he could not say. Cisco hugged back, face buried in the crook of his neck and arms holding tight, a silent promise to never let go.

XxX

Barry spends most of the day with Caitlin and Cisco, he didn’t realise how much he missed them until they were all snuggled on the sofa, watching a movie and sharing a bowl of buttery popcorn. Today is everyone’s last day; tomorrow they will pack up their things and make the long drive back to Central City in time to bring in the New Year. They have shiny, bright New Year Eve’s parties to attend; they have friends and family waiting to celebrate with them. There is only so much fun one can have in the middle of the snow covered woods and they aren’t paralysed with fear like he is, they aren’t rebuilding, they can bring in the New Year with excited cheers and raised champagne glasses.

They can dance on rooftops, countdown to the stroke of midnight, let out a loud Happy New Year and be filled with the excitement and thrill of nerves as they wonder what the year will bring. They’ll make resolutions, plans; maybe they’ll kiss a stranger at midnight, under the stars, under bright lights. They think of all the good things the year could bring; money, love, adventure, an endless list of possibilities and in the span of 365 days some or none of those things will happen. In the span of 365 days all it takes is one day, one moment, one choice to ruin it all.

They’ll be no sparkling champagne-soaked party for Barry; he won’t dance on a rooftop or countdown to the stroke of midnight. The New Year will not be celebrated with joy and kissing strangers under stars or bright lights. He’ll be right here, in the middle of the woods that are quiet and empty of cheering, roaring celebrating crowds. When midnight comes he will remember the day everything changed, he’ll think of what if’s, the could have’s and should have’s.

He’ll close his eyes and accept that he can’t change the past, not this time. He won’t make any plans because he has no idea where the road ahead will lead him, he won’t make resolutions because this year he doesn’t want to find the courage to tell Iris that he is in love with her, because he no longer is. If one day he stumbles upon courage he’d be telling an unexpected person that he
maybe, possibly, is in love with them. There will be no lists of resolutions this year, no sparkling champagne or counting down to the stroke of midnight.

There will be a quiet cabin, a distant sound of fireworks coming from Apple Grove that will stir him awake for the briefest of moments. When he wakes, to a new day, a new year he’ll gather up his things, climb into the car with Len and Sara and head home. Back to the family home he prays doesn’t still taunt him, back to the city that still needs a hero and back to a life he no longer fits. Part of him won’t want to leave, it's safe here, tucked away in their little corner of the world. He’ll force himself out the front door anyway; step out into the cold, snow crunching under his feet. It’s time to face the world once more because soon he’ll have a daughter and she deserve better than to live in the middle of nowhere.

Today none of those things have happened, he is still curled up on the sofa with is two best friends, watching The Avengers and eating buttery popcorn. In this moment the maddening thoughts are silent; he doesn’t taste ash on his tongue or feel the rust against his skin. Right now he doesn’t feel like a victim, he doesn’t feel fear or anger or sadness, he feels happy. It’s like old times, before Zoom, before the storm, it’s fleeting and sweet and he will savour the moment because they always end too soon.

All it takes is an image, a sound, then the explosion, sweet paralysation, hyperventilation and he’s ready to go insane. He makes it through the movie without being triggered, when the credits start to roll Sara, Lisa and Len walk through the front door, they have returned with the last ingredients for the tea. He’d much rather get this over with before Joe, Iris and Wally return from the trip to the ski fields. It could be ugly; he doesn’t know what is lurking in the darkness. Who is waiting to greet him under the mask?

The tea tastes sweet with an unpleasant aftertaste that he does his best to ignore. Warmth spreads through him, heavy lids close within moments of lying down. It feels like floating, he hasn’t felt this feather light in so long. He is lying on the floor, Len and Sara at his side, Caitlin sitting at his feet and monitoring his vitals. The floating turns to falling, it’s frightening but only because he knows where he is going to land. When eyes open he is in the dark corridors of the asylum, running, running like he always does.

Like always has.

It unfolds the same way as it always does. Doors burst open on their squeaky hinges, screams and cries ricocheting off the walls and reverberating maddeningly loud in his head. Standing calm among the chaos is the silhouette Barry wishes to unmask. Only he can’t move; he is frozen in fear, trapped by the screams and pleas that fall on deaf ears and bring a sick satisfied smile to his captive’s lips. This nightmare world isn’t real; he isn’t suspended for all eternity among the chaotic darkness.

He wants to wake up but something won’t let him, heaviness keeps the scream from his lips, keeps his eyes from fluttering open. He wants to wake up, he needs to be calm, someone needs to wake him up and keep him conscious. He wants to scream so desperately that it psychically hurts; he wants to run again because if he can’t wake up then that’s the next best thing. He can’t run, it’s coming closer; he can’t breathe, it’s getting closer, closer, closer.

A voice that feels like home comes from somewhere in the dark or maybe it comes from deep within his mind, he isn’t sure but it’s telling him to be brave. He has to unmask the dark figure before him, free himself from the hold it has over him. It takes all his strength, his arms shake violently as they lift up; fingers latching onto the cowl and pulling it back to reveal a face he can barely recognise. Eyes bright and full of life stare back at him; he steps out of the darkness, light
changing black leather into crimson.

The man before him has hazel eyes that sparkle like they haven’t seen how dark bruises can be, how dark red blood dripping down pale thighs can look. He smiles with lips that haven’t tasted copper, that haven’t cracked and dried and split from dehydration. The man before him is The Flash, is the Barry Allen he used to be, before he gave up his speed, before Zoom, before the storm. He’s staring into the eyes of all he used to be, all that was lost in the fire.

He is afraid of him, he is afraid to hear him speak, to hear how much he loathes him. The old photographs in his house used to scream abuse at him; they hurled insults and demanded to know why he became so weak. They hated the person they had become, the anxiety-stricken, teary-eyed mess of a boy who jumped at shadows and saw ghosts in mirrors and was terrified of almost everything. He wasn’t that person now; he’d opened up, unboxed the memories and grasped hold of the smallest embers.

He wasn’t anything like the strong man standing before him but he was better than when he first came home. Still, he was certain The Flash would remind him that he still had nightmares, felt phantom hands and panicked at the slightest things. He would remind him that he gave up their powers, he let Zoom take them. He deserved what happened to him, it was his fault, everything, all of it. The Flash doesn’t say horrible, heartless things, what kind of hero would he be if he did?

Instead, he smiles and it’s bright, hopeful and kind and everything Barry’s brittle smile can’t be. He opens his mouth and says with a tongue that isn’t coated with ash ‘this isn’t your fault.’ A throat that hasn’t screamed a thousand screams has tender words rise up; ‘You didn’t deserve this. Stop blaming yourself. Stop blaming us. We didn’t know… how were we to know?’ The Flash isn’t standing before him anymore; it’s a mirror reflection of himself.

Eyes that have seen too much stare back at him; a feeble smile twitches to life on his face. He mirrors it, a light, an ember sparks in his chest, it feels like something has been removed, a thread cut free. When he no longer blamed his friends and family he began to blame himself. He held tight to that belief, letting it sink deep into his mind, into his heart. He believed the lies, he allowed them to fester, to grow, to consume. Len and Sara had tried to reassure him, they said he didn’t deserve it, told him it wasn’t his fault and on the surface, he believed them. Deep down in his heart the words still held fast, spreading their poison.

Now he’s standing in the dark, staring right into his own eyes and he is freeing himself of the lies. How was he supposed to know that his darkest days were about to unfold? What could have he done differently? Let Wally die? Not a chance. There was no way to see what was to come; it was unfair to hold such blame, to point and aim at himself. It wasn’t his fault, he didn’t deserve this and even though he had given up, allowed Zoom to do with him as he pleased he still deserved to move on. Even though he tried to kill himself he still deserved to live, to strive for those better, brighter days.

In the dark, the threads fall like ribbons to the ground, embers burning bright glowed deep within his chest. It was another step on the road to recovery, another battle fought and won. In this make believe world he’d met his own eyes and saw no reason to blame himself any longer. The Flash, the best version he’d ever been, forgave him. Now it was time for Barry to truly forgive himself and only then would he be able to move on with his life.
I hope everyone had a lovely Christmas and if you don’t celebrate Christmas then I hope you had a fantastic day all the same. I wish you all a Happy New Year!

Still far away
From where I belong
But it’s always darkest
Before the dawn
So you can doubt
And you can hate
But I know, no matter what it takes
I’m coming home

Skylar Grey - Coming Home

Len doesn’t want to leave; the tiny cabin deep in the snowy woods, tucked away from the world has begun to feel like home. He hasn’t had a home in years, not in the typical sense. There have been places to sleep and eat, to hide away and wait for the heat to die down so he can venture out again to pull off his next big heist. This brick and timber cabin had been a home for him; he had a bed, a closet to put his clothes in, a place by the front door for his shoes and a favourite mug. Today he had packed up what little he owned, stuffed it into a duffel bag and thrown into the back of the car.

It wasn’t all bad; he wasn’t leaving alone or returning to an empty, unfulfilling life. The guest bedroom in Lisa’s lavish apartment awaited for him; he would be able to put his clothes in the closet and find a new mug to be his favourite. It would do fine; Lisa would be there, and she was his sister, and that would be enough to make it feel like a home, right? Maybe it wasn’t about having a bed or a place to put his shoes that made the cabin feel like home, perhaps it was Barry, who brightened his life despite the fact he was still struggling through his darkest hours.

It was Barry that felt like home. Once he returned him to the West house, he wouldn’t be able to stay the night, crawl into bed with him and wrap him in his arms until morning light. Joe might let them stay; he didn’t seem to distaste them as much anymore, but Len knew they couldn’t. It was time to step back, start allowing Barry to get comfortable on his own again, to feel safe with his family and friends. It wasn’t like he wouldn’t see him, they’d still come over every day and spend time with him, they’d still have their therapy sessions every Wednesday.

Returning to Central City was a big thing and even though a part of Len didn’t want to leave it didn’t stop him from being proud of Barry. He’d come so far, the light was returning to his eyes, flickers of embers could be seen on the okay days, in the good hours. Nightmares didn’t plague his sleep regularly; there a handful of undisturbed nights and the strange dream with the masked figure that turned out to be him had stopped the day they’d done the ritual.

Barry had been running from himself, too afraid to stop and face the truth. He’d held tight to the guilt and the blame; he’d believed the lies for so long that they had sunk deep down into his
subconscious. When he finally stopped running, he could see with perfect clarity. There was no reason to place blame on his shoulders, no need to feel guilty for giving away his powers, for giving up the hero. He ran to avoid facing the truth, and Len understood why he kept on running.

The truth was this, Barry had been raped and tortured over a period of four months, it was an unchangeable event, and most importantly it was no one’s fault that it happened. It just did. It was an awful, unfortunate event and that no one foresaw. Not even when Zoom demanded his speed did they stop to think if he could want more if he wanted to hurt and break Barry in unimaginable ways. Barry couldn’t have known, and that’s what his doppelganger told him. The Flash absolved him off his guilt; he didn’t blame the new rebuilding Barry for their downfall.

It was all a little confusing, but Len understood it nevertheless. If he looked in the mirror one day and found his reflection talking back, absolving him of his sins, he might feel a little more light himself. Len had done many things to be ashamed of, and while others now overlooked it, it still didn’t stop the guilt that was deep down in his core. Rotten and ugly, a reminder that he’d been a cold heart man who killed for the hell of it; who stole and took because he felt like it.

Barry had to face the best version of himself, he’d lost The Flash, the hero and isn’t that worse than regretting ugly things? Remembering all the good, heroic things and being unable to do them anymore because he lost his speed, because he fell apart was worse than remembering the terrible things. Len would argue that Barry was a good enough person without his speed, the fact he could run insanely fast didn’t make him a hero. It was his heart, his courage, the desire to help and protect others that made him a hero, not a fancy suit and a freak lightning storm.

Still, Len understood how having something, be it speed or his cold gun, made you feel powerful, safe and brave. Without it, there was a hole where it used to be. It was his and Sara’s job to make sure Barry knew he could still be great without his speed. He was an amazing person, even if were still a little broken. They would be there to keep him from running; they’d help him face the darkest hours and the blackest days. Len had a feeling the running might be over; there was a shift after they talked about the dream. His eyes seemed a little less haunted; his smile is a little brighter. Self-forgiveness was a powerful thing; it had pushed Barry ahead.

Now it was time to leave. There was no reason to stay here any longer; they didn’t need the quiet safety of the cabin anymore. So Len climbed into the car, started the engine and took one last look at the cabin before driving away.

XxX

They take a detour to Star City; the plan had been to drive straight through to Central, but Sara felt an impulse to see her father. She hadn’t heard from him since Christmas night when he sent her a text to say he would be leaving in the morning. She’d invited him over for breakfast, but he declined, there had been no word since. Her instincts were telling her something was wrong, he was spiralling in grief, probably passed out on a couch, the smell of whisky on his breath.

Len graciously accompanies her to his apartment; she could use some emotional support today. They had dropped Barry off at Oliver and Felicity’s since Sara didn’t want him anywhere near this mess, he was doing so well, and he didn’t need to be put in the middle of a bad situation. They walked silently do her father’s door, knocking loudly, the sound echoing eerily in the dim hallway. When no answer came, Sara fished the spare key from her pocket. It had been Laurel’s once, now like so many of her sister’s things, it belonged to her. The apartment smells foul, leftover pizza boxes and Big Belly Burger wrappers litter the floors and tables. Unanswered mail sits in a haphazard pile by the door next to one shoe and a pair of carelessly dropped keys.

She finds her father passed out on the couch, a bottle of whisky lying on the floor, amber liquid
slowly dribbling out to pool with what looks like vomit. In her rage she heads to the kitchen, the sink is overflowing with dirty dishes and the mug she fills with icy cold water still has a small amount of cold coffee in the bottom. Sara stormed back to the lounge room she is seconds away from pouring the murky liquid over her father’s sleeping face. Len stops her with a gentle hand clutching her wrist and a firm look that says more than words could.

She lets Len take the mug, with a weary sigh she walks away, back to the kitchen to put on a fresh pot of coffee for when her father wakes. When he does they are going to talk, she will push as hard Laurel used to; she’ll fight for their father because she is the only one still breathing. She’ll do whatever it takes, be it an AA meeting or rehab, she will not let Laurel down, she will not let her father down. He can resist and say he’ll stop all he wants; he can look her right in the eye and lie, deny that he’s spent the last week drinking himself stupid. Sara will not be fooled or swayed; she will get him help even if she has to get Len to drag him all the way to rehab.

XxX

It’s strange to find himself without Len or Sara; their company has become a part of him; they might as well be a third limb. They are his anchors and even though he is getting better, even though he can smile a little more and panics a little less he still needs them to feel safe. Which is ridiculous, since right now he is sitting in The Green Arrow’s apartment and if any one of his enemies walked in through the door they’d be dead before they hit the ground.

He is safe here, Oliver and Felicity are doting on him, bring him biscuits and hot chocolate and fussing over him like worried mothers. He really is okay; there has been no triggers, no panic attacks, just smooth sailing. Of course, he’s been in the back of an SUV most of the day, watching the world pass by in blurs of grey and white. When he grew tired of watching the endless landscape, he picked up his book, losing himself to a world of pure imagination. By the time he sat it aside Star City was towering over him, the streets noisy and bustling with people and traffic.

Len and Sara walked him all the way to Oliver and Felicity’s apartment door, staying by his side until he was safely inside the urban flat. They had promised not to be gone long; Sara wanted to check on her dad, and once she had, they would return to him. Barry told himself he could survive a few hours without them; he would be all right; he was fine. Expect he kept checking his phone, watching the number’s slowly change, feeling disappointment and a trickle of dread every time the screen came up empty.

While he may be better, a little happier, a little lighter, he still wasn’t entirely rid of the anxiety that made a home within his walls. It settled in the pit of his stomach, sending a nervous strum pulsing under his skin that felt like the speed forces evil twin. There was a low buzz of fear humming below the surface; it had risen the moment the door closed shut, a resounding thud that finalised their departure. He hoped he could strive off the anxiety, fight down the urge to bury himself in blankets and wait somewhere quiet and dark for their return.

Resiliently he pushed forward, faking a smile, forcing out questions, revealing his daughter’s names to happy faces, gripping at the blue parka draped over his lap. Felicity didn’t seem to pick up on the anxious drum of his fingers, the overused hand gestures and the near constant touching of his hair in a self-soothing manor. Or perhaps she did, because it was Felicity Smoak after all and she knew when her friends were distressed, as he was becoming in the absence of Len and Sara, but she didn’t push or pry. She kept her voice soft, words sweet and gave him enough space without making him feel alone.

Oliver, on the other hand, watched every movement like a hawk, blue eyes darkening as he catalogued every twitch or wild gesture. Maybe he was trying too hard, being a little over zealous
with his hands and smiling all wrong. He wanted to show them that he was better, that he wasn’t fragile and broken like before. The way his body moved, the way his smile felt didn’t feel right. It was just a charade. The improvements that he been making seemed to shrink away.

He tried not to scold himself, to be angry that he was feeling frightful and nervous. Coming home wasn’t going to be easy; some adjustments had to be made, things that needed to be discussed. It was okay that he felt uncertain right now, he was allowed to struggle. This might as well be a test; if he couldn’t survive a few hours in Star City, then he wasn’t ready to go home. Home, at long last he found himself wanting to call it that again.

It had taken a lot of time, a lot of bad days, terrible days and a strange conversation with himself to realise he still belonged in Central City, he still belonged with his family. When the Flash set him free he could envision himself walking towards his room, the pictures lining the walls silent. The ghosts of his past were not angry with him; they didn’t despise him or hate who they became. He might be the Flash anymore, but that didn’t mean he was worthless.

One day soon, after Nora was born and the anxiety didn’t cripple him, he’d start over. Because he deserved too, no matter what Zoom said, no matter what the darkness whispered, he deserved to move forward. To forgive himself for his mistakes, to relearn the world and all the magic it could bring. Those days were yet to come, at this moment he wouldn’t punish himself for feeling uneasy, for wanting to reunite with Len and Sara so the fear rattling his bones would still.

They must sense his distress; Oliver is asking him if he would like to lie down in the guest room and he might jump too eagerly at the chance. Oliver escorts Barry upstairs; he can feel Felicity’s eyes on his back as he ascends the stairs, but Barry doesn’t turn around. Oliver doesn’t speak until Barry has settled down on the bed; he is leaning against a mirrored door, blue eyes never straying from his face.

“How are you feeling, Barry?”

The question is heavy, weighed down by the hundreds of questions Oliver doesn’t dare ask.

“I’m making progress” he replied honestly, “I take it day by day; there’s not much else I can do.”

“That’s good, Barry.” Oliver shifts, lingering by the edge of the bed like he is waiting for an invitation to sit.

Barry shuffles over to make room for him, a silent acceptance to the unasked question. “We’ve been doing a lot of therapy, Len, Sara and I. We just talk, well, I talk, and they listen, it helps. Not all the time, though, the more I talk, the more I start to remember. I don’t know how I could forget anything he did to me, but sometimes new memories or repressed memories rather float up and put me right back at square one.”

“I still think about my time on the island, about the stuff that followed” Oliver revealed. “I’ll hear something or smell something and I will be right back there. It’s disconcerting at times, especially if I’m out as the Green Arrow. I’ll falter, not enough to get myself killed but enough that I could lose track of my target or an innocent bystander could get hurt.”

“I’ve heard exposure therapy is useful to fix those kinds of things” Barry informed “Sara talked to Caitlin about getting me started on it, but she said I needed to put it off until after the baby is born. Too much emotional stress I guess.” He shrugged, dropping his gaze to his rounded stomach. “I don’t want to cause her any harm. She’s survived so much with me, all my breakdowns and beatings.” The words rushed out on their own accord, escaping before he could silence them between tightly pursed lips. Quickly he flicked his gaze up to meet Oliver’s face, his expression
was grim, troubled, if only the words could be plucked from the air and shut back in.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to say that.”

“You can say whatever you want to me Barry; I’m here for you. I know it's hard opening up to the people you’re close too, trust me, I am expert at it” he offered him a half-hearted grin, a small attempt to erase the frown from Barry’s face. “But talking to them does help. It helps them know what to say, what not to say. It gives them an understanding of what you feel when you find it hard to talk; they won’t have to ask what’s wrong or what they can do help. They’ll already know.”

“It breaks my heart to think about them knowing” eyes flutter shut, caging the tears. “It’s just too much; it’ll kill them. It’s bad enough having to tell Len and Sara, but at least we have this connection. We understand each other others pain.”

“You don’t have to protect people all the time” Oliver declared, reaching out to place a comforting hand on his shoulder “let them protect you for once, let them share the burden. It takes a village after all.”

“That’s to raise a baby” Barry’s eyes flicker open, tears spilling free though there is a ghost of a smile “which is another thing I am about to do.”

“Right,” Oliver said gruffly, a smile playing on his lips, “I think it fits both ways.”

“It kinda does” he wipes away the tears, smearing them across his face. “And I know you’re right; I know they need to know certain things. Just give me a little more time, okay?”

“Of course” he swept a calloused thumb over a stray tear, letting his hand lingering, Barry leant into the touching, deflating. “In the meantime, I am always here if you need to talk to me.

“Thank you, Ollie.”

“It’s no trouble” he reassured, “also Felicity and I wanted to let you know that if you need any financial support just to let us know.”

“Oliver, I’m really grateful for the offer, but I can’t take your money. I have some savings that will get me by until I can…” Until he can what? Go back to work? Find a new job? Sell Star labs? He wasn’t even sure if he could return to his old job let alone venture out and find a new one after having a baby, and there was just no way he could sell Star labs. It wasn’t just his, it was Caitlin’s and Cisco’s, it was a living reminding of all the good they had accomplished. The real Harrison Wells wanted to change the world, and Star Labs had been his dream, Eobard Thawne may have destroyed it, but the three of them could surely return it to its attended purpose one day.

That didn’t leave him any options, though. He had some savings that would get him by for a while, but a large sum of that would have to go towards buying things for Nora. Still, he couldn’t just take Oliver’s money, no matter that he was the mayor or that Felicity owned a billion dollar Tech Company. He wasn’t the kind of person to take handouts, not without being able to give back in some way. He’d have to make do, no matter how generous the offer was.

“I'll be all right, really, but thank you for the offer.”

“What if I told you that if you didn’t let Felicity buy you baby clothes she’d be very upset.”

“Well...” Barry considered “I suppose if it’s for Nora.”

“Great,” he said “she has been shopping online all morning and if I have to see one more onesie I
Barry laughed, warmth blossoming in his chest at the thought of Felicity actively wanting to buy his daughter clothes. “I feel like me saying yes is just going to subject you to it longer.”

Oliver sighed long-sufferingly, making Barry chuckle, the vibration of his body stirring Nora awake. Taking Oliver’s hand, he placed it on his stomach; it took a moment, but then Nora kicked. A swift hit to the spot right under Oliver’s palm. He jumped in surprise, lifting his hand to inexpert Barry’s stomach below.

“She’s got one hell of a kick on her,” he said, eyes alight with awe.

“Trust me, I know. My kidneys and bladder are severely bruised these days.”

“Is it painful” tentatively he placed his hand back down.

“Sometimes, mostly it just feels odd but a good kind of odd.”

“Has your dad come around yet?” he asked, stroking Barry’s stomach, hoping to encourage another kick.

“Not yet” he sighed, watching Oliver’s hand glide over his skin, feeling Nora reach out and touch the places his hand had just been. “I’m not sure he will.”

“I wish I could help,” he looked up, brow pinched in thought “I’m sure he’ll come around eventually. Maybe after you tell him, you’re naming her Nora?”

“I fear that might make it worse” he confessed “it won’t change my mind about naming her after my mum but I don’t think he’ll like it. All he can see is what Zoom did to me.”

“Well it’s like I said, she’s a part of you so she can’t be anything dark or monstrous.”

At his words she kicked again, Oliver laughed, eyes sparkling with joy. Barry knew without a doubt that she would never be anything dark or monstrous; she was light and love, wonder and excitement. She was his daughter, his and his alone. Zoom’s darkness, his hatred would not touch her, it would not cause her grief and pain like it had him. She’d no nothing of darkness or hate; he would give her a life full of love, full of happy, bright shiny moments and exciting adventures.

XxX

Len’s standing at the kitchen sink, washing dishes and trying not to listen to the argument heating up in the other room. Sara wants her father to check into rehab or at the very least go to an AA meeting; Quentin insists that he is fine, it was a lapse in judgment, it won’t happen again. Len’s heard these lies before; he’s seen how this story plays out and there is no happy ending. His father promised his mother that he’d quit drinking, that he’d get help, get better and they’d be happy again. That day never came, they were never happy again.

What came was the downward spiral, the unmaking of his childhood, Lisa’s childhood. Innocence lost in whisky-fuelled violence; nights spent crying and cowering in fear, waiting for the day to break, for someone to save them. The violence never ended, it followed Len all through his life. He learnt to embrace it, hoping then it couldn’t hurt him. It worked, he was fine, surviving on the ice in his heart, then along came Barry and the ice wasn’t enough anymore.

The yelling intensifies, it makes him uncomfortable; it makes him feel like a kid again, and his parents are fighting, shouting louder and louder until the inevitable fist lands across his mother’s
face. There is silence, for a heartbeat, a gasp then the sobs and I’m sorry's followed. Only he was never sorry, his mother eventually learnt that. It’s why she packed her bags and left; only she forgets to take them with her. Lisa said she’d come back; she’d burst in the front door with an army at her back; she’d return to them. She never did and eventually Lisa stopped talking about the wild fantasies and resigned to the fact that they had been abandoned, forgotten.

Len knows Sara’s father wasn’t a mean drunk; he wouldn’t raise a fist, but he was still hurting her. If he just gave in, went to a damn meeting then it would make Sara happy, he could, should at least do that for her. It wasn’t his place to interfere, even if he wanted to walk into the room and shake some sense into the man. Luckily Sara was stubborn and by the time he had all the dishes clean and dry she was collapsing into a chair at the kitchen table, exhausted.

“Did you get through to him?” Len asked, leaning against the sink with arms folded.

“Kinda” she sighed, “I can’t leave him like this. He really needs to get some help.”

Len steps away from the sink and pulls up the chair closest to Sara. “If you need to stay then stay,” he said softly, “I’ll look after Barry until you’ve got your dad sorted out.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.

“Okay then,” she said, determination hardening her features. “I’ll be back in Central City as soon as I get his stubborn ass to rehab.”

“Well if he is stubborn as you then you might be here awhile,” Len said, trying to lighten the mood.

“Hey,” she slapped him playfully “like you can talk.”

“I’m not stubborn” he protested “I’m set in my ways.”

“That’s just a fancy way of putting it” she rolled her eyes, biting back a smirk. “Okay, I’m going to stay. You go and pick Barry up from Ollie’s so we can get him home.”

“Are you sure he’s ready?”

“Yes, he is” Sara affirmed, “are you?”

No, no he wasn’t. The quiet wilderness had been more enjoyable than he foresaw. The serenity of the solitude, the towering trees and the partly frozen lake had been just what he needed. In the forest he found himself, he set free his painful stories, letting them blow away on winter winds or sink to the bottom of the lake. In the midst of rebuilding Barry he had started to reassemble himself, finally fixing the broken pieces, well a few of them anyway.

Len’s past would always haunt him, the same way Sara’s and Barry would them, but together the past wouldn’t weigh him down, it was no longer a noose around his neck, a boulder upon his back. They had helped him unshackle the chains, helped him face the demons. They didn’t reign over him anymore; he turned towards them and said ‘fuck you! I own my mistakes, but now I am going to do be better! I am going to be better.’ They had lost their power; the voices in the dark couldn’t hurt him anymore.

So maybe he was ready to leave the cold, lonely woods behind and return to Central City. Maybe it was time to start over, give up the life of crime and find a real job, find his very own place in the
world. He could become something more. He could protect Central City from Meta-Humans now that it no longer had The Flash. He could do a lot of things, be a lot of things but mostly he just wanted to be with Barry, he wanted that above everything else.

Barry still needed time, though, and Len still had a lot to make up for. He would try; he’d do whatever it took to be a person worthy of Barry’s love. It was terrifying, but he was ready, ready for the future, for it to be better, brighter than the past. So when he answers Sara, he straightens his back, squares his shoulders, holds his head high and says without faltering “I’m ready.”

“Good” Sara gives him a satisfied smile, “then it’s time to take Barry home.”

XxX

Barry’s coming home, he’s finally coming home. Joe cannot wait, neither can Iris who has cleaned the house top to bottom, baked Barry’s favourite muffins and then cleaned the already immaculate house some more. The only time Iris ever cleans is when she is nervous, Joe on the other hand paces, fingers tapping irregular rhythms on his thighs. He hopes this time things can be different, that Barry can feel comfortable and safe here. He is still unsure of what made him want to leave, but he trusts that this time can be better; he’ll finally have his son home.

All three of his children will be under the same roof; he’ll be able to protect the, keep them safe from the cruel world and make sure they are happy, loved. That’s all he wants, to make sure Barry can be happy again and that he knows he is loved and protected. Henry may have turned his back on him but Joe will never, could never do that. He understood where Henry was coming from; it wasn’t easy knowing the child growing within Barry was Zoom’s, the man who took him from them, who hurt him in the worst possible ways.

She, baby Nora was part of Barry too, and that is why Joe would accept her, would love her. Iris already adored her soon to be niece; she had gone out one morning and returned hours later, laden down with shopping bags. He hadn’t seen her that happy in months; her giddy excitement was infectious. It inspired him to do something he should have thought of sooner. Up in the attic was the bassinet Iris slept in when she first got home from the hospital. He didn’t have a lot of her childhood toys left; a selfless Iris had given them away when she realised there were less fortunate children in the world.

He still had the bassinet, though, it wasn’t fancy or frilly, it was a simple white thing that had seen better days. He cleaned up, repainted it and washed the linen; now it set waiting in Barry’s room for his arrival, Iris dozens of perfectly wrapped presents scattered around it. Soon, Barry would be home soon. He was just leaving Star City now; he’d be here in three hours, which gave Joe enough time to cook dinner and wonder around nervously, to tap uneven rhythms on his thighs.

This time had to be different; he needed to have his son back. He’d missed him so much; he’d feared he would never see him again. Sometimes he still woke with that same fear in his chest, a heavy feeling settling over him like a dead weight. He had to remind himself that Barry was safe, he may not be where Joe can see him, but he was with people who cared, who were looking after him. He was safe and away from harm, and that was the most important thing. Today he was coming home, so if Joe woke in the night with fear in his chest, he could simply get up and walk quietly down the dark hall and look in at his sleeping son, safe, home.

XxX

It’s right on dusk when they arrive in Central City, the last sliver of sunlight is slipping away just as Barry steps foot onto the front porch of his family home. He hesitates, waiting until the sun has completely vanished from the sky and the first star has twinkled to life before knocking. The drive
here had been peaceful, an open road stretching out before them, music playing softly in the background and Len at his side, talking to him, just talking. There was no mention of the traumas they had both lived through; they just spoke about the good things, the little things and the trivial things.

In between towns and roads stretching on as far the eye could see Barry got to know more about Len then he had in the last three months. They had talked before but never like this, never so freely, so openly, letting out stories and tales and making each other laugh with misadventures. The past felt a million miles away, it was just them and the open road, two friends cruising along, unburdened, for a while at least. As the city loomed in the distance a sense of uneasiness settled in their lungs, in the space between them, in the very air they breathed.

Central City was home to an extensive list of tragedies, for both of them. It was loud, bustling and dangerous, nothing compared to the quiet serenity of their little cabin. It wasn’t just the city with its towering building that made Barry feel uneasy; it was the fact that soon he and Len would have to part. He didn’t want to be without him, to go to sleep in an empty bed where surely he would descend into a nightmare. He didn’t want to wake with a burning throat and find himself alone in the dark, shaking in fear and fighting off memories that clawed their way to the surface.

He wanted to wake to a safe embrace, soft woods soothing him, chasing away the voices that followed him out of his nightmare. He’d curl to Len, wanting, needing to feel the warmth of his skin, to know he was real, to know that he was truly awake, not just lost in an imaginary fantasy world that was designed to delude him into thinking that was safe. In the dark of the night, fighting off the hands and teeth of a nightmare it’s easy to get lost, to get confused. Even after all this time there are still moments where he fears it’s all just a dream, he never actually escaped Zoom, he just got trapped in his wonderland.

Breathing Len in, soaking in his warmth, feeling his safe embrace had clarity trickling back in, he was not lost or still held captive; he was free. Tonight he wouldn’t have strong arms to hold him, a soft voice to chase away the dangerous thoughts; he’d have an empty bed and darkness. He’s already knocked on the front door but already he wants to turn and run; they could go to Lisa’s; they could go anywhere as long as Len was there when he went to sleep and woke up in the morning. He could ask Joe if he could stay, just for tonight but it won’t be one night, Barry will ask again tomorrow and the next day and the next, he never wants to be alone.

That’s why he has to let him go if he keeps holding on then it will only get worse. Len has his own life to live, and Barry can’t be asking him to crawl into bed with him every night for the rest of their lives. He has to learn to sleep by himself, to face the long night alone. It’s all part of healing, of moving on and if he doesn’t start tonight, he might never start. So once Barry is safely inside, the smell of lasagne and blueberry muffins wafting from the kitchen, he says goodnight to Len. He hugs him a little too long, holds on a little tight but Len doesn’t let go until Barry finally pulls away. When Len leaves and the door shuts heavily it suddenly feels like he is the only person left in the world, there is no warmth around him; the house has grown enormous, towering over him like a hungry giant. The immense loneliness that follows nearly knocks him to the ground; it slams into him with brutal force, taking the air from his lungs. He wants to run out the door, beg him to stay, please stay, don’t ever leave but he’s feet don’t carry him forward, out the door and down the stairs.

He remains where he is, swaying ever so slightly, a trembling shiver rattling deep within his bones. He stays still and tells himself that he has to try this for one night at least, just one night and if he can’t, if it’s too much then Len will stay the next evening. He can do this, Iris and Joe are here, and they are hugging him and telling him how happy they are that he is home. He is not alone, they are
here with him, soon Wally be home, and they’ll have dinner together, as a family, to celebrate Barry’s homecoming.

Later he will shower and climb into the bed that has become foreign to him; he’ll close his eyes and take a deep breath. It’s just a couple of hours, a few strokes of the clock; then it will be morning and Len will be here. He can do this; he has to do this; it’s an important step to make, and he’s been coming forward in leaps and bounds. Only Barry’s afraid a night spent alone in the dark will set him back, it might unravel all that has been put back into place. If he wakes afraid, shaking from a nightmare and tongue tasting like ash he’ll call Len; he’s not far away; he’d come if he needed him to.

It wouldn’t come to that, though, he would be strong, brave. He’d face the dark because he wanted to be better. They had all agreed that it was time to let him spend a night alone, they’d let him get too comfortable with their presence. It was just another step he had to make, another battle to be won and he’d done so well, fought valiantly from the very start. As scared as he was, deep down he knew he could do it, what was one more hurdle?

Taking a deep breath, he let the fear drop away, focusing on Iris’s excited smile and Joe’s soft gaze. Iris took his hand and led him upstairs, past the photos that no longer whispered hateful things and into the bedroom that no longer felt like his own. Iris let out a gleeful ‘ta da’ while pointing towards the far corner of the room, where a white bassinet and a dozen neatly wrapped presents sat. Whatever fear that remained dropped away, happiness he hadn’t felt in a very long time pooled in his stomach, it brought tears to his eyes, made his heart swell with joy.

“Is all of this is for me?” he asked, dumbfound.

“Of course, it is” Iris smiled, leading him closer, “well you and baby Nora.”

“The bassinet is from when Iris was a baby.” Joe appeared in the doorway, beer in hand “I had to tidy it up a bit, but it should do fine for the first month or so.”

“I… I can’t believe you did all this.” He looked at them, astonished that they had gone to so much trouble. He knew they had been accepting of Nora, but surely deep down they had been struggling with the truth of her conception. It had taken him months to learn to love her, Iris and Joe had been supportive from the very start, even when his father turned his back. He couldn’t hold back the tears, after months of hearing Zoom’s lies a part of him had started to believe that Joe and Iris wouldn’t love him, not now that he was tainted, ruined. He let Zoom fill his head, his heart with evil ugly things, he let them poison him, let them grow, let them consume.

He believed the broken, twisted part of his mind that listened to Zoom; he let his splintered soul whisper lies to him late at night. Standing here, seeing their devotion in perfectly wrapped presents and a freshly painted bassinet, finding nothing but love in their eyes, forced every lie, every untruth from his mind. He slashed at the words, set them ablaze and kicked their ashes to the wind. Here he was loved and protected, Joe and Iris didn’t hate him or find him disgusting, they were his family, and they loved him no matter what.

If he woke tonight with a scream dying in his throat, trembling, sobbing and fighting off phantom hands he would open his eyes and find his family there. They would chase away the monsters, soothe the tremors and dry his tears. He was not alone; he would never be alone again, not like he was in the asylum. He’d never have to struggle through the long nights; he’d never have to wake to the days alone. He was home and his loneliest, darkest hours were behind him.

XxX
Leaving Barry physically hurts, as he drives away from the West house, he has to fight the urge to turn around, march up the front steps and beg to stay the night. He knows it would make Barry very happy; he hadn’t liked the idea of having to start sleeping without them, but he understood it was beneficial in the long run. It was perfectly acceptable for him to use them as an anchor, to tether himself to them in times of great stress or to if he needed help to find his way out of a panic attack. But if they became a crutch then they weren’t helping, and they had been sleeping by his side every night for a very long time now.

Len felt like they should ease into this new routine, Sara agreed but Barry being stubborn said he’d be fine, they both knew he was lying, but they weren’t about to force him to do it their way. If tonight ended horribly, then they could revisit their first idea, which was a much better idea than just jumping straight in. It’s not that Len doubted Barry’s strength because he didn’t, he was resilient, and if he made it through the night without needing him to rush around, then he wouldn’t be surprised.

Barry was strong but so were his demons, so were the memories and nightmares. They still held power over him; their claws were still deeply embedded, making it easy for them to unleash a harrowing nightmare or set off a trigger to a memory almost forgotten. Len and Sara had gotten him so far it would be a shame to cause a setback. They had carefully and lovingly pieced back the broken shards, but there were still cracks, chunks missing, some would never to be found. For now on there would be jagged edges, there would be scars that only Len and Sara could see because they had the same ones. All the king’s horses and all the king’s man may be able to put him together again, but that doesn’t mean he’ll ever truly be whole.

Len knows that cruel, wicked man can take away pieces of you, and if you search and if you seek you’ll find some of those pieces again, the rest are lost in the chaos. Barry hopefully knows that once he reaches the roads end, he’ll never truly be whole but if he doesn’t, and there is still a sliver of hope that he will be then he’ll be devastated. Accepting the broken parts, the jagged edges, is part of moving forward, it’s just not an overly fun thing to accept. Len has known for a long time that he will never be a shiny new man, he can be better, kinder, stronger but he will never be without the scars, the memories that sometimes float up and wake him from his slumber.

Barry wants to move forwards; he might even push himself harder than he should. Len can see the determination burning bright in his eyes; it was there when he insisted that he would survive a night without them. It was nice to see it, the blazing determination but Len worried he was going to push too hard, force himself to do things he wasn’t ready for. He would ask Lisa later; she would surely have a textbook somewhere that would tell him how to handle this situation.

He’s gut said to let him go; he had to make his own choices, but his head told him that if Barry put too pressure on himself, then they would have a setback, a landslide back to nightmares and near constant panic attacks. As he walked into Lisa’s apartment building he tried to reassure himself that Barry would be fine, at least for tonight. He had his family with him and was important to get him to feel comfortable with them and at his home was vastly important. It didn’t stop Len from wanting to be there, not just in case something happened, he wanted to be with him because he loved him and this was his first night away from him too.

So maybe it’s Len who doesn’t want to rip the Band-Aid right off and maybe he is only imagining that Barry is pushing himself too hard because he is worried that soon he won’t need him. Which is incredibly selfish of him, at the start Rip said that it was his, their mission to fix Barry and the day he no longer needs them is the day they have completed it. It would be a joyous day knowing Barry had won, that the memories and the anxiety didn’t hold him back. That day would come, it probably wasn’t going to be here soon, but there was an end to this journey, and Len didn’t know what come after.
Would that be the day he told Barry how he felt? Would they go on a date? See a movie and have a
romantic dinner then stroll home to kiss on the front porch under the spotlight covered with
fluttering moths? Did Barry reject him? Was everything they shared ruined, nothing more than ash
beneath their feet? The future was full of too much uncertainty for him, there was still time, still
plenty of road ahead and in all honesty, he was being stupid. Barry would be a constant in his life;
they were bound by the terrible things done to them and a bond like that doesn’t sever easily

Wherever the road leads, they would walk it together, face every obstacle in their path, slay every
demon and monster and come out victorious. No matter what came after Len told Barry that he
loved him, he would never leave his side. Their friendship couldn’t easily be ruined; there would
not be a day where it became ash beneath their feet. He shouldn’t feel freighted, Barry getting
better wasn’t the end of them; it was just the beginning of a new chapter.
Hold onto Hope

Someday soon,
I'll find you
Someday soon,
I'll know you

So hold onto hope, love
I've searched high and low for you
For you
Each day gets closer
So hold on stronger to me

Amy Stroup – Hold onto Hope Love

Barry is adjusting to being home relatively okay. The first night is the most difficult, sleep evades him at every turn, the bed is too big, too empty and every noise and shadow have him flicking on to the light to seek out the source of the disturbance. Always he finds nothing, just a shadow, just the old house creaking as it stretches its bones and shrugs off the day. He holds tight to the reindeer Sara had given him, it smells like wood smoke and pine, breathing in the scent calms his nerves. Sleep does eventually come, but it’s broken by shards of nightmares that leave him gasping awake, skin damp and body trembling.

It’s two in the morning, and he has barely slept, the cobwebs of the nightmare cling to him like slick oily weeds. At least he can say he tried; the dream pushed him over the edge; the tremors won’t stop until he finds safe arms to lie in. He gives in and gets out of bed, tiptoeing out of his room and down the hall to Iris’s. He hesitates; he hasn’t crawled into bed with her in years. It was too awkward once he realised his feelings for her but those feelings are no longer held secret in his heart. Once he thought she was his future, now there is someone else, someone unexpected and now they are the secret held in his heart.

Quietly he makes his way towards the bed; stepping around the books and shoes that litter the floor. When he lifts up the blanket to get in she stirs awake, a sliver of moonlight is the only source of light, it catches her big brown eyes fluttering open. He stays where he is, letting her senses come to her before moving any closer; he’d hate to frighten her. He doesn’t, her eyes adjust to the dark and recognition can be seen in them, he slips under the covers and right into her open arms.

Iris doesn’t ask him any questions; she merely holds him close, carding long fingers tenderly through his hair. The tension has ebbed, tremors lost in her comforting embrace; sleep has almost taken him when a sharp jolt has it dashing away. Iris lets out a sharp gasp the moment a groan escapes his mouth.

“Your daughter just kicked me” her voice is light, on the edge of giggles.

“Sorry,” he mumbled, only now realising that his stomach pressed against Iris’s side.

“That was kinda surreal” she mused “did it hurt you?”

“A little” he replied, hands moving down to rest on his stomach.
“She is going to have a mean kick on her” Iris’s hands find their way to his abdomen, in the moonlight, he can see the adoration glisten in her eyes “It's truly amazing Barry.”

“Yeah, it is” he whispered, feeling sleep slowly return to him. “Thank you again for the presents and for being so accepting.”

“You don’t have to thank us Barr,” her eyes fluttered shut, “it’s what family does for one another.”

Barry slept soundly for the rest of the night. The following night Joe allowed Len to stay until he fell asleep and when Barry woke hours later from a nightmare he held off going to Iris. Instead, he took Len’s parka and the reindeer and went down to the lounge room, where he spent an hour watching TV until he succumbed to sleep. Joe found him there the next day, curled up under Len’s parka, reindeer held snug in his arms. More restless, sleepless nights followed, but his resilience helped him through.

In truth, missing Len bothered him the most. The nightmares were losing their power; his mind was running out of twisted, disturbing things to conjure up. They still upset him, still made him snap awake with fear in his chest and a scream in his throat, but by now they felt like reruns. Every night he found himself back in the asylum, alone in the dark, swinging from a rusty old pipe, body convulsing and the drip, drip, drip of water slowly driving him mad.

When sleep took over, the curtains pulled back, screen lighting up with bloody, violent memories. A flash of a blade, a cry, crimson spilling down pale thighs, staining the world red, a scream, hands touching, fingers invading, everything is black, blue and red, a sob. There are only horrors to be found in the dark, memories distorted and splintered until they make no sense at all. Or there will be nightmares as clear as glass; he can taste the stale air, the blood in his mouth. He can feel the mattress shutter and shake beneath him, feel every inch of Zoom above him, inside him.

They have been played and replayed, an endless loop of the wickedest, cruellest, fucked up things done to him and yet he had grown used to them. Fear no longer kept him from falling asleep at night; he’d seen every terrible thing his mind had in store for him. Why be afraid when he’d faced it all before? It wasn’t the concern of the nightmares that kept him awake; he would much rather go without them, but they were no longer powerful enough to chase him from sleep.

What kept him awake was the empty bed, the loneliness. He missed falling asleep to the sound of Len’s soft breathing; he missed waking to the sight of his serene face. He missed Sara too of course, but the way he missed Len was different, it felt like a deep ache. In Len’s absence, his feelings had grown stronger. Late at night when sleep would not come he’d find himself thinking of him, playing out the hundreds of ways their story could unfold. When he allowed his mind to wonder he envisioned many different tales, some happy, some sad, some so horrible he shoved them into a box labelled ‘never to be opened.’

There was a future for them; Barry was sure of it. They were going to be more than what they were; at least he hoped they could be. What Barry felt for Len transcended anything he had ever felt before, and he spent years believing Iris was his destiny. Maybe once she was, but then he helped create a breach to another earth and with that a whole new future. Iris had always been light and beauty, kindness and grace, Barry was bloodstained and haunted, darkness and tragedy, their paths could no longer align.

Len had danced with darkness; he’d charged through it and made it to the other side bloody and broken but victorious. Tragedy marked their souls; it was the red string of fate tethering them together, if only Barry could find himself deserving of love. Shaking off the lies whispered to him by a wicked tongue continued to be difficult. Whenever he found himself letting go of one untruth another rose to take its place. Not all lies had been told by Zoom; some came from within, from the
ugly bitter part of his soul that believed he wasn’t worthy of love. Who’d want to be with Zoom’s leftovers? Who’d want to touch his scars, kiss the skin that had been violently ravished by a beast?

Every step he took was met with a new obstacle, something else to overcome. One step at the time, one day at a time, he’ll make it to the end, he just has to hold on to hope. Hope that he can make it, that he can conquer every fear, every bad memory and trigger. Hope and believe that he will find days filled with sparkling happiness and nights free of terror. For the time being, he will continue to battle through the nights; he’ll familiarise himself with his family, relearn their touches, their voices. Perhaps their love will be strong enough to help him learn to love himself again, then and only then will he be able to discover what the future holds for him and Len.

XxX

If Len hears Cisco slurp from his slushies one more time, he is going to snatch it from his hands and throw it at his face. He’s sitting with Barry within the med bay at Star Labs, waiting for Caitlin to arrive so she can perfume the ultrasound that Barry invited him along to. She is, according to Cisco, stuck in traffic and will be here shortly; Len hopes Cisco’s right because he is getting very close to leaping across the bed and strangling the kid. Of course, he won’t, Cisco isn’t a bad guy, Len is just a little on edge, a little cranky from not sleeping well.

His bed feels empty without Sara and Barry; the room is too bright, too big and he finds himself chasing sleep until the first rays of sunlight filter in through the blinds. The nights are lonely without Barry, and he can’t help but worry about him. Does he feel safe? Is still afraid of sleeping alone? Are the nightmares terrorising him and pulling him from sleep, making him scream and tremble as the memories rattle violently through him. It’s only been four days since they returned to the city but it feels like an age since Len slept.

The nights might as well be centuries; that’s how tired he is, all because the bed is empty because Barry is not by his side. Len couldn’t remember a time when he needed someone to sleep with him now the nights stretch on for aeons, the absence of the people he loves keeping him awake. When Sara returns, which will most likely be very soon, she’ll seek Lisa out. It’s her bed she’ll spend the nights and Len doesn’t mind, he’s happy for her, but it doesn’t solve his problem.

The last time he slept soundly was back in the cabin, Barry held securely in his arms, their hearts beating as one. All he wants is to crawl into bed beside him, wrap him in his embrace, keep him safe until morning light. He’s never missed someone like this before, never needed the empty spot in his bed to be filled with a living breathing being. If Mick could hear him now, hear these silly little thoughts racing around and around his head oh how’d laugh. Leonard Snart, Captain Cold, unable to sleep at night because the man he loves isn’t there.

He’ll have to push through, just like Barry is, who looks just as tired as Len feels. Ignoring Cisco and the annoying slurping he focuses his attention on Barry, who sits on the edge of the bed, legs swinging and fingers tapping. Len can tell he is nervous; he’d been rather cheerful on the drive over here, excited to see his daughter again, excited for Len to see his daughter again. Barry’s words filled his heart with joy, seeing the adoration shine bright in his eyes was heart-warming, it showed how truly far Barry had come.

It wasn’t the journey here that caused the discomfort, thinking back the nervous energy buzzing around Barry started the moment they had an awkward run-in with Harrison Wells and his daughter Jesse. The father-daughter duo had frozen, staring at Barry with gaping mouths and eyes glimmering with guilt. The girl took off first, disappearing deep into the building. Wells stayed a moment longer, guilt-riddled eyes tracing every inch of Barry, lingering a little too long on his rounded stomach.
Without a word, he took off in the direction of his daughter. When Len asked Barry ‘what the hell was that about’ he stuttered an answer, his distress palpable. Immediately he let the matter drop. Len took Barry’s hand and led them slowly towards the cortex, knowing Barry would talk to him when he felt ready. The anxiety hasn’t left him; he would broach the subject again, but he doesn’t want to make Barry speak in front of Cisco, he doesn’t think he’ll be comfortable enough.

He is about to ask Cisco to give them a moment when Caitlin finally walks in. Her appearance has some of the tension diminishing from Barry, his legs still and his hands fold over his stomach. They exchange pleasantries then it’s down to business. Caitlin gives Len a blue folder, explaining that’s its information on being a ‘birth partner’ and Barry gets one on male births. Len feels like he is back in school, receiving mountains of homework that won’t get done because when he goes home, he has to cook dinner, do the laundry and help Lisa with her homework and all of this has to get done without angering his drunken father.

Caitlin is talking animatedly about a hundred different things; Barry just blinks at her, looking a little pale. Len sets the folder aside; at least he’ll have something to read through the long lonely nights. Cisco is telling Caitlin to ‘cool her jets’ because even he can see that Caitlin is distressing Barry. Apparently, Barry had never taken any interest in his anatomy before and right now this is information overload. Len rests his hand supportively on Barry’s knee, a little reminder to breathe, just breathe.

Barry lets out a deep breath; Caitlin apologises for being a little over zealous and Cisco pets Barry’s back comfortingly. It’s a little awkward for a moment; no one seems to know where to go from here. Len would still like a few minutes alone with Barry; his shoulders are tense, jaw clenched and eyes dancing with distress. He would like to relieve Barry of the anxiety wrecking havoc on his body, but he misses his opportunity; Caitlin is clasping her hands together and announcing she’ll start the ultrasound.

There is a flurry of motion then Team Flash settles, everyone taking their places. It’s no wonder they kept this city safe for so long, they work together seamlessly, moving as one, knowing exactly where they belong, where they fit. This must be what it feels like to be an outsider to him, Sara and Barry, no wonder Joe and Iris were feeling left out. The friendship was so strong between these three that it seemed there was no room for anyone else to fit. He didn’t need to feel left out, though, Barry reached out for his hand and pulled him into their bubble.

Everyone in the room stares at the monitor; Caitlin glides the wand over Barry’s stomach, the grainy black image lights up with a tiny life. It takes Len’s breath away; she takes his breath away. He can see her small nose and her little ears, her hands move, fingers curling and uncurling. He doesn’t hear any of what Caitlin is saying; it’s probably important, but he is lost, only seeing Barry’s little girl, only hearing the thump, thump, thump of her heart. She is beautiful, and he cannot wait to meet her.

At this moment, as he drinks in every little detail, he falls in love with her, vowing silently to protect her, to make her and Barry happy, make them feel loved and safe. He’s glad everyone else is distracted or else they might see the emotional storm swirling in his eyes. Lashes flutter, chasing the storm away, composure regained.

Looking towards Barry, he finds hazel eyes glistening with tears, love and devotion. Caitlin finishes the scan, cleans the sticky blue gel from Barry’s stomach then leaves the room, forcing Cisco to go with her. They sit quietly for a moment, a frozen image of Nora on the screen. Barry sits up, adjusting his clothes and turning to face Len, who can’t hold back the smile. Barry slips from the bed right into his lap, Len’s arms automatically fold him into an embrace.
“She’s beautiful.” Barry murmured “I can’t wait to meet her.”

“Me either, Scarlet” he replied, placing a hand on his stomach, right at the spot Nora loves to kick.

“Nora Scarlet Allen” Barry mused, “I think I like the sound of that.”

Len grinned, warmth spreading through his chest, setting free songbirds and lighting embers to melt the ice that had made home in his bones long ago. If only he could tilt his head forward, press his lips to Barry’s, a whisper, a sign of his devotion. The time is still not right; he’ll have to wait, wait until he can close the distance between them and kiss Barry like he is the most precious thing in all the worlds. He is one of the most valuable treasures in Len’s life.

Once someone made it past the ice fortress they were there to stay; he’d fight for them; he’d kill for them, and he’d die for them. Only two people had ever been this important to him, and one of them was gone now, leaving a hole to be filled. Barry, Sara and now Nora had made it into his heart, embedding themselves deep without even trying. He needs to pull himself together, before the words he longs to speak break free. He has to be patient; the time will come.

For now, he’ll hold Barry a little tighter, smile and say “It sounds perfect to me.”

XxX

Len’s having his sixth cup of coffee for the day, the sleepless nights he can deal with, he’s had his share over his life, but it’s pushing four nights, and if he doesn’t sleep tonight, then he might snap. Len praises himself on being level-headed; he can think himself out of any situation, but even a Saint would struggle to keep it together when faced with insomnia. Tonight he actually might get some shut eye; Lisa had gone to Star City to lend some support to Sara so that Len left alone in the apartment. That was until Iris showed up with an anxious Barry, who was also desperate for a good night’s rest.

Barry had been fairing well, after the ultrasound the other day he’s mood had brightened, Nora was his saving grace. When they returned to the West house, Barry led him to his bedroom where he showed him the bassinet and array of gifts. They spent the rest of the day reorganising Barry’s room, making enough space for the extra things he’d need for when Nora arrived. After that, they curled up on the couch to watch Sherlock, which is where they are doing tonight.

Only tonight they’ve settled in to watch Skyfall; on-screen James Bond is falling from a speeding train, beside him, Barry is sitting quietly, he hadn’t said much about what had made him anxious but there didn’t always need to be reason. Sometimes he just had bad days, bad hours and they just had to let him play them out.

He hadn’t seen him today, Barry had messaged and said Joe wanted a family day and that he’d him see him tomorrow. Len spent the day lazing around the apartment; he could have wasted time going to Saint’s and Sinner’s, but something kept him home. After a few hours of boredom he picked up the folder, Caitlin gave him yesterday, when he looked up it was dark out, and someone was knocking on the door.

There wasn’t a lot of information on ‘birth partners’ as the article labelled it for Len to read, but Caitlin had placed in a few pages of information on what Barry would be going through. It didn’t seem fun, for a fact, it seemed like it would be God awful and all he do was comfort him through it. Helping him breathe, massaging his back and holding his hand didn’t seem like enough, not when Barry was suffering. There wasn’t anything else he could do; he couldn’t take his place or ease the pain.
It made him feel a little helpless, which is pretty much how he feels about this whole ordeal. He couldn’t save Barry from the pain then, and he couldn’t protect him from the future pain either. Bitterly he thought how even though Zoom was dead he was still going to cause Barry unimaginable suffering. This time it would be different, Barry wouldn’t be alone, it wouldn’t be pain inflicted by torture but by the birth of his child and Len would be there, at his side, the entire time. As scary as the prospect of the birth seemed it didn’t dull Len’s excitement, he never thought he’d give this kind of devotion to anyone but his sister.

At times it felt like Nora was his, maybe in some other world, one less cruel, she was. Perhaps their story had played out differently. They had different lives, grew up friends, met each other in college or at work or a chance meeting under the stars. There were a thousand possibilities, a million stories that could unfold but this blood stained one is the one they’ve got and Len will love Barry just the same. They don’t need a magical beginning, a movie worthy romance; that isn’t who Len is.

He was born in tragedy, and it makes a twisted kind of sense that tragedy led him to Barry, to a future he never saw coming. There is something worth waiting for, something exciting and terrifying brewing between them; it grows and changes as each day passes. In the time it will reach its conclusion, tonight Len will sleep soundly, knowing Barry is by his side, safe and where he can find him.

XxX

It’s so dark. It’s always so dark here. The air is damp, chapped lips taste sour, corrupted lungs heave in sweat and blood. There is pain, intense, unimaginable. It’s like something is cutting into him, there is a trickle that turns into rivulets and the pain explodes. Eyes flutter open, that’s why it was dark, he had them shut, lids pressed together tight to block out the piercing white light suspended above. There is something hard and cold beneath his bare back; something tethers him painfully in place.

Standing over him is Zoom, he’s grinning manically, eyes glinting menacingly. A blade is slicing through his stomach; there is so much blood, too much; he’s not going to survive this. Zoom splits him open like it’s nothing. All he can do is scream. All he can see is red. Then there is a flash colour among the crimson, a pitiful wail. Zoom holds Nora in his arms, she wiggles and cries. Barry screams, pleads and begs for Zoom not to take her.

Please, please, don’t take my baby.

He doesn’t listen, he never listened. Barry is left alone under a spotlight, blood gushing from his slashed open torso, rising up his throat to silence the screams.

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A guttural scream shatters the silence of the night; Barry sits up gasping for air, half expecting to choke on blood. Hands grope urgently at his stomach, checking for a gaping wound that was never there. His body trembles, fear, is a fist in his chest, lungs scream and burn for air. He can still hear Nora’s pitiful cry; still see Zoom standing over him, hacking into his body like a piece of meat.

Nausea pools in his stomach, it feels like he is swaying, like the room is spinning madly around him. Panic consumes, devouring the sense and reason from his head. He feels lost. Where is he? Where is up and which way is down? There is only panic; it’s a deadly disease running rampant through his body. It’s terrifying and maddening; a scream builds in his throat as the room spins and turns until there is nothing to see but darkness. The panic rise’s, he can’t calm down, it feels like he might go insane, like this time he will truly lose his mind to the fear in his head.
Voices are shouting in his mind, incoherent thoughts smoking up his mind. If only he could breathe, if only his lungs could inhale a deep breath, exhale the fear and the insanity. In the darkness, he finds a bright light, not blinding like the one from his dream, but a soft yellow beacon of hope. He goes towards it, darkness fading and much-needed air seeping into gasoline-coated lungs. The world falls back into place, everything now right side up.

He finds cornered blue eyes waiting for him. Finally, the fear and the dark expel from his lungs, deflated and exhausted he drops his head into his hands. Strong, comforting hands rub his shoulders, encouraging him to speak, reveal the horror that had torn him so violently from sleep. Tiredly he lifts his head; Len is sitting in front of him, close enough to touch but not close enough to crowd. Barry casts a quick glance to the clock on the nightstand, its quarter past four; at least he almost made it through the night.

“Zoom had me” words feel heavy on his tongue; he swears they taste like blood. “He was cutting Nora from my body.” Fear prickled at his spine, images of the gruesome dream flickering in his mind. “I couldn’t do anything. He took her, and I had to watch.”

“Zoom’s not going to take Nora, Barry,” Len assured “he can’t. He’s dead.”

“I know, I know” Barry scrubbed quivering hands over his face in frustration “it felt so real, though! And who’s to say some other Meta won’t try and take her from me? Someone who knows that I used to be The Flash or the Reserve Flash could show up again? He’s made it very clear he wants to make my life as miserable as possible.”

“Barry, take a deep breath” Len cups his face between his large palms “No one is going to take Nora from you, okay? She is safe; you are safe.”

Barry nodded, tears trickling down his face “I thought my mind had run out of ways to terrify me.”

“I’ve learnt that the mind is capable of making the most horrifying things even worse.” A calloused thumb swept away the tears “it was just a dream, though, it can’t hurt you and neither can Zoom, not anymore. And I won’t let anyone lay a finger on your or Nora.”

“I feel so helpless and scared all the time. It never really goes away. It’s always strumming in the background, waiting for something to set me off” Barry revealed. “I manage to find moments where I can be happy or whatever my new version of happy is but I am always waiting for the other shoe to drop. There is a sound or smell, or I see something and my whole world shatters. I am back to the broken mess Zoom made of me. I keep trying and trying to get better, and I kinda do, but I keep slipping back, it’s like the darkness won’t let me go.”

“You will feel better, Barry, I promise you that but you can’t force it.” Len took a deep breath, hands moving to his rest on his bony shoulders once more.

“That’s what everyone keeps saying and yet I know this will always be a part of me.” It would be marvellous if he could wake up to a brand new day and find his skin free of scars, his mind free of fear but it’s just a feeble wish, an impossible ask. There might be a time when he can sleep without nightmares and go days with panic attacks, but there will always be a sliver of darkness in his heart, a mark on his soul, right next to the one from his childhood. These two events will forever be a part of him, no amount of pretending or therapy will erase these tragedies from his heart.

At times, though, with nightmares fresh in his mind and body still trembling he has trouble believing he’ll ever find happiness. He has to hold onto hope, close his eyes and remember the moments where the darkness wasn’t all consuming. Fleeting moments of happiness are all he has to hang on to, and they will have to be enough to get him through. They don’t stop him feeling
hopeless, though; they scarcely chase away the fear that poisons his veins.

“Scarlet, are you with me?”

Barry’s eyes snap open; he hadn’t even realised he’d closed them. “Sorry, I’m not in a good headspace right now.”

“You don’t have to be sorry” Len squeezed his shoulder reassuringly. “Do you want to let me know what’s going on in that head of yours?”

“Just a lot of spiralling thoughts” he replied honestly, “I’m just so fucking tired of it all.”

“That’s understandable.” Len shifted, moving so he was sitting behind Barry, arms cradling him as he laid them back down “and you’re not by the way.”

“Not what?” Barry asked, nuzzling into the warmth of Len’s neck.

“Helpless.” He said matter-of-factly “you might not have your speed, but you’re still able to protect yourself.”

“Len, if you saw how I punched without my speed, you’d laugh. I am not capable of defending myself without the speed; it made me stronger. I used to have abs” he patted absently at his rounded stomach “also I am seven months pregnant, and am starting to waddle; I won’t be able to protect myself from anything.”

“You don’t need abs to fire the cold gun” Len replied, running nimble fingers through Barry’s messy hair “I can show you how to use it? Not that you will need to but if it makes you feel better, then I will.”

Barry propped himself up on his elbow, looking down at Len, drinking in his features in the golden glow. “I don’t know if Joe will like this. You know he never even taught me how to shoot a gun? Which is entirely unfair since he showed Iris.”

“Maybe he was worried you’d shoot yourself in the foot” he teased, playful smile stirring butterflies in Barry’s stomach.

“Oh very funny,” Barry was glad for the gentle banter, it helped ease the darkness swirling in his mind “I am sure I would have at least avoided doing that.”

“So what do you say?” Len asked, brow quirking and trademark grin present on his handsome face “are you in?”

Barry sighed, he wasn’t sure this was going to change anything. In the middle of the night with the cobwebs of nightmares strangling him he’d still feel helpless; scared. But maybe if he knew that he was able to protect him he might be able to feel less afraid in the daylight. Knowledge has always been power for him, if he wanted to learn something he’d seek out the information, he’d find every answer to every question. Learning how to protect himself wasn’t that different. If he wanted to feel safe in a city full of Meta-Humans and a world full of danger, then he would have to find ways to protect himself, protect his daughter.

The cold gun was a start; once Nora was born Sara could teach him a number of fighting skill sets that would help him to sleep at night. He knows Len and Sara would do absolutely anything to protect him, to shield him from harm but monsters have a way of sneaking into his life. All he used to do is run, run away from the monsters, run back to Star Labs; there would be no more running for help. For the first time, he would learn how to truly protect himself, not with speed or smarts
but with fists and weapons.

“I’m in.”

XxX

Len hopes this is the right thing to do, especially since it was his idea. They're at some abandoned building on the outskirts of town; Len has used it as a hideout a handful of times but after the police raided it a year back no one dare come back in case they still had eyes on it. The police of Central City had bigger things to worry about, though; the old hangar had been left to decay. The hideout had never been a five-star hotel but in the absence of people coming and going it had fallen to ruins.

They stayed outside, inside was dank and dark and smelled of rotting flesh. In this city it wouldn’t be surprising if there was corpse waiting inside, some pool soul stashed away and never to be found. The smell could also belong to a dead an animal; the place is infested with rats; either way, Len wasn’t going to waste their time hunting down the dead. They came here for a reason, and he hopes this is going to make some difference, even the smallest difference would be appreciated.

Growing up Barry had never needed to know how to use weapons, how to fight like his life depended on it and when he was thrust into the world of mortal danger he had his speed to keep him safe. It was understandable that he felt helpless without it. Len couldn’t return his speed to him, but he could teach him some basic defence moves, give him a little something to help him feel safe. Not that Len would ever let alone close enough to hurt him.

This wasn’t about him; it was about helping Barry, and hopefully, this was going to go pan out well. Nothing should go wrong; the gun was safe enough for Barry to use and they were out in the middle of no man’s land, so there was no one to see them or distract them. Everything would be just peachy. There are half a dozen beer bottles lined up on some upturned boxes; all Barry has to do is freeze them, piece of cake. Barry is waiting for him to give instructions; he is currently sitting on an upside down crate that doesn’t look all that sturdy.

“You sure you want to do this?” Len asked for the third time, making sure Barry knew he could opt out at any moment.

“I’m sure,” he said, again, jaw set in determination.

“Alright,” Len gives the gun a once over, she’s in perfect condition, then hands her to Barry. “Ice those bottles.”

“Doesn’t look that hard” Barry smiles, it’s probably supposed to be cocky, Len had always enjoyed that cocky grin, but this one is brittle, there just isn’t that much confidence left in him.

He watches Barry get up, with a little difficulty and a little assistant from Len. He makes his way towards the boxes and their empty beer bottles, raising the gun he hesitates then fires, blue beam smashing the bottles to pieces. The recoil knocks him backwards; Len is close enough to steady him, afraid to let go even when Barry finds balance again, and the gun dropped to his side. They stand silently, taking in the damage.

“That wasn’t that bad, was it?” Barry asked, sounding unsure, a little disappointed in himself.

“You did good, Scarlet” Len reassured. The cold gun wasn’t exactly the most delicate weapon to use; it didn’t have pinpoint accuracy, and if that had been a person standing there, then they would be dead right now. He could live with killing people; the bloodstains were already there so what
were a few more? Barry, on the other hand, had never killed someone and Len never wanted that to change. That’s why teaching him how to use and handle the cold gun was so important. Because if there ever were a time he did need to use it, he’d rather Barry know exactly how to hurt someone, not kill them.

So they kept trying. It takes them all morning but eventually Barry has better control of the stream. When he managed to freeze a bottle instead of destroying it, he shouted for joy. The look of achievement on his face warmed Len’s heart; it had been a pretty good morning. They forgot the reason they were doing this; it became just the two of them, the pain of their pasts losing its hold on them. Watching Barry’s joy proved to Len this had been a good idea, it helped him focus on something, allowed him to escape his head for a while.

He made a mental note to tell Sara about today; they would have to do more things like this in the future. Things were going so well, he stood behind Barry, hand on one shoulder and the other on his hip, keeping him steady, so the recoil didn’t hurtle him back. He said ‘keep your legs apart’ and like that Barry was slipping from his grasp, crashing down to the ground below, cold gun slipping from fingers. Reality slammed back in, darkness rolling in to smother and wilt the bright happiness of the morning. Down, down Barry fell, Len watching, frozen in a moment of panic, he had caused this reaction. He had done or said something, and now Barry was tumbling down like a house of cards, and all he could do was watch.

XxX

All it took was the wrong words to make the world shatter, to make Barry’s mind splinter. One moment everything is okay, he is okay, he’s actually having fun, the kind of fun where you forget all the misery, you forget the world. It’s just him and Len, they are not two people marked by tragedy, they are two friends having fun, enjoying a cold crisp morning in the fresh outdoors, sharing a stolen moment of happiness. It’s a peek into what could be or what could have been had Barry’s world not been torn down.

It’s a flicker of a bright, shiny moment that is shattered by four little words. Fifteen letters are all it takes, the world washes away in grey swirls, the ground vanishes from beneath Barry’s feet. When he finally lands, he is very, very far from home. The first thing he becomes aware of is the weight on top him, hot flesh pressed against his cold skin. The second thing he notices is the firmness beneath him, shaking, rattling. His eyes open but he refuses to see, to believe.

Please, God, don’t let this be happening. Make it stop, please, make it stop. It never does, it only gets worse. There is no escape, no reprieve from the pain, the wickedness. Zoom is above him, fingers roaming over exposed skin, teeth leaving bloody marks as they sink into delicate flesh. Everything hurts. He wants him to stop, to let him rest, let him sleep. Time has lost all meaning, the days have begun to blur, he could have been here for years, centuries even.

In truth, it hasn’t even been four weeks but the darkness, the pain all swirl together and what is the importance of keeping time when all hours are the same. Pain and misery follow pain and misery; it’s an endless loop he’s cast into, stuck repeating the same horrific events for all eternity. It’s just him, the darkness and the monster who is trying with strong, cruel hands to pry his legs apart; he fights with all the strength he has left to keep them together.

Pain blossoms in his stomach, knocking the wind from him, he hadn’t even seen the first coming. Strength rushes out in a choked of breath; the battle lost, and the beast has won. He waits for the inevitable, first the fingers, stretching him open but never enough then the brutal force of Zoom’s cock thrusting into him. All he can do is cry out when it happens, arch his back and grip at the sweat, cum and blood-stained sheets in hopes that if he holds tight enough, it will take the pain
away. It never does, it’s sometimes too much to bear, especially when he is raw from being fucked earlier.

Zoom’s hot breath sends shivers down his spine; his teeth sink teasingly into his earlobe, malice words trickling into his head as he whispered, “Now keep your legs apart, or I’ll break them.” his words emphasised by a finger pressing painfully into him. “Understand Barry.”

“Yes” the word is glass on his tongue, his mouth his so dry, he’d give anything for some water, but Zoom’s needs come first. They always come first.

“Good” he hissed.

He tries to blackout what happens, attempts to chase the white rabbit down into his wonderland, but he’s punished mercilessly for his disobedience, and he can’t find an escape. There is no following the white rabbit tonight. There is no escape from the brutal thrusts, the sharp nails and hungry teeth. The only mercy granted is the water Zoom gives him when he is sated, once Barry’s drained every drop he collapses back onto the mattress that wails beneath him like it too feels his pain.

Finally, he can close his eyes, watch the white rabbit emerge from its hiding spot and lead him to a better world.

XxX

It takes too long to get Barry back. Len bundles him into the back of the car, wraps in his parka and shuts all the doors, locking out the world. By the time Barry finds his way out of whatever terrible memory that overtook him, Len’s voice is hoarse from talking, every muscle tense and heart racing in fear. They don’t say anything for a while; Len can only hold Barry while he weeps, soft, pitiful sobs the only sound. Each tear makes his heart ache; make his gut churn with the knowledge that he had caused them.

Whatever he had done or sad had trigged some forgotten memory, some forgotten moment of horror. Once they are both ready to speak, he’ll have to ask what set him off, so it could never happen again. He’d wrecked his brain trying to figure out what could have caused the panic attack, but it all happened so fast, the fear that rushed through Len as he watched Barry slip from his arms made the memory hazy. Barry had been fine, smiling, happy then it all crashed down around them.

He should feel grateful that Barry got to have a small window of happiness, a flicker of normalcy among the chaos then he had to go and ruin it. He was good at ruining things, breaking them, leaving them less than what they were at the start. This is what he does; bring people up only to topple them down. He’d done it before, sometimes he did it for fun, not to the people he cared about but watching your enemies fall like dominos was a favourite past time of his.

“It’s not your fault.”

Len looked over at Barry, taking in the immense sadness in his red-rimmed eyes. “I did something.”

“No, Zoom did something, you just reminded me, and that’s not your fault” he declared, rubbing away the tears with his sleeves. “I’m okay, now. Please don’t be angry with yourself.”

Typically Barry, offering comfort to him when he was the one in need of it most, typically Len being an ass and making this about himself. He had to let the guilt go; it’s not like this was the first time he’d accidentally trigged Barry, bother himself and Sara had stuffed up on multiple occasions.
It never got any easier, seeing Barry spiral into some lost memory, dealing with the aftermath is heartbreaking and gut-wrenching. They also make it through, the tears dry and when the sun rises the following day Barry is little better, they all are.

Barry always chooses them for comfort, no matter how often they have messed up or set off a trigger, he never blames, never sees them as anything but his faithful companions. Len lets go of the anger, the guilt, feels it leave his bloodstream. They have to talk about just what happened; it’s awful making him reveal the horror over and over, but it’s the best thing they can do in this rotten situation.

“You’re right, I’m sorry, I just hate seeing you upset.”

Barry nods, offering Len a brittle smile in reassurance, in encouragement to go on, ask the questions, he’ll answer.

“What trigged you?” he waits with bated breath, heart hammering in his chest. What had he done? Was he standing too close? Did he say something? God, what did he even say?

“It… it was when” Barry licked his lips, hands wringing together nervously “it was when you said keep your legs apart.” The words fumble out fast; he ducks his head, hiding the shame in his eyes.

Len doesn’t know what to say to that. The implications of the words are all too clear. There is nothing to say that will make it okay, not one damn word in the whole fucking world could make any of this okay. All they can do is not say it again, and that doesn’t feel like enough to Len right now. Barry just suffered a panic attack, and all he can do is watch fresh tears make tracks down his face, all he can do is sit here and wonder what to say. He wished Sara was here; she’d know exactly what to say, what to do to make the tears stop.

Len can only feel anger rising within him, icy rage strumming in his veins, pooling in his gut and building in his throat. He’s not mad at himself anymore; the anger is directed at Zoom, at the wicked monster that took pleasure in tearing Barry apart. He wants to lash out, hit something, smash something, stomp the icy rage beneath his feet. He can’t do any of these things. He’ll frighten Barry if he does, and he couldn’t live with himself if he made Barry fear him.

“I’m sorry, Barry” he breathed out, letting the rage expel from his lungs “you didn’t deserve any of this.” One more deep exhale, the anger wanes, he feels confident enough to reach out to Barry, tilting his face up to meet his. “Do you feel up to talking about it?”

“There isn’t much to say” his voice is rough, broken. “He was trying to rape me, again and I was in so much pain” his voice hitched. “I didn’t want him to… to do it again, so I tried to keep my legs together.” He let out a broken, twisted laugh that mad Len’s heartache painfully. “Zoom always said I should have stood with my legs closed; I shouldn’t have worn such a tight fitting suit. He made me believe it was my fault that he did those things to me. It made me feel so dirty. It made me feel like I was being punished and after a while, I believed it, I took the punishments.” He said bitterly, tears glistening in the pale sunlight as they stream down his face. “Anyway, it didn’t work. Nothing I did ever worked. He always got what he wanted in the end.”

Len feels ill; Barry’s words make him feel cold, gutted. Zoom had done so much damage; he’d hurt Barry in the most violent, intimate ways and now he and Sara had to rebuild the shattered boy left behind. He didn’t doubt that it could be done, they had made so many breakthroughs already, but he was only now realising how long the road to recovery truly was. It could take years, it could take centuries, it didn’t matter, Len would walk every step with Barry.

“It’s not your fault” he had said this countless times, and he would continue to say until Barry
believed it. “Zoom is the only one to blame. You are not dirty, and you didn’t deserve to be punished. You didn’t deserve any of it.”

“I know,” Barry avowed “I know. But when I get lost in my panic like that, when I am lost in a memory like that I forget, but I know.”

“Good” Len pulled him into his arms, needing to make sure Barry felt safe, felt loved despite his claim not to believe the lies. “I’m going to keep reminding you, though, for the moments you forget.”

“Thank you.” Len could feel the ghost of a smile against his throat, Barry deflating, sagging against him and breathing out a weary sigh. “We should probably go; Joe and Iris will be waiting for us.

“Right, “Len said, but he didn’t let go, he needed to feel Barry in his embrace, feel his beating heart beneath is hand.

“I’m okay Len” he whispered, long fingers lacing through the ones that lay above his heart “we’re okay.”

Len felt the tension ebb, shoulders relaxing as stress dissolved from his body. His heart skipped a beat at Barry’s words when he said ‘we’ at had first he assumed he meant Nora then Barry’s fingers wound through his and he knew that when he said ‘we’ he meant them. They were okay, they were broken and bloodstained from a brutal past but they were okay, they would be just fine, because they had each other now. In a world full of darkness and wicked things it was important to have something, someone worth fighting for, a light to shine bright in the darkest hours. They both might have cracks, making their beams dull, splintered but they’d always be able to follow them home.
War of Hearts

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I can’t help but love you
Even though I try not to
I can’t help but want you
I know that I’d die without you

I can’t help but be wrong in the dark
’Cause I’m overcome in this war of hearts
I can’t help but want oceans to part
’Cause I’m overcome in this war of hearts

Ruelle - War of Hearts

People write endless amounts of quotes and poems about road trips, they embellish, they fanaticize; they make it sound like some grand adventure. Each town has a secret to reveal, a story to be told, in the night there will be dark truths to be found. People romanticise road trips; they write some pretty words and film coming of age stories about kids that go cross country and find themselves. They can turn the bright, sunny journey upside down, flip it on its head and make it gruesome and terrifying.

There is a lot to be said about travelling long distances at high speeds, and most of it is bullshit. Road trips are long, tiring, tedious and with an unborn baby resting against his bladder and patchy asphalt stretching on for miles Barry finds them overrated. He did bring it on himself; he could have stayed home, curled up on the couch with Len and watched a movie, but no. He decided to drive three hours out of town to visit the father who walked away from him.

He’s not sure what kind of events will follow, there is always an endless list of possibilities that can unfold. What he hopes is that Henry has had enough time to think, clear his head of the rage and ill feelings towards Nora, and when they arrive he will greet them with open arms. He can only hope, which is something he does a lot of lately. Hope the nightmares won’t return tonight; hope he can make it through the next day and the next. There is so much to hope for and so much to lose if hope burns out.

Barry casts a glance over at the driver’s side; Joe is behind the wheel, fingers tapping on it in time with the music. They haven’t spent this much time together since Barry came home, it’s nice, it makes him realise how much he’s missed him. Coming home had been the right move, he’d overcome enough of the grief that being in the house no longer bothered him; the framed pictures no longer screamed from the walls. It was starting to feel like home again, well almost.

The nights were still troubling; sleeping without Len’s presence was harder than he anticipated. It was made worse by the new nightmares sneaking in from the dark recesses of his mind. After the first horrifying dream about Nora more followed, each night they grow more violent and distressing. He was exhausted from lack of sleep, the only real rest he had gotten this week was the night spent at Len’s. It had been three days since then, and Barry was very much ready to beseech Joe to let Len stay so he could at least find comfort when he woke, afraid, nauseous and trembling.
Maybe if today didn’t end well, he could use it as an excuse to have Len stay over and Sara as well, as she was returning from Star City later today. He’d missed her company, the way she could talk him down from a panic attack or help him relax after a nightmare. She was a good friend, and Barry was looking forward to having their little trio back together again. He would miss having Len to himself, though, they hadn’t spent this much time alone together, and it was nice to continue to get to know him, even with the ups and downs.

Last night Len had been invited to stay for dinner by Iris, who unlike Joe was making an effort to make him feel welcome. Joe had been working late, so it had been just the three of them and Big Belly Burgers. Iris talked to them about a new article she was working on, she asked Len questions and answered his, Barry sat quietly, anxiety making him withdrawn. When dinner was over, they made their way to the lounge room to play a board game and drink hot cocoa by the fire.

Barry hadn’t been paying attention, too lost in fear of what tomorrow could bring, to notice Iris poking him to alert him to his turn. It was Len’s strong, warm hand on his elbow that snapped him back to the moment. Quickly he apologised, but it was too late, all eyes were trained on him, wanting to know what the cause of the distress was and needing to know how to fix it. By now he was aware that brushing them off wasn’t going to work, nor would it help if he kept his feelings bottled up inside.

“I’m just nervous about tomorrow” he disclosed, looking down at his drink like it could magically show him what the future held. Instead, all he found were mini marshmallows slowly melting.

“What if he still doesn’t want to see me?”

“I wish I could tell you that tomorrow would turn out just the way you want it, but I can’t Barr.” Iris said lightly “what I can say to you, is this: No matter what happens, Dad and I will always be here for you” delicate fingers cup his chin, lifting his head so he can meet her gaze “and Nora, we love you both.”

“I know” he murmured “It’s just… he’s my dad. I fought so hard for him, and he just walked away from me,” he touches his stomach; there is nothing more incredible than knowing that just beneath his palm is his daughter. “I wish he’d fight for me, just this once.”

“We’ll always fight for you, Scarlet.”

Barry looked over at Len, heart beating pleasantly at the sincerity of his words, butterflies and hummingbirds stir their delicate wings, setting loose a terrifying word. It comes up his throat, teetering dangerously on the tip of his tongue. If it won’t for Iris, if it won’t for the darkness still laced around him like ugly poisonous vines he would have said it, he would have said something he hasn’t spoken to anyone but his daughter in so long. He was so damn close to saying ‘I love you’ and the realisation is petrifying.

Is he ready for love? Only a few days ago he wasn’t sure, and he isn’t now but when he looked at Len, saw the devotion, the adoration, the love blazing in his eyes all he could think was ‘I love you, I love you, I love you.’ There was a trickle of doubt in the space of a heartbeat, and it wasn’t just Iris’s presence that kept the words from spilling out. He could be reading it wrong, seeing what he wants, needs to see. After all, his mind was still in ruins. It could be a trick of the light, a trick of the mind, there might be love held in Len’s heart for him, but it might not be the kind he thought he saw.

Even if it was by some miracle what his heart most desired, there was still the fact he still was a mess, a somewhat pieced together mess but a mess nonetheless. He could barely look at himself in the mirror, despising what he found staring back at him, hating the ugly scars. Didn’t they always say you have to love yourself first before you could love others? How could anyone love the
disaster left behind by Zoom, the splintered mind and scarred body? How could Len love his hideousness? Thoughts are spiralling down a dark, dangerous path, fast, sinking him deep into the abyss. He lets them go, like balloons cut free from their strings.

Instead of saying ‘I love you’ which he does, he truly does, and later that night it will make him question the whole loving yourself in order to love theory. He says “Thank you, Len” with the touch of a smile, a hidden ‘I love you’ laced beneath the words. They continue their game. Iris wins and Barry spends the rest of the evening thinking about the emotions found flickering in Len’s eyes and if they mean what he hopes they mean.

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In the distance Henry’s house comes into view, it’s a picture-perfect classic farmhouse, complete with a backdrop of rolling green hills dotted with cows. The sky above is grey; a steady downpour had started up a few moments ago, and the rain doesn’t look like it’s going to let up anytime soon. Anxiety strums to life in Barry’s veins, the closer they get to the house the more it grows. Growing, growing until his heart is pounding like a war drum and his lung constrict until the lack of oxygen makes him feel dizzy and ill.

He has to fight through this, take deep breaths, close his eyes and visual something nice, a warm sunny place where everything is okay. Only nothing is okay, it’s getting closer to it, but he hasn’t reached the end yet, the place at the end of the road with its big flashing red you are okay now’ sign. If such a destination even exists, it seems kind of foolish to think that there is a day, a moment when everything falls back into place and like that he’ll be fixed.

It seems a silly notion to believe such a thing; there isn’t a sign at the end of the road; there might not even be an end to this road. There will be a curve in the path, a slight change of directions, a sign that says: ‘Congratulations! You made it this far. Now keep going.’ And on that day, at that moment something might change. There could be a shift, and perhaps he will feel a little lighter, a little brighter and most importantly, he’ll feel okay. Onwards he will go, no longer bound to the past, to Zoom. On he will march, with Len, Sara and Nora to the brighter, better days.

Today he has to brave the darkness, step out of the car, cross the wet lawn, climb the stairs and face his father. He trudges slowly towards the house, following in Joe’s shadow, holding tight to the umbrella, so it doesn’t slip from shaking fingers. Henry answers the door before they even have a chance to knock, surprise and a flicker of nervousness written clear in his eyes. They hadn’t told him they were coming, not wanting to give him the chance to deny them, to leave.

Hesitantly he invites them in; inside is warm, smelling of coffee and stale air, like the windows, haven’t been opened in a few days. Henry leads them to the kitchen; they sit down at an old wooden table, the top littered with papers. Barry takes a closer look at the few scattered by his elbow; they are for jobs in faraway cities; there is a dry lump in his throat and an ache in his chest. Is this how much his father hates him? He’d rather go to some foreign city and start over then be with his son? Was he that ashamed of him that disgusted?

Barry couldn’t fathom leaving Nora, not now, not after finally accepting her. She was a part of him, she’d been there in his darkest hours, Nora had survived Zoom’s brutality; she was his light. He no longer associated her with the wicked things Zoom had done to him. She may have begun her life in Barry’s darkest hours, but her life would be full of light, of sparkling happiness and glittering love. If Henry couldn’t accept her by now, then this would be the last time he tried reaching out. She would be born in light, surrounded by people who loved her, who accepted her; there would be no cold hearts to dull her sparkle.

This was Henry’s last chance. It may be unfair, but Barry couldn’t handle doing this again, the
anxiety was making him sick, making him sway. They were sitting in silence, the tea Henry made for them growing cold, silence stretching on. Barry should talk, say something, just ask the damn questions but the anxiety has stolen his voice, words lost to the turmoil in his mind. Thankfully Joe finally says what he cannot; he sounds strong, a little angry but every time he meets Barry’s eyes there is unconditional love for his son.

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“I know all that, Joe” Henry snaps.

“And yet here you are” Joe shoots back “hiding out in the middle of nowhere instead of being there for your son.”

“You made it pretty clear last time that he was your son” Henry retorted.

They’ve been like this for the past half hour, snipping and snapping at each other like hungry wolves. Barry had to retreat to the living room, the tension in the air pushing him closer and closer to a panic attack. He can still hear every word from where he sits in the lounge room, hiding beneath Len’s parka. Joe is trying to convince Henry that Nora isn’t Zoom, she isn’t something ugly or vile; she is part of Barry. The good in him outweighed any bad, and it’s not like evil is inherited, it’s not part of anyone’s DNA. Evil is created, carved out of blood and tragedy.

“He’s our son” Joe’s voice wavers with a thousand emotions, Barry can only imagine what his must expression look like, “and it’s our job to support him, no matter what.”

“Is that way you’re letting him hang around Snart? Because last I checked he had hurt Barry just as much as Zoom had.”

The anxiety froze in Barry’s veins, washed away by searing rage. Len was nothing like Zoom, how could his father even think that? Len had a dark, troubled past and he had done terrible things, things that he was trying to make up for but putting him the same category as Zoom was outrageous. Len was not a monster; there had always been light shimmering beneath the darkness; Barry had known it was there from the start. Zoom had no light, no glimmer of goodness to be found; it had burnt out long ago.

He wouldn’t stand for this. Henry could not accept his choice to keep his daughter; he could hate him for all he cared but he wouldn’t sit here and listen to say such horrible, untrue things about Len. Henry hadn’t protected him; he wasn’t there when Zoom took him, he was out here, searching for jobs in cities far away. He didn’t want to get to know his granddaughter; he didn’t want to help Barry through the most difficult time in his life so why should he wait for him to change his mind. Why bother? Joe and Iris had accepted Nora right from the start; they were trying to warm up to Len, to Sara. He didn’t need Henry, if he didn’t want to be part of his life then fine, Barry would make it easy for him, he’d serve the string. Barry marched into the kitchen, heart beating like a hammer and finally, he finds his voice, unsteady at first, but he doesn’t back down. He stays strong, unwavering.

“Len is nothing like Zoom!” he bellowed “I know he wasn’t exactly a good guy, but he has changed, he helped saved the world. He’s saving me, which is more then you’ve done. It’s more than you’ve ever done.” He knows it’s cruel, that the repressed rage is escaping in harsh words. “Len killed Zoom, he and Sara risked their lives to come and get me from the precinct. They have been by my side since that day, and you have the nerve to say that Len is like Zoom? He is not a monster; trust me, I spent four months with one! I know what they smell like, what they taste like; I know what kind of pain and torture they inflict upon people.”
Rage consumes him, all the things left unsaid climb up his throat, escaping, sending shock waves and causing destruction.

“I can still feel the things Zoom did to me, and I don’t mean in my aching heart” tears accompany the jagged words “I can still feel him near me, inside me. I close my eyes, and I see his face. He did monstrous things to me, to whole worlds. Len would never, ever, hurt me. Not even before would he have done those things to me. So I don’t want to ever hear you say Len is anything like Zoom. He isn’t, and neither is Nora.”

The room falls into a shocked silence, the rage dissolves, leaving Barry miserable. He just wants to go home to Len, forget this horrible day ever happened. With the anger washing away the clarity of his words settle in, he feels awful that he said those horrid, vile things in front of Joe. He feels ill again, dizzy, he wants some air. He wants to get in the car and drive as far as way from this place as fast as he can. Thankfully Joe must sense his distress or see the way he starts to sway, tremble.

“It's okay, Barr” he gets to his feet, hands resting comfortingly on his shoulders “we’re leaving.”

Barry nods, feeling a numbed kind of shock settle over him. He allows Joe to steer him towards the front door, a stunned Henry frozen to his seat watches them leave. They are outside, cold, damp air seeping through their clothes, chilling their bones. The rain is coming down heavier now; it cascades off the tin roof like waterfalls. Joe hands him an umbrella; his shaking fingers can barely hold on. They are about to step out into the downpour, make their way down the stairs, across the wet lawn and to the car when Henry comes out of the house.

“You're naming her after your mother?” he doesn’t sound angry, there is a surprise to the words, a little hesitance but it’s better than rage.

“Yes,” Barry answered resolutely.

“Just give me a little more time, please?” Henry pleaded “just a few more weeks to sort my head out. You don’t know how difficult this is for me. I am your father… I am meant to protect you and when you were taken… I feel apart Barr. You are my world” he stepped closer, reaching out a hand to rest on his shoulder, Barry stiffened but he doesn’t shrug it off, “you are my whole world.”

He looks calmly up at his father, feeling the emotional storm rage within. “Nora… Len and Sara, they are my world, and if you want to be a part of it, then you have to accept them.” He jerked away from the touch, stepping away; it felt like each step placed miles between them. “I'll give you until Nora is born, after that; I am done waiting around for you.”

“Okay,” his father said solemnly.

Barry gave his father one last look, turned around, walked across the sodden lawn and climbed into the car. He was tired of being left in ruins by others; he wanted to be better and maybe to get there it meant he had to close a few doors. He needed people he could rely on, who loved him despite the fact he was no longer The Flash, despite the fact he was broken and scarred and pregnant with his rapist child. If Henry couldn’t be all of those things then, no matter how hard it would be, he had to say goodbye, because he couldn’t handle this kind of hurt and disappointment again.

Henry had one last chance, two months to accept the son he now had or else Barry would cut the strings, he’d set himself free. No more waiting, no more fighting for attention, no more fighting for his love. As heartbreaking as this was, he knew that it was the right thing to do. There was no room in his recovery for this kind of emotional trauma. Not to mention he didn’t want Nora growing up with a grandfather who couldn’t even look her way. As they drove away, rain pelting heavily onto the roof, Barry cast one last look at his father, who was watching them leave with desolate eyes.
The train is running late; trains aren’t meant to run late, but it’s pouring in Central City, and there has been an electrical problem, so Lisa and Sara are stuck twenty minutes out of the city, waiting for the power to be fixed. Len remains in the car, watching droplets of water make tracks down the windshield. His mind is elsewhere, thinking about Barry, he’s always thinking about Barry. He and Joe left this morning to visit Henry; Len had wanted to accompany them, but he knew it wouldn’t be a good idea.

Henry had never been friendly to him or Sara, so going with Barry wouldn’t have panned out well. It was also a good idea to let Joe and Barry have some bonding time, as much as he wished he could be there to support him, it was important to give Joe a chance to be the one Barry leant on. Staying behind meant he had free time for his mind to wonder and a delayed train gave him even further incentive to sink deep into his racing thoughts.

And while there are many things to think of, ponder over, all roads lead to the one single thought, the one person who was always on his mind. Of course, he thought of Barry. He worried that today would be awful, that Henry would break his heart, shatter the pieces that had been painstakingly put back into place. Perhaps for once something would turn out right for Barry, maybe Henry would welcome him with open arms, and when he returned this afternoon, he’d be filled with happiness.

Len doubted that very much. They weren’t living in a pretty, shiny universe, wishes and hopes didn’t often come true here. All Len could hope for was that Barry was okay, no matter the outcome and if he came home broken-hearted and hurt then, Len would put him together again. Because that’s what you do for the people you love, you help them pick themselves up no matter how many times they fall apart. He’d always been there to help Lisa after heartbreak and miserable day.

It’s what Len did for the people he loved, and he said it before, and he’d say it again: he loved Barry Allen. For months now he had remained silent, unsure if his feelings were reciprocated. He was tired of this war of hearts; he had been trying so hard to reign in his emotions, to convince himself that what he saw in flickering in Barry’s eyes were just imaginary things. He couldn’t ignore them anymore; not after the other night. When Barry looked at him his eyes glistened with adoration, devotion and love; it might as well been written on the walls.

For a moment he saw nothing but love sparkling in Barry’s eyes, then there was a flutter of the lashes, and it was gone, lost. It had been there, though, it was tangible, even Iris noticed the shift in the energy, the brief flicker of something magically. It had been real, for a moment Barry had allowed himself to reveal his true feelings, the ones that had been hidden beneath the wreckage of his downfall. Knowing that Barry felt the same, even if it was only able to be seen in rare, blink-and-you’ll-miss-them moments, it was enough to give him the courage to believe.

To believe in a future for them, a far off day when Barry was better, and they could finally set their true feelings free. It was no longer an ‘if’, but a matter of ‘when’ and Len would wait a thousand years, he’d wait a thousand more for Barry to be ready.

Joe’s memory skipping back to the moment Barry said ‘I can still feel the things Zoom did to me. I can still feel him near me, inside me.’ The words keep replaying in his mind, every time they loop around his grip on the steering wheel gets stronger, heart breaking a little more every time he remembers. Barry hadn’t opened up to him yet; he didn’t know how the scars on his thighs came
about; he didn’t know what caused the burn marks scattered about his body.

He knew what had possibly caused them; Caitlin had been able to make an educated guess, but there were stories behind them, stories filled with pain and fear and Joe wanted to know what they were. He wanted to bear the burden with Barry; that’s what fathers did. His son had always carried the weight of the world on his shoulders, and Joe had been trying to help him carry it for years. Hearing him shout about those ugly things to Henry broke his heart. It made him want to bring Zoom back from the dead just so he could kill him, slowly, painfully. He’d never been a violent man, but this was the one time he’d make an acceptance.

There was no resurrecting Jay; Len had shattered his skull, and Joe could only hope that hell was real so his punishment could last an eternity. There is no use for rage; there is nowhere to direct it, so he takes a breath, exhaling the hatred. Beside him Barry has succumbed to sleep, they have been on the road for a little over an hour when he nodded off, curling up beneath the blue parka. It left Joe alone with his thoughts, left his mind to wander to dark places.

Why had Zoom cut Barry’s inner thighs? What had possessed him to do such thing? What was the point? He wanted desperately to ask, but Barry didn’t know he’d been there, helping Caitlin strip him of worn out clothes that were stained with blood and something else they both tried to ignore. Knowing wasn’t going to make him feel any better, he is sure the stories Barry has to tell him will gut him, shatter his already frail heart. He still wishes to know, to bear the burden.

Behind every scar is a tale, a painful experience that his son had to endure because he couldn’t get to him, he couldn’t rescue him. Four months he was gone, suffering, alone and all they could do was fail. There were no more breaches; Zoom had closed the last one when he took Barry. They failed their hero and the scars, the painful memories, they were on him. Barry’s blood is on his hands, and he will spend the rest of life hating himself for not being smart enough, strong enough, to cross worlds and save his son. All he can do is offer support, hope that he will open up so he can share the pain, the misery.

Beside him Barry starts to stir, eyes fluttering wildly behind closed lids, mumbling incoherently. Joe slows down; it’s been a stressful day, and it’s no wonder he has fallen into a nightmare. Sara has made it very clear that they need to wake him gently, coax him out the darkness. He starts speaking softly, hoping his words will find their way into Barry’s subconscious. It doesn’t appear to be working; Barry grows more restless, legs kicking out, a fist slamming into the window.

Barry startles awake a moment after his fists hit the window, he cradles it’s to his chest wincing in pain. The shock causes Joe to slam on the breaks, tires screeching on the wet asphalt. Barry is blinking the fog from his tear stricken eyes; Joe pulls the car over to the side of the road, so he can give his son the full attention he needs. It takes a few moments, the dream has left Barry distressed, and Joe does his best to soothe him. When he is finally calmed, Joe finds his voice; they are still two hours away from home and if he doesn’t get Barry to open up to him now, he may never will. He doesn’t want to be shut out like Henry, he knows he deserves to be, but he wants to try and fix their relationship, and getting past the towering walls is a good start.

“Do you want to tell me what that was about?” he asked, words underlined with a desperate plea.

Barry worries his bottom lip between his teeth, hesitating, debating. “It was a memory” he looked away, forehead resting against the cool glass of the window “about Zoom doing things to me.”

“You’re safe now, Barr” he reached out, placing a comforting hand on his shoulder. “He can’t hurt you anymore.”

“I know” he murmured, looking back over at him “but the memories still can.”
“Memories are good at that” Joe sighed, pausing, deciding whether to push or let go. He pushed; he wasn’t going to let any more distance grow between them. “Tell me about it?”

Barry sighed, eyes welling with tears “I don’t want to hurt you.”

Of course, selfless Barry was worried about him, worried that the truth would cause him pain, all of this time he had been shutting him out to protect him. He should have seen this; it was such a typically Barry thing to do. There would be no more carrying this pain around by himself, if he was hurting then Joe would hurt too, he’d cry his tears, feel his pain. He didn’t need protecting, he was the parent, it was his job to shield his son from the world, and he had failed spectacularly at that.

“You don’t have to protect me, Barr, not from this” he declared. “If you’re still not ready to talk then I’ll start the car, and we’ll go home, but if you are ready, then I will listen. I am here for you; I am here to help you through this, and I’m here for you to share your pain with. So if you are ready, I can take it.”

Barry nodded, blinking back tears. “I am… I am ready.”

“Okay,” Joe said softly, though his heart beat like a hammer, trying to escape from his chest before Barry’s words could shatter it.

Barry took a deep breath, closed his eyes and began to talk. Setting free every dark tale, revealing the origins of every scar and each word, each harrowing tale felt like a knife to Joe’s heart. The pain Barry must have felt would have been immense, the suffering endless, each day bringing new horrors. He had known it was going to be bad; that terrible, wicked things had been done to his son but to finally hear the words spoken, to have the details revealed, well it was gut-wrenching.

No matter how much he wanted to rage and cry he forced himself to keep it together, he owed Barry that much. When there were no more stories to be told and Barry’s voice had grown hoarse a heavy silence fell over them. Words were hard to find, what could he possibly say to make any of this better? ‘I’m sorry’ wasn’t enough, not when his son had been electrocuted, beaten, had his bones broken, starved, repeatedly raped and had his flesh curved into like he was a piece of meat. Zoom had used him as a plaything, whispered lies to taint his mind, enjoyed breaking him, enjoyed every minute of it, and there were no words on any earths that could make this okay.

“Joe?”

He looked at his son, who stared back at him with glistening eyes. Joe couldn’t hold back the grief; he dropped his head into his hands and wept. He felt Barry’s hands on his back, comforting him when it should be the other way round. Gathering his strength Joe lifted his head, wiping angrily at the tears.

“I’m sorry;” he said, “I’m sorry I wasn’t there to protect you, I’m sorry you had to go through that, and I am so, so sorry that I that I can’t make this right.”

“Joe, there is nothing to make right” Barry insisted. “I was angry with you, I won’t deny that, but I know this wasn’t your fault, it wasn’t Iris’s or Wally’s fault either. It was Zoom’s. He did those things to me; he is the monster, he is the one who hurt me, hurt us and you don’t have to be sorry for that.”

He nodded, letting the words sink in, find their way to the guilt and slash it to pieces, crush it to dust and send it away. “It’s not your fault either” he needs to make sure Barry knows this, knows that it wasn’t his fault that Zoom hurt him. “You said Zoom told you a lot of lies and I need to know you don’t believe any of them.”
“I don’t” he reassured “not anymore, at least. I know it wasn’t my fault. I know I didn’t ask for this to happen. Sometimes, when it’s bad, I slip up, and I start blaming myself, but I do know. And on the bad days, in the dark hours, Len and Sara remind me.”

“Good” Joe said, offering Barry a fragile smile “now I will remind you too.”

“Okay,” he mirrored Joe’s broken smile. “Are you okay?”

“No” he answered honestly “are you?”

“No” his smile wavered “but I’ll get better.”

XxX

Sara dropped down onto the lush grey sofa, letting out a tired sigh. It had been a long, emotional week, hell it had been a long, emotional couple of months. Getting her stubborn father into rehab had been easy compared to the all the other things that had been thrown her way. It was relieving to know her dad would be okay, that he was getting the help he needed and having Lisa there for support, for comfort had been wonderful. It would be nice to have a reprieve, but there was still a former hero that needed her help, her love and support.

Barry was currently visiting his father so that at least gave Sara some time to kick up her heels and indulge in a much-needed rest. Len had kept her up to date while she was away and Barry had messaged her time to time to check in. He also sought comfort from her, talking to her about his new nightmares and the day he had a severer panic attack after Len accidently set off a trigger. It had been difficult being away from them; Sara hadn’t relied on anyone in a very long time, and yet Barry and Len had entangled themselves in her life.

They had tangled themselves in her heart.

Their absence was noticed. Between the nightmares, panic attacks and god awful days there were okay moments, fleeting seconds where they were just three friends, no past weighing them down, no tragedy blemishing their souls, no strings attached. Out of the ashes, something beautiful emerged, a friendship forged in the wake of disaster. At least something good came from the pain, the misery; they’d always be marked by their past; they’d always remain a little broken, but together they would be okay.

There was also Lisa, who Sara was falling hard and fast for. She hadn’t loved anyone since Nyssa, and she’d loved her dearly, but there always seemed to be a clock counting down, an incessant tick-tock alerting her to every minute until the end. They were two assassins in love; it was never going to last. Nyssa had been there to pick up the pieces; she put Sara back together again, but it was all wrong. When Nyssa rebuilt her she did so in her image, she made her stronger, a fighter, a killer.

At the time she needed to be those things to survive, to heal. Nyssa never knew the real her, the girl who loved painting and listening to Lady Gaga. She may have fallen in love with Sara in her darkest hours, but she had loved the stranger reborn from the ruins. Lisa saw her; she saw the artist underneath, the fun, cool girl who liked to dance to music in her underwear. She saw the light and the darkness and accepted them both. Their relationship would be stronger; there was no countdown sounding in Sara’s head.

Love in the aftermath of tragedy didn’t often always end well. Only sometimes, though. The love blossoming between Len and Barry was getting stronger; the sparks may have been ignited before Barry was taken, but the time they’d spend together, saving each other, getting to know each other,
had turned into a fire. It was impossible not to see the affection they held for each other; it was only a matter of time before they confessed their feelings. Sara expected that it would take a while, there were still many obstacles standing in their way, but she didn’t doubt they’d find their way to each other in the end.

“Good to be back?” Lisa asked, stroking golden nails through Sara’s hair.

“Indeed” Sara mused, “I’ve missed this place, I feel… I feel safe here, happy.” She confessed “I felt like that at the cabin… but here it feels a little lighter; I feel a little lighter. It sorta frightens me; I’m not used to feeling this way.”

Lisa smiled, pressing her lips to Sara’s in a tender kiss “Well get used to it because I love having you here.”

“Oh yeah?” Sara smirked impishly “why don’t you show me how much.”

“Well there are many ways in which I could show” she mirrored Sara’s alluring grin, “, but I have something that might almost be as good.”

“Oh do you?” Sara asked, quirking a brow “and what is that?”

Lisa took Sara’s hand, long fingers trailing tenderly across her palm, “Will you be mine?”

Sara’s breath caught in her throat; hummingbirds soared in chest and butterflies danced in her stomach “Yes,” there was no second guessing, no hesitation; she wanted this, she wanted Lisa. It might be kind of cliché, a little high school but screw it. Sara needed this, need confirmation of love, a declaration, a promise of something more. She smiled; love and adoration sparkling like a thousand pretty lights in her eyes, “Yes. I will be yours.”

XxX

Barry’s sitting on Len’s bed, papers sprawled around him, sleeves rolled up, exposing the thick scars that wrap around his wrists. The room is empty, it’s the only reason he dared roll up the sleeves of the hoodie, Len is taking a shower, and Sara and Lisa are in the kitchen. The aroma of apple pie wafts in through the door, the familiar scent relaxes his frantic mind. Anxiety has been pulsating through him since his confrontation with his father, the nightmare and the conversation with Joe had only escalated it.

Talking to Joe had been gut-wrenching, seeing the emotional storm play out in on his face had broken Barry’s already fragile heart. Reliving the pain, the misery and horror had stirred old emotions. Once again he found the boxes unopened, old memories set free to wreak havoc. It never got any easier; he thought it would; he thought that every time Barry said ‘Zoom electrocuted me, he left be chained in the dark for hours; he beat me; raped me; broke me,’ it would get easier. It doesn’t, each time the words feel like sharp glass, they taste like blood; they make his stomach churn and his heart ache.

Every time he unpacks those memories, a sharp clarity reminds him of the horror he endured, it hurtles him back to the moment, to the darkness. He said, words hesitant, voice wavering ‘Zoom cut me, my… legs, on the inside… my inner thighs’ and he was right back there. Bleeding onto an already blood stained mattress, choking on pitiful sobs, wanting the pain to stop, praying it would just end. He still doesn’t remember why Zoom did it; there is a faint memory that says it was in ownership, in love. He could be wrong, though; it could have been in punishment.

He hasn’t told anyone that Zoom proclaimed to love to him, he can’t get the words to come out;
they hurt too much. It’s silly he knows; they won’t blame him or be angry with him, but he doesn’t want them to know, maybe because he doesn’t understand. Zoom beat, raped and tortured him in the name of love, but that wasn’t love, it was madness, it was an obsession. Love is kind; love is beautiful and glittry, not dark and twisted.

Perhaps that is why he is afraid to be loved again, because the last person who loved him tore him apart with a devilish smile, shattered his world and enjoyed every moment of it. Deep down he knows it wasn’t love, it wasn’t, it was ugly and violent; all the things love should never be. It doesn’t change anything, though; a monster had loved him, and somehow he had done something to make the cruellest person he’d ever had the displeasure of meeting fall in love with him.

What did that say about him? Was there some darkness residing in his heart? Did others with dark souls sense it; did it make them seek him out? No, he wouldn’t fall for the spiralling thoughts, the little voices trying to bring him down, the inner demons trying to sabotage. What Zoom felt for him wasn’t love, he was insane, broken beyond repair and Barry had done nothing to make Zoom feel those things. It just happened, it is what it is. When he was ready to be loved again, he had to remember that the person, the people loving him wouldn’t harm him.

Their love was not violent or sick, it was pure, it was true. Maybe it was time to tell someone, to confess that Zoom had proclaimed to love him that he wanted to have a family with him; he wanted to rule, to destroy worlds with Barry by his sides. From the very beginning, he had hurt, raped Barry in hopes of turning him into something dark, something monstrous. It had failed. He may have damaged him; shattered him into a thousand pieces, and some of the pieces would never be found, but he had not carved out a beast. He merely left a broken boy, drowning in emotions, memories and nightmares.

Thoughts grow uncontrollable. He had sat down to read through the papers Caitlin had given to him, and all it took was a few moments of solitude for his mind to crumble. It had been a long, tiring day; his defence was worn down; it was far too easier for the darkness to sweep in. Blinking away the troubling thoughts he focused on the papers, he had a lot to learn, and truthfully some of the information frightened him. He set it aside for another time; it might be best to go through it all with Len and Sara.

He places everything back into the folders, ignoring the ugly scars on his wrists. He is still warm from the shower he took earlier, and though there is no one around to see them, he can’t help but find the sight of them disturbing. They take his mind back to dark places. Roughly, he secures his sleeves back into place, the hideous marks hidden from view. They may still be there, but once they are gone from sight, he can feel himself relax ever slightly, the phantom feeling of ill-fitting cuffs fading away.

“You don’t have to hide them you know.”

Barry looked up to see Len leaning casually in the doorway. He averts his gaze, cheeks flushing; he had been so careful to keep his scars hidden. He knows they have been seen by a few people, but that doesn’t mean he wants them on display for Len to see. “They’re ugly,” he snapped bitterly.

“No they’re not” The bed dips under Len’s weight, calloused fingers cup his chin, a gentle urge to look up. “Don’t ever think that.”

“You haven’t even seen them” Barry turns away from the touch, folding in on himself

“You can show me,” he said, voice light “if you want too.”

Barry peers up at him through long lashes, debating, wavering. Heart hammering, he slowly offers
his hands for Len to take in a silent answer. He keeps his eyes tightly sealed as Len’s fingers roll up the sleeves to expose the angry, thick red marks. He bites back a sob when fingers run ever so tenderly over the rigid scars. “I told you, they’re ugly” his voice breaks, a single tear falling free.

“They aren’t, Barry” he whispered, fingers still tracing over the marred flesh “they are reminders that you survived and you don’t have to hide that.”

He opened his eyes, blinking back tears “I… just… I look at them and I…” he trails off, emotions choking the words from his mouth.

“I understand” Len carefully secures the sleeves back into place, but he doesn’t let go of Barry’s trembling hands. “I sincerely mean it when I say they are not ugly. Nothing about you is ugly, Barry.”

He sniffles, heart skipping a beat at Len’s words, emotions swirling and raging inside him, unleashing a storm, though it isn’t entirely unpleasant. He let the wave’s crash over him, the roaring wind surge through his mind. His scars were not ugly, they were not gruesome or vile, they meant he survived, they meant he survived. They didn’t have to be hidden. Len didn’t think they were ugly; he touched them, he studied them and saw only Barry, not the tainted, used remains of Zoom.

Slowly, slowly he lifts his gaze, hazel eyes meet icy blue ones; finding devotion and adoration glittering in the endless blue; they see pure and honest love. His heart stuttered in his chest, words, terrifying words rising up his throat, dancing on the tip of his tongue. If he could just open his mouth, find the courage, burn the dark thoughts to ashes then he would be able to say those three little words. He might need more time to be loved, but at this moment he felt ready to love, his earlier words to his father playing over in his mind.

He was not undesirable, Len was not repulsed by the scars, by the skin Zoom had tarnished; he looked at him and saw past the things that were done to him. He saw the survivor; he acknowledged the victim; he accepted the new person growing within and most importantly he loved all three. Because right now, for the first time he could see everything Len felt for him shining clearly in his eyes and the voices of doubt and sabotage had been shut away moments ago, so they were not here to tell him lies now.

He could do it; he could say those little words, and if he didn’t hear them back, then it would be okay because Len had already said them. He said them when said ‘nothing about you is ugly, Barry’ the came out of his mouths when he said ‘you survived and you don’t have to hide that.’ He is ready, God he thinks he is ready, he must be, has to be. He opens his mouth to speak; set the words free, watch them float up in the air and settle over Len.

“I love you” the words leap of his tongue, bursting in the air like fireworks, Len seems taken aback at first, unsure of what to do with Barry’s confession. “I wanted to say it the other night, but… I was afraid. I’m still kinda afraid. I… I’m sorry. I’m an emotional wreck and-”

“-Barry” he interrupted “breathe.”

“Right” he took a deep breath, trying to regain control of pounding heart.

“And I love you too.”

He didn’t really know where to go from here; the words had been spoken, and when Len said them back warmth spread through his chest, his heart skipped a beat and his breath caught in his throat. There was so much more that needed to be said, explored, but he wasn’t ready for the rest yet,
whatever that may be. All he knew for certain was that he loved Len, that he was falling in love with him and in time they’d be more, it was clear, it was a promise written in Len’s eyes, laced within his ‘I love you’.

The confession was enough for now; it’s all Barry’s fragile heart, and weary mind could take. There was nothing else that needed to be said tonight; Len wasn’t expecting a grand gesture or anything more than Barry was willing or able to give. He smiled at Barry; once more rolling up the sleeves of his hoodie, revealing the thick, red scarring; pressing feather light kisses against the marred flesh. It was a silent vow, a confession, he didn’t just love him, but he was in love with him.

The touch made Barry feel dizzy; it was strange to be treated so delicately. Zoom’s touch had always been brutal, wrong, even when he did play at being nice, cleaning his wounds, soothing him in the aftermath of one of his fits of rage or holding him close after he violated him. There was always malicious intent lurking in Zoom’s gaze, always violence lingering in even the softest of touches. The way Len touched him, lips whispering against his skin felt pure. Len finally looked up at Barry, lowering his hands but not letting go, studying him. Barry smiled, bright, full and moved forward to hug him, burying his face into the crook of Len’s neck, breathing in his fresh scent.

“Are you okay, Scarlet?” Len asked, stroking the nape of his neck tenderly.

“Yeah,” he breathed “I’m just thinking.”

“About?”

“About my scars” he sighed, replaying Len’s earlier words, letting them destroy the hatred he felt towards them, allowing them to tear the words from his mind and send them away. “I survived” easing back, Barry met Len’s eyes “‘and I don’t have to hide that.”

“No, Scarlet” Len smiled, cuppings his face softly, stroking his cheek “you don’t ever have to hide that.”

Later that evening when Barry crawled into bed, curled up against Len’s side, he replayed their conversation. ‘I survived,’ he says to himself, to the whispering voices in his mind, ‘I survived and I don’t have to hide that.’ The words repeat in his mind, over and over, following him into slumber. In the morning when he wakes to sunlight filtering in through the blinds, a delicate ray of golden light shining on his wrists, for the first time he doesn’t think about how hideous they are. He doesn’t feel the sharp pinch and tug of mental embedding in his skin. Instead, he feels Len’s feather light touch; he hears ‘nothing about you is ugly, Barry’.

Quietly he climbs out of bed, tip-toeing towards the floor length mirror that sits in the corner of the room. Usually, he did everything to avoid gazing into it. With a deep breath, he looks up, finally seeing his reflection. It’s still a little hard to recognise the person staring back, over the past couple of months he has found many unfamiliar faces looking back at him. The beaten, broken mess of a boy that he first saw in a no name motel, at the edge of some unimportant town, has morphed into someone stronger.

It isn’t the old Barry gazing back at him with bright, hopeful eyes. It isn’t The Flash smirking at him with confidence and courage. There is someone entirely new looking back now. He is still a little broken, a little scared of the world, a little sad, but there is shimmer, a flash of light in eyes that have seen far too much. There is a fire, embers burning bright, sparking to life in them, in his belly, in his heart. There is hope looking back at him through eyes a little less haunted. Letting out a tired sigh, Barry turns away from his reflection, for once not hating the person staring back at him.
Chapter End Notes

So, sorry the chapter is late. I changed my mind about the ending last minute and had to do a re-write. Originally Barry didn't tell Len that he loved him, but I felt since he came so close at the start of the chapter that it would be nice to tie it off with him confessing his feelings. I also feel like this how Len and Barry should begin. I am a little (ok a lot) nervous about this ending, and I do hope it's fitting. Let me know what you think and I look forward to sharing the next chapter with you :)


It’s February, the days are getting warmer, a little longer. It’s been four months, two weeks and one day since Barry came home. He’s been back longer than he was gone, not by much but still, he can’t help thinking about it when he looks at the calendar. It feels like it’s been a lifetime, he has endured so much, too much in the last couple of months, God he’s suffered more than his share in this lifetime. When he counts the days when he realises he has been back for longer than he was gone a strange, cold feeling rushes through him.

Zoom has stolen so much of his life, four months in hell, four months of being beaten and raped and another four given to recovery and he wasn’t even at the end yet. He was better, so much better, the dark days are fewer and far between, but there are still bad days, nightmares, panic attacks. There are small advances, he smiles a little easier, feels a little lighter, and he doesn’t doubt that the better, brighter days are just up ahead. They are coming; the fork in the road will be here soon enough. Sometimes he just wished he could scrub clean the darkness from his mind, erase the memories but they hold steadfast, forever apart of him.

He’s learning to accept that, to embrace the new Barry coming to life inside, the father, the partner, the survivor. He tries, tries, tries to move on with his life, to be a normal guy who does normal things, like hanging out with friends, go to the movies and spend time with his partner. Normalcy is getting easier to hold onto, each day he feels a little further from the broken mess that Zoom created. Even fear running rampant through his veins doesn’t stop him from marching on, working with Len and Sara to regain control of his life.

There has been a lot to focus on over the last six weeks, like Nora, who will be here in just two short months, and Len, who is now something more. They haven’t put a label on it; there wouldn’t really be a fitting one anyway. They just are. They are together. They are something, *something special*. Nothing has really changed that much since the night Barry said ‘I love you’ and Len said it back, voice warm and eyes glistening with unconditional love.

What they have come is just right, there doesn’t need to be anything spectacular happening, they don’t need to go on fancy dates where they have fine wine at expensive restaurants. All Barry needs is Len. All he wants is to go to sleep with him at night and wake up next to him in the morning. That’s not to say they don’t go out, Barry has been pushing himself more, trying hard to get some semblance of a normal life back. In doing so, he made sure to spend more time with Cisco and Caitlin, they were his best friends, and they used to spend all their time together.

He’s made more time for his family, slowly rebuilding their relationship, even if it felt a little strained when Joe learnt that Barry and Len had become more. Joe tried for them, though, he didn’t
like it, but he didn’t force Len out. He took him aside and had a stern conversation with him. Barry had never seen Len look scared until Joe ordered him to sit down at the kitchen table and talk. Barry had been asked to go upstairs, he had paced around his room nervously for the next half hour.

Joe didn’t shoot Len, which was a good start, he did promise that no one would ever find his body if he did hurt Barry, though. Not that he ever would. After that the tension between them eased, Joe made an effort, not just with Len but Sara and Lisa too. His family was growing, becoming whole and new. His daughter was also growing; the pregnancy was getting a little harder as it progressed. There were leg cramps that woke him at all hours of the night, lower back pain that took his breath away and hormones that didn’t mesh well with his PTSD.

There had been some God awful days sprinkled in with the good and okay ones. He still marched on, making it through every fit of rage, breakdown, nightmare and strange food cravings. He keeps going, because he is strong, a survivor, and there was so much to live for. Like the feel of Nora’s kicks, the first cup of tea in the morning, the glittering stars and the feel of Len’s skin against his own, chasing away the memories of Zoom’s touch. He fights each day for the people he loves, for himself, he struggles, falls down and gets back up and as tired as he is, as heavy as his heart feels, he won’t ever give up. There is so much happiness just around the bend.

XxX

“Man, I’d love to be able to use magic like Doctor Strange.”

“I don’t know, I think my speed was pretty impressive.”

Cisco looks over at Barry, smiling slightly “You miss it?”

“Sometimes” Barry sighed, stretching out his legs before they can cramp from lack of use. They’ve been catching up on movies that Barry had missed; it’s odd to think that world kept moving without him in it. Movies were made, people went to work, went on dates. Time kept moving, even though it felt like it had been frozen, held still while Barry suffered through the unimaginable. “I dropped a mug the other day. I tried to catch it, and for a split second I swore it slowed down, but it crashed onto the floor, broke into pieces.”

“Maybe it did?” Cisco suggested, pausing the movie “maybe Nora’s powers can manifest through you? No, that doesn’t sound right… I mean on Charmed Piper could use Wyatt’s powers, so maybe-.”

“I think this is real life and comparing it to a TV show isn’t really relevant.” Barry interrupted with a fond smile.

“Yeah, but have you seen our lives?”

It was meant to be a joke, a silly little nod to all the weird stuff that unfolded around them, but the words tugged at Barry’s heart strings. His life had stopped being normal the day his mother was murdered by a speedster from the future. After that he thought he’d never suffer something so horrible again, surely that’s all life would through his way. The tragedies didn’t end that day, they got worse, so much worse. In the beginning, all the bad things happened around him, the people he loved suffered the most, they were the ones killed or injured.

Then a hole in the multiverse sent him Zoom, and he showed him exactly what it feels like to be the one hurt, the one at the heart of tragedy. So, yes, he had seen his life, it was dark, it was blood stained and haunted. It was not the life he envisioned, it was the one he had, though and he fought
so valiantly for it every damn day.

“Sorry” he apologised “that wasn’t funny.”

“It’s okay, Cisco” Barry reassured, “I’m not going to fall apart if you make bad jokes, I’ve survived worse.”

“Oh, I see, finally admitting I’m not that funny, are we?” he bantered.

“Hey, you said it, man.”

“Oh, if you weren’t heavily pregnant I would totally tackle you.”

Barry laughed, it felt foreign, he didn’t laugh much these days, he missed the feeling of it. “Do you really think Nora could use her speed through me, theoretically?”

“I have no idea” he confessed, “You are the first pregnant speedster I have ever encountered.”

“Right,” he sighed “there probably isn’t a prenatal class for ex-speedsters.”

“I highly doubt it,” Cisco said, “but Caitlin has made you a pretty sweet every day prenatal class.”

“Yeah, she has.” Barry smiled, so very grateful that Caitlin was going to so much trouble for him and Nora. The thought of having to go to a regular class was terrifying, too many questions would be asked, and crowded spaces still made him anxious. What Caitlin had set up at Star Labs was perfect. “I can’t believe I only have two more months to go. It’s surreal.”

“Tell me about it” Cisco replied, “Do you think she’ll have speed as a baby?”

“I hope not.” He answered truthfully, “I think parenting is going to be hard enough without throwing superpowers into the mix.”

“Well you’re not alone, Barry” Cisco vowed, patting him on the shoulder “You’ve always got me and the tall, handsome, mysterious figure that shadows you everywhere.”

“Are we talking about Len?” Barry asked brow quirked.

“No, Santa Claus” he quipped, “of course, Len.”

“Is this your not so subtle way of asking if we’re…” he makes a vague hand gesture. The word dating isn’t really suitable, they hadn’t even been on a date, not that it mattered. It’s not like Barry could handle that right now anyway and they hadn’t actually used the term ‘boyfriends’ yet. “Together?” he settled on.

“Yes, yes it is” he deadpanned.

“I guess we are, it’s just, it’s” he trailed off, there weren’t words to describe what they had, what they were, their love transcended defining, it just was. “He makes me feel happy, which is something I never thought I would be again. He makes me feel safe, and I know it’s really soon, I’m still in the woods, but I feel okay enough in my mind and” he moves his hand to his chest, right over his heart “my heart to make this work. Does that make sense?”

“Yeah, it does” Cisco replied. “We were a little concerned at first but – and I can’t believe I am going to say this – Len has actually turned into a pretty decent guy. Therefore I trust him to not hurt you, but if he does, I will take the cold gun and shove it where the sun doesn’t shine.”
“He won’t hurt me, Cisco,” he proclaimed, unwavering in his trust in Len. “I know we’re just getting to know one and other and I still have a lot of recovering ahead of me, but believe me when I say I am ready for this… this new thing between us.”

“Oh,” he nodded, “but I got your back, alright?”

“You always have” he smiled. The anger he felt towards his team all those months ago had vanished, there is no rage burning inside, there is no blame to be placed on others or himself. He set them free, he set himself free.

“Back to the movie?” he asked, pointing the remote control at the frozen screen.

He hesitated, he’d been trying to find the courage to talk to Cisco about the things he saw when he vibed him, but every time Barry attempted to make the words come out he lost his nerve. They haven’t spoken about it, not since last year when he first returned home. It wasn’t affecting their friendship, they had fallen back into place perfectly, but it still lurks around them, shadowing them. He’ll wait for another time; he doesn’t want to crush the lightness of the night. They’ve been having fun, just like old times, it can wait for another time, another day.

Barry smiled tiredly; Len would be here at ten to bring him home. He looked forward to crawling into bed with him, folding himself in his warmth and falling asleep to the sound of his steady breathing. “Yeah, back to the movie.”

XxX

Len wakes to the sound of a muffled groan; tiredly he opens his eyes to find Barry attempting to stretch the muscle spasms out of his left leg. He’s been suffering from cramps nightly for the past few weeks, it’s become a pattern. Len will wake at around one or four every morning to the sound of Barry letting out frustrated groans; he’ll hear the slight footsteps against the wooden floors as Barry paces the length of the room in hopes of easing the discomfort. It doesn’t really work, in the end, he’ll get back into bed, and Len will massage the ache from his legs. After they crawl back under the covers, limbs entwined and bodies pressed close as they return to slumber.

In the morning he’ll wake to Barry’s sleeping face, serene and untroubled, he’ll brush steady fingers over his jaw, up his soft cheeks, taking in the moment before the day charges in. It’s perfect when it’s just the two of them beneath the covers, hiding from the daylight. In these moments the world stands still for them, just for a heartbeat and Len can thank the universe for Barry, for making sure he survived, for bringing him back to him. Hazel eyes flutter open, and a genuine smile graces Barry’s face. For one precious moment they are just two people in love, the word and all its demons can’t harm them, have never harmed them.

Then it’s gone, floating away like smoke from a fire, and time keeps ticking, they must untangle themselves from their safe cocoon, they must face the day. The days are getting better, Barry is getting better. He’s been spending more time with his friends and family. They’ve ventured from the house on a number of occasions and only a few times have those adventures ended in disaster. It never dissuades Barry; he keeps trudging on, never backing down, not even when the thought of doing something terrifies him.

It makes Len fall even more in love with him. When they first meet he admired his determination, his heroism and even though Zoom tried to destroy him, to tear those parts away, they will still there. Brighter and stronger than ever, it made him so proud, so full of love. Barry had survived hell, he still struggled day to day, but he never gave up, not even when the nightmares or memories pushed him to breaking point. Barry had whispered to him late one night, head pillowed on his chest, right above his heart, that he couldn’t have gotten this far without him.
Len doubted it, Barry would have recovered without his help, but maybe, just maybe he wouldn’t have and that’s a terrifying thought. If he didn’t get on the Wave Rider, if he didn’t befriend Sara, then he wouldn’t be here right now, helping to rebuild Barry. The Time Masters had pulled his strings from the start, sent him Rip, forced him onto the Wave Rider and when Mick died, he wanted to kill them all over again. But if it wasn’t for them and their madness he wouldn’t be here, with the man he loves.

Barry is his silver lining, his chance at a new beginning, a better life. At least something good came from the darkness, even if the darkness was filled with the worst kinds of memories and pain. Their love burst to life in the late of hours of the night, in the depths of winter, it was the constant light shining through, showing them safe passage home. Lighting the path to each other, to this very moment, as un-perfect as it was. They were un-perfect though, they were scarred, and battle hardened, they had seen the ugly, wicked things hiding in the shadows.

They had been hurt, they had been broken, beat down and forced to rebuild more than once. Their jagged edges fit together just right, their pain and past were understood, never judged, they accepted each other wholly. Len had never felt love like this, once he thought love was a weakness, something to be used against him, the only person who was given affection was Lisa, and even that was feeble. Now he showered his sister with the love she deserved, he finally let the ice melt from his heart.

And to think it all started with Barry, who simply said ‘there is good in you,’ and from that day on Len felt a tug, a need to be different, to be the person Barry saw beneath the rubble. It all started that day, the day Barry Allen saved his life. It was unfair that they had to go through so much just to be together, especially Barry, who suffered more than anyone ever should, but even that had a small silver lining. It might seem insane to find something positive in the aftermath of Barry’s capture, most people could never see the one thing that stood out against the darkness.

He’s talking about Nora of course, the sweet, innocent life brought into existence in the cruellest way. It didn’t change the fact that Barry adored her. After his most recent scan, when they were sitting around Lisa’s apartment looking at the ultrasound image, Barry looked from him to Sara, smiling.

“This is going to sound crazy, but Nora is kind of like the one good thing that came from all of this,” he said quietly. “I know how she was conceived was horrible and painful, and nothing is ever going to make what Zoom did to me, okay, but she’s helped save me.” He laughed, a little bitterly “Funny, all Zoom wanted to do is destroy me and even the child he forced me to carry has somehow helped me find part of myself again.”

“It’s not crazy, Barry” Sara reassured, hugging him, she’d been a little clingy since coming back from Star City, not that Barry minded her affectionate touches. “It’s human nature to look for the light in the darkness and Nora is yours, and that is okay. We know it doesn’t make any one thing that Zoom did to you okay, but you are entitled to love your daughter.”

“Sometimes… sometimes it feels like she is ours” when Barry said this he looked directly into Len’s eyes, a ghost of a smile on his lips. Then he looked away, at Sara who smiled and hugged him again, vowing to take care of them both.

Len didn’t get the chance to tell Barry that he felt the same, that at times when he had his head resting on his stomach, listening to Nora’s heartbeat, he felt like she was his. If Barry asked him to be her father, then he’d say yes in a heartbeat. He loved and adored her just as much as Barry did. The dimly lit room comes back into focus; Barry has given up his pacing and is now attempting to rub at his legs, which is both adorable and useless since his stomach prevents him from bending.
“Here, Scarlet.” Len takes his legs, gently massaging out the cramps.

“Thank you” he sighed, eyes fluttering shut as his head falls back against the pillow. “I should be grateful that I’m not getting woken up by nightmares, but this still sucks.”

“It’ll be over soon” he promised “two more months, and we’ll have our baby girl.”

Barry opens his eyes, smiling tenderly “Yeah, we will.”

“Are you still feeling apprehensive about the birth?”

After reading the information, Caitlin had given to them Barry had become quite anxious at the thought of going through labour. The nightmares got increasingly worse around the same time, he’d been plagued by dreams of Zoom taking Nora, of her birth ending in his death. They could only assure him that Zoom was gone, dead, body burnt to ashes, so there wasn’t even a trace of him left on this earth, but in his nightmares, he was very much alive.

“Yes,” he answered honestly, lids fluttering shut again, body relaxing under Len’s soothing touch.

“There are other options,” Len remarked, “A C-section might be less stressful on you emotionally.”

“I know” he sighed “but Cait doesn’t know how to perform one and Star Labs isn’t equipped for surgery and even if it could be it would still be risky, far riskier than a natural birth. And there is no way I could handle going into hospital. Also, there is a chance Nora could have speed, imagine if she came out phasing or with lightning skittering over her skin, I couldn’t risk people knowing.”

“I see your concerns.” He moved back up the bed, lying down next to Barry, who immediately snuggled into his warmth. Len placed his hand over Barry’s stomach, feeling Nora stir within. Every time he felt a kick or a flutter his breath caught in his throat. “I can’t really make it any easier for you, I’m sorry.” He continued, caressing his stomach, Barry placed his hand over his, moving it down, so it rested below his bellybutton, there Len felt a tiny kick. He couldn’t hold back the smile when he said, “I will be by your side the whole time, though. You can hold my hand as tight as you want, just know I won’t leave you.”

“I know” he mumbled, sleeping taking over “I’ll be okay, it’s just nerves. I’m in good hands.”

“Yes you are” he pressed a feather-light kiss to his nose.

“I meant Caitlin” he teased, a tired little grin gracing his face.

Len laughed, savouring the light-hearted bantered, it was nice to see the humour returning to Barry. “That’s what I meant.”

It was Barry’s turn to laugh, a small, bright sound that made Len’s heart swell with joy. Tired eyes blinked open, sparkling in the amber glow “I love you.”

“I love you too” another kiss to the nose, “very” a kiss on each cheek “very” one the middle of forehead “much.”

Barry sighed contently, sleep taking over. Len smiled, watching him slumber, taking in each breath, each little movement, basking in the serenity of the moment until dawn came and with it the rest of the roaring world.

XxX
If Felicity sends any more baby clothes, then Barry’s drawers aren’t going to be able to close. It’s not that he doesn’t appreciate it because he does, it’s not like he’s able to go out shopping, the mall is too loud, too bright and the mere thought makes him want to crawl under the covers. So it’s really sweet that Felicity, Iris and Caitlin keep buying him baby things, stuff that he really needs as well, it’s just he’s already had to clear out three drawers. Nora is going to be spoiled, no, she is spoiled, and she isn’t even born yet.

He is sitting on the floor, tucking neatly folded onesies into an already overstuffed space. There are a few other things to be put away, such as the new toys, the many boxes of diapers and a few other odds and ends, not to mention the pram still needs to be put together. Wally had offered to do that, he isn’t sure why, when Barry looked at the instructions he was baffled as to how it went together, so he doesn’t know why Wally volunteered for it.

Not that Barry was complaining; he would be perfectly happy to let someone else take care of it. It was sweet of Wally to offer, he seemed a little uncertain in where he fit in at times, they’d still been working out the kinks when Barry was taken. He shakes the thought away, there is no point chasing the rabbit down memory lane, he knows where it will lead him, and he has wasted enough time thinking about the past. It was time to move on, to un-attach himself from the strings that kept trying to tether him to the dark.

Focusing on the arrival of his daughter helped, instead of losing his mind to spiralling thoughts he would think of her, allowing the thought of holding her, of seeing her for the first time to ground him. There were many things to distract himself with, plenty of thoughts to wash away the memories. There were plenty of people too, lots of smiling faces, strong hands, and kind hearts there to protect him from the demons within, to steer him out of the panic.

There were many people there to catch him when he fell, when he stumbled. There was always someone to chase away the nightmares, wipe away the tears and soothe the anxiety. Months of solitude had taught him to rely on himself, to become used to the cold, bitter loneliness. Having a houseful of people and brimming with bustling noise felt foreign, it made him want to crawl under the bed and hide. Now it was easier, he was getting used to having people around him, to a bustling, noisy house.

It was only going to get crazier once Nora was born, everyone had volunteered to help out, pitch in, babysit, it was overwhelming. They would all be there for him, to help him in any way they could, it made Barry’s heart swell with joy. His friends and family loved and accepted Nora; they loved and accepted the new person he was becoming. Henry hadn’t come around yet, he hadn’t heard from him since the other month, his time was running out. He didn’t want to waste his time thinking about him either; especially since he could hear Iris letting Len in the front door.

His heart skipped a beat, Len had spent last night at Lisa’s, at Barry’s request. He felt awful that he was waking Len every night, they were both so tired, and at least one of them deserved a good night’s rest. A reluctant Len left yesterday afternoon, Sara taking his place instead. She was currently in the kitchen with Iris, they were baking muffins or something sweet, he wasn’t quite sure, either way, he’d find out when later.

Iris was constantly bringing him food, which was really sweet but she might be taking the eating for two thing a little far. He can talk to her about that another time, or maybe he won’t, and he’ll just keep giving the extra muffins she brings him to the birds. Right now, Len is walking into his room, and that takes all thoughts from his mind.

“Hey,” Barry greets him, attempting to get up but he can’t, this isn’t the first time this has happened. “How’d you sleep?”
“Well enough,” he smirked, “bed seemed a bit empty, though.”

“I hear they make body pillows for that” he quipped, still trying to get his feet under him but his pregnant stomach and off balance made it difficult.

“I already have one” he moved closer, offering Barry his hand to take “need a little help?”

“Yeah, thanks” he took Len’s hands, strong and reassuring, and let him pull him to his feet.

“Anytime.”

There were so close, if he leant forward, closed the space between them then he’d be able to taste Len’s lips, he could finally know what his kiss would feel like. The thought, the desire, floats up out of nowhere; it floats up from a time long ago, before the darkness, when he longed to learn what Len’s kisses would be like. Back then it would have been rough, cold, maybe a little aggressive; now, now it would be gentle, soft, sweet. It wouldn’t be a curious, lust-fuelled kiss, an impulse desire to know what breaking the rules felt like.

It would be… well, he might as well close his eyes, tilt his head forward and find out. He leans in, eyes fluttering closed, heart a hummingbird in his throat, he holds his breath, afraid, excited, ready. It feels like an eternity until they meet, time slowing down, world fading away. It’s just them, a gentle press of lips, hesitant at first, then turning into something bold. They kiss for seconds, years, aeons, exploring and learning. When the kiss, so tender, so very delicate ends, they break apart, breathing in deep lungfuls of air.

Barry doesn’t want the moment to end, once he opens his eyes time will unfreeze, the world will sweep back in, it will be worth it because he will get to star into Len’s dazzling eyes. When eyes blink open, he finds piercing blue ones glittering with love, shining with happiness. He wants to kiss him again, to taste him once more; to feel the softness of his lips, the gentle sweep of Len’s tongue chasing away the memory of Zoom’s sharp, bitter kisses. The memory sparks something dark; there must be a flash of it in his eyes because Len is cupping his face in his hands, eyes clouding in concern.

“I’m fine” he reassured “that… that was… wow."

Len grinned, sweeping his thumb over Barry’s moist lips “I’ve wanted to do that for a while now, I just wanted you to be ready first.”

He smiled, reaching his hands up to rest over the ones Len held against his cheeks. “Well it was a really good kiss; I think I could go for another.”

“Are you sure?”

Len’s hesitation only made Barry love him all the more; even now he was still making sure he was okay, that he felt safe and secure with what they were doing. “I am sure.” Once again he moved forwards, capturing his lips in an encouraging kiss. Len let him take the lead when Barry deepened the kiss he pulled him closer, when Barry draped his arms around his neck and parted his lips Len swept his tongue over his bottom lip and tangled his fingers in Barry’s hair.

When the kisses ended, they both panted heavily, Barry trembled slightly, feeling a rush of emotions surge through his body. Sensing it, Len steered him towards the bed, sitting him down and wrapping him in his arms, waiting patiently for him to regain composure.

“I’m all right,” he said, smiling through the tears, “that was just one hell of a kiss.”
“You sure you’re alright, Barry?” Len pressed, not wanting to be the cause of his distress.

“Yes, Len, I am okay” his smile brightened “I really am. I’m just feeling a lot. Good things, though and I don’t think my mind remembers that it’s supposed to feel good things. Like happiness” he takes Len’s hand “and love.”

“Well you better get used to it” he laces their fingers together, “because I thoroughly enjoy kissing you.”

“And I thoroughly enjoy you kissing me.”

This time he allowed Len to make the move, giving him the chance to take the lead, he trusted him enough to give him control.

“You are so very unexpected Barry Allen” he whispered against his lips “but I am glad you came speeding into my life. You’ve made me a better man, you light me up. You light up my whole world.”

Barry couldn’t hold the back the tears; it had been an age since he wept with joy. “You helped save me, Len; you help me fight the darkness every day. I never thought I’d find my way back to the light, but you are always there, guiding my way.”

Len kissed him, a silent vow to always be there, in every hour, on every good, bad, and terrible day. Barry dropped his head to Len’s shoulder, feeling the emotional storm drain the energy from his body, his racing mind. It was all he could give right now, three kisses, three declarations of love. Later, one day, maybe months or a year from now they would be able to explore each other further, learn the expensive of each other’s skin, find the secret scars and reveal their tales.

One day, when Barry is healed and could associate sex with pleasure and love, they’d tangle themselves together. Len would worship Barry, reminding him of what love is supposed to feel like. Barry would weep in joy, letting Len chase away the phantom hands, erase the memory of Zoom’s wicked touch against his skin. That day was far off, until then, feather light kisses, gentle exploring touches and tender embraces would get them through.

XxX

It’s Saturday afternoon, it’s been one week and three days since he first kissed Len. There have been plenty more since, tender, sweet kisses stolen in-between moments. Life felt almost normal again, mundane, even the city had been free of Meta-Human attacks. Barry’s life had been chaotic for so long now, he’d spent months fearing he’d never get the chance to feel the sun on his skin, the taste of freedom, the joy of happiness. Things were changing, and some things were falling back into place, it was a welcome reprieve to the constant uphill battle Barry had been fighting so long now. If this was what the future would be like than Barry could safely say he’d be happy.

He had Len, the unexpected man who saved him, who helped him heal and who he fell in love with. He had Sara, the unlikely friend who had also saved him, who helped him to heal, to find a way out of the dark. Soon he would have his daughter; the unforeseen child who he loved more than he ever thought was possible. Time was healing him, Len and Sara’s guidance, acceptance and love was pushing him forwards. He was on the cusp of the better days. A whole new world was unfolding around him, a life he thought he was never going to live was coming into motion and it may have been forged in the darkest hours, by the curliest of hands, but Barry was finally starting to love life again.

Warm sun filters in through the spindly, bare, branches of an old maple tree, bathing the three
people laying lazily beneath it in a golden glow. They’ve been sitting here for a while now, enjoying the soft breeze whispering against their skin, basking in the picture perfect afternoon. It had been awhile since just the three of them had spent quality time together. Sara suggested that morning they go out for a picnic, a few hours later and an overstuffed basket later and they head to a quiet park on the outskirts of the city.

When they had managed to find some time together over the past few weeks, it had been either to prepare for Nora’s birth or to have a home therapy session. They still got together every Wednesday to talk about how he was coping, how he was dealing with Nora’s birth getting closer. These sessions now took place at Lisa’s, in her lavishly decorated living room, they would all sit down on the plush white couches and Barry would talk about a new nightmare or some new fear that had risen from the depths of his mind.

It was so much easier to open up now, he’d already revealed every horrible, torturous thing done to him, there had been no stone left unturned, no box left unopened. Except for one, the last hidden secret, the one thing he still felt compelled to keep buried. It was still difficult for him to tell them that Zoom had been in love with him, just thinking the words made him feel ill, left a sour taste in his mouth. It had taken far too long to untangle himself from Zoom’s lies, to find the part of himself that knew he deserved better than to be loved by a monster. That the monsters love was not that at all, it was obsession, it was violent and dark.

He knew better now, he was loved by better now. So he finally told them. Under swaying branches and a setting sun, he admitted his last secret; feeling the weight of it lift from his chest, blow away on the gentle breeze. He felt a little awful for disturbing the peace, for breaking their perfect moment of normalcy but their lives weren’t normal, even on the brightest, happiest days they’d still have darkness swirling within them. That didn’t mean they couldn’t enjoy the bright, shimmering sunsets, though, the moments of joy, it merely meant they’d cherish them all the more because they never knew when the next storm would hit.

Len and Sara didn’t judge him; they didn’t blame him for how Zoom felt, for the actions he took. Deep down he knew they wouldn’t, but there were still the voices of doubts, the whispering taunts. They were hard to shake off; it was still a work in progress. He was still a work in progress. After all was said and done they both embraced him, holding him close, always holding him close, and Barry knew they’d never let go. He’d known it for a while, but this last reveal cemented it in place. Their lives were forever entangled, forever bound and as scary and uncertain as the future was he knew he’d, they’d be fine. They’d make it through anything. They were a team, a little broke and a little bloodstained, but a team nonetheless.

XxX

Len has decided that there is no greater treasure in the world than the one he currently holds in his arms. They’ve been sitting under the stars for the past half hour; their picnic had extended into the early hours of the evening. Together they watched glittering stars twinkle to life, letting the beauty of the night distract them from the world around them. Len’s trying to pay attention to the sky, Barry is explaining the multiverse to Sara, and Len keeps thinking back to when Barry told them that Zoom had been in love with him.

He and Sara had talked about this before, late at night while Barry slept upstairs and they stayed up waiting for the harrowing screams to shatter the silent night, preparing to calm Barry down, to comfort him. Sara suggested it on a bitterly cold night, they were both huddled before the roaring fire, drinking hot coffee to strive of the fatigue. It had been a terrible day, Barry had barely ventured from his room, and when Len caught sight of the anguish in his eyes, his heart broke. Days like these had been common; it never made them any easier to get through, though.
“I have this terrible theory” Sara whispered like she was afraid her voice would float up and wake Barry “about Zoom.”

“And what is that?” he asked, anger slipping into his words, just hearing that monsters name made him bristle with rage.

“The things he did to Barry… it wasn’t just pure torture… especially the forced pregnancy” she paused, choosing her next words carefully. “When I was held captive… I knew that in the end, HE would kill me; it was all about inflicting pain but what Zoom did…. It was possession. It was an obsession.”

Her words rolled over Len like acid, skin crawling at the mere thought of Zoom doing those horrid things for a reason, with purpose, it seemed worse than pure madness. It made a twisted kind of sense, Zoom’s unique brand of torture while brutal had always been careful. Not to mention Barry had told them, voice full of venom and disgust, that Zoom used to tend to his wounds, making sure he wouldn’t get an infection, making sure he didn’t die. And it wasn’t just so he could prolong the suffering it was because…

“He was in love with Barry” The words are bitter, sharp things in his mouth, making his stomach churn.

They talked about this theory a handful of times after that night. Tonight Barry’s reveal proved that they had been right. It wasn’t a nice to hear, but they had expected it, they had dealt with their emotional on those cold winter nights. When Barry told them earlier, voice trembling, eyes gleaming with the painful memories, they listened to every word, offering comfort and encouragement when they saw he needed it. Afterwards, Sara told Barry it was something they had discussed, letting him know they were waiting, as always, for him to be ready to tell them.

It was all said and done. Yet Len keeps thinking about how Zoom claimed to love Barry. It reminded him a little of his father, parading around like he cared then down went the beers and the cheap whisky or bourbon, and there was no more pretending. Monsters often dress up in sheep’s clothing, then the lights go out, the mask comes off, and everyone can see the evil within. It was easy to play dress up like Zoom did like his father did, it was easy to fool the rest of the world, to fool everyone with the fake smiles and hollow laughs.

Len wasn’t going to be like his father, he’d been close, standing on the edge and ready to tip over when a scarlet speedster saved his life. Tonight he was holding that man in his arms, lying beneath the stars and listening to him talk about trivial little things with his new best friend. He’d be a better man for them, he’d work every damn day to be worthy of their love, their acceptance. It’s getting late, getting too cold, they untangle themselves and start heading back towards the car, Len lagging behind, still lost in thought.

“Are you okay?” Barry asked, walking back towards him. “You’ve been quiet for a while now. Is it about what I said… about Zoom?”

Len came to a stop, Barry halted before him. Len couldn’t make out his expression in the dim lighting. “No, it’s not. I’m just thinking… about whether I’m worthy of you.”

Barry closed the distance between them, “Leonard Snart, you barely knew me and yet you rushed into danger to save me. You killed Zoom. You took me to the middle of nowhere and stayed there with me for months. You were there every time I had a nightmare or a panic attack or just a shitty day.” He places a hand against his stubbled cheek; Len can’t help but lean into the touch. “You didn’t have to do any of those things, but you did them anyway because you are a good person.” He leant forward, pressing their lips to together in a whisper of a kiss. “You saved me, Len, you
saved me, and I love you, and you are worthy of my love, and I am worthy of yours.”

Len couldn’t stop the tears, the swell of emotion in his chest. God, he was so lucky, he could have lost Barry to Zoom, to another word, but here they were, under the glittering stars, alive and so irrevocably in love. It was absurd that Barry didn’t know if he deserved his love. He deserved all the happiness, the love and the affection in the world. He deserved everything and Len was going to spend the rest of his life showing Barry that he was cherished, adored, worthy.

Barry sweeps away the tears with a soft stroke of a thumb, leaning in to kiss him once more. He always kisses Barry slowly, tenderly, cradling his face between him palms or wrapping one strong hand around the nape of his neck and resting the other over his heart. He is so careful, so mindful of where he places his hands, resisting the urge to let them wonder, explore the body he so wishes to worship. One day he’ll kiss every scar, learn every inch of skin, count the moles and make constellations out of them.

For the time being, he is cautious with his touches, the depth of the kisses, giving Barry complete control of every little move. He’s never surrendered to someone like this before, never given the reins to someone else, always too afraid to give away that much power. His trust for Barry runs deep, and that trust is mirrored in the way Barry kisses him, leans into him without hesitation or fear. It won’t stop him from being careful, if his hands stray if he kisses a little too hard, he could set off a trigger.

Their kisses are still damn amazing, though. The world fades away, the colours and the sounds vanishing; it’s just the two of them, lost in the moment, lost to each other. Barry is everything he never expected, their love is something he never thought he’d find. It was wondrous, magnificent, real.

“I could kiss you all night, Barry Allen” Len confessed, warm breath ghosting across his lips “but it’s getting late and chilly, so I should probably get you back home.”

Barry nodded, smiling in the dark. “Will you stay tonight?”

“Always” Len mirrored the smile, hoping it was visible in the twilight “always.”

Chapter End Notes

When I first heard this song a few months ago, I knew right away that I wanted to use it for the chapter where Len and Barry first kiss. It fits them so well, especially in the context of this story, I hope you all enjoyed reading the kiss as much as I did writing it. I am also heading towards the last part of the story so if I have left something unaddressed or if there is a cute little scene or something you’d like to see let me know :) I’d be happy to add in some extra things before we reach the end.
Walk Through The Fire

I try to understand
How we're here again
(In the middle of the storm)
(In the middle of the storm)
There's no way to go, no way to go
But straight through the smoke, straight through the smoke
And the fight is all we know
The fight is all we know

Zayde Wolf FT Ruelle – Walk Through the Fire

Don’t panic!

It’s his first thought when he hears footsteps in the darkness, body tensing, fear sparking to life. His body reacts on its own accord; it hears footsteps and the alarm bells sound, feeble adrenaline pulsating beneath the fear. The footsteps get closer, don’t panic, unwanted hands are touching him, fingers scrapping over already bruised flesh and crimson stained skin. He knows how this song and dance goes; he has been an unwilling performer for quite some time now.

He mustn’t panic, don’t fight, just take it. He must get to his knees, roll over, spread his legs, obey, obey, obey or pay the price. Obey, and he might get out of this alive. It hurts, it always fucking hurts regardless of whether he resists or not. It could be worse, though, there could be hands pinning him to the mattress, one wrapping around his throat with just the right amount of pressure to choke the air from his lungs. Resistance meant punishment and punishment meant he hurt for days, body left bloody bruised, broken and chained in the dark.

It’s easier like this. Don’t panic. Stay still, and it will be over soon. It’s just another bad dream.

“Get away from him, you sick bastard!”

Panic! Move, fight, he has to do something. The voice calling out in the dark belongs to Len, he turns his head away from Zoom, sharp teeth drag painfully across the sensitive skin of his neck. With all his might he pushes Zoom, rolls out from under him and runs. He can’t see Len, it’s too dark. He heard him, though, he is here. His body moves forward on its own accord, the darkness shatters around him, and there is Len, locked in the glass cage that used to be Killer Frost’s prison.

All he can see is Len’s panicked face. He has to get him out; he has to get them both out. There is no escape, not from this. He tried, he tipped over the edge, and even that didn’t set him free. They will die here. He’s being pulled away, dragged to the ground; it’s cold and damp beneath his naked flesh. Len screams, Barry can’t meet his eyes, he’s sorry, God he is so, so sorry. He should have fallen to the bottom of the cliffs, should have found a sharp, glistening piece of glass and ended it all.

It’s too late now. Zoom is behind him, inside him and Len is screaming, pounding on the glass so fiercely that his skin splits; crimson smearing the grimy surface. It’s a lifetime than a thousand more before the abuse ends, the air smells of blood, fear and sex. Barry finds a small, glimmer of courage and looks up to meet Len’s broken gaze. He holds it’s for a second, a heartbeat; then Zoom is tearing Len’s heart from his chest. The scream that tears from Barry’s aching throat is animal, a banshee’s wail.
When there is nothing left inside, he collapses to the floor, falling down, down, down into the darkness.

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“Barry, hey man, calm down.”

It’s light when he opens his eyes, the room lit with the eerie glow of the TV. This isn’t the asylum. Zoom isn’t here. Len isn’t lying dead in a glass coffin. He’s at Cisco’s, they were watching a movie, it was just a nightmare, another twisted, fucked up play conjured from the darkest depths of his mind. Safe, he is safe. Len is safe, alive. Len didn’t witness Zoom raping him, he wasn’t murdered, he was fine, alive. These nightmares are pushing him to the edge. He’d been doing well then this new, distorted, twisted, disturbing nightmare made an appearance.

It started two weeks ago, others followed, all just as unsettling. Sometimes it was Len and Sara in the cage, watching in horror as Zoom raped him, pounding, pounding, pounding against the glass until all Barry could see was red. In the end, they both lie heartless on the concert floor, empty eyes staring up at nothing. In other’s he was alone, surrounded by darkness, the drip, drip, drip of a broken pipe torturing him or they’d be screams ricocheting off walls, reverberating in his head like an earthquake.

He was in labour, forced to give birth in the haunted, bloodstained asylum. He always woke before Nora was born; startlingly awake with a scream dangling on the tip of his tongue. Worried eyes met his gaze in the dim glow, comforting words and soothing touches lulling him back to sleep. Things had been good, so good, then there was the fall, the slide back into the darkest hours and all the shiny, happiness wafted away like clouds blowing away to bring somewhere else rain. Happiness had been in his grasp, he held it in his hands, but like grains of sand, it slipped through his fingers.

In five weeks Nora will be born, five weeks is all he will allow himself. He can be sullen, withdrawn for now, but it has to change, he’s done it before, over and over so he can do it again. Once more he has to walk through the fire. He should talk to Len or Sara about his new nightmares, he’s told them everything, they know the origin of every scar, the sordid details of every fucked up thing done to him and yet he cannot speak of this. How could he look at them in the eyes and tell them how many times he’s seen them die? Killed because he is unable to save them?

How can he look at Len and tell him that he is helpless to stop Zoom from raping him? He has to watch, scream and strike the glass until his hands are bloody and raw, only it’s never enough, and in the end, he dies, and that was the last thing he ever saw. Barry knows it’s not real, it’s just a nightmare, but God it feels true, even now he can still hear Len screaming. The memory makes him feel ill, nausea rising up from the bottom of his stomach to the top of his throat. He swallows it down, breathe, breathe, breathe. Don’t panic.

“Barr, are you okay,” Cisco said, waving a hand in front of his face “you don’t look too good. Should I call Len or Caitlin?”

“No I’m fine” he shrugged off the concern, rubbing the fog and images from tired eyes. “Sorry, I… I haven’t been too good lately.”

“How do you want to talk about?”

Barry looks over at Cisco, the friend who had seen Zoom rape him, torture him. They need to speak about that, it’s a heavy, dense weight hanging between them, even if they aren’t willing to
acknowledge it. He has relied on Len and Sara, told them every tale, every nightmare, so if this one
time he can’t tell them he can always tell another. It might be Len and Sara in his dreams, trapped
behind a wall of unbreakable glass and unable to help him but in reality, it had been Cisco. His best
friend had to witness the depravity, the torture, and go on knowing he couldn’t do anything to stop
it.

“I’ve been having these nightmares… I mean, I’ve had lots of nightmares, but these…” he pauses,
worrying his bottom lip between his teeth as he tries to find the courage to continue. “I am in the
asylum and Len, and sometimes Sara are there, they trapped in a glass cage… and I’m” he sucks in
a deep breath, feeling his stomach hurt from nervous and heart thunder. “Zoom is raping me, and
they can’t do anything. They keep screaming and trying to force their way out. There is no use,
though. When Zoom… finishes with me he kills them.”

The tears come, stomach twisting uncomfortable as nausea rushes through him in waves. “I can’t
even bring myself to tell them about it, I don’t know why. I’ve told them everything else” he
rambles, words broken by sobs. “I’m sorry, I was going so well, and then these nightmares started,
and I guess… I just started unravelling again.”

“Listen to me, Barry” Cisco said firmly, taking one of Barry’s trembling hands into his own. “Len
is alive, Sara is alive, and you are safe. You are home. It’s just a nightmare; you’re not unravelling,
ookay? You are going to be fine. And you want to know how I know that? Because I’ve seen how
far you’ve come, seen how strong you are, how brave. In a few days’ time, I guarantee that you
will feel better. You have to keep talking about it and if this one nightmare is too hard to tell Len
and Sara then tell me, tell Joe or Iris or Caitlin. We are your friends, and you can tell us anything.”

Barry nodded, blinking back tears. “You’re right, I’m sorry. I know I’ll be okay, sometimes I just
need a little push in that direction and maybe a shoulder to cry on.” He offered him a brittle smile,
letting Cisco’s words settle over him, wash through him. Len was alive, Sara was alive, and Zoom
was gone, unable to harm them or Nora. He was free, which even after all this time was hard to
grasp. Swallowing down his grief, he searched his splintered mind for another spark of courage. It
wasn’t the ideal time, then again there was no perfect time to have this conversation, it just had to
be done. Regardless of nightmares, happy, fun filled moments or sad, pitiful ones.

“I haven’t asked how you are,” he said, words heavy and strange in his mouth. “We never really
talked about the things you saw… saw Zoom do to me.”

Cisco looked away, eyes clouding with distress. “We don’t have to talk about this now.”

“We need to” he insisted. “I have been putting it off long enough, and it’s not fair that you’ve given
me your unwavering support, and I haven’t done the same for you. Cisco, you are my best friend
and the fact that I was raped and hurt doesn’t change anything. I am still here for you to talk to.”

“It seems so insignificant compared to what you went through” he confessed, still looking away.

“It’s not” he reassured, “have you told anyone about what you saw?”

“No” he looked back now “I didn’t… it wasn’t my place. I invaded the darkest moments of your
life; I didn’t feel like I had the rights to share them with anyone else. I felt bad enough that I saw
them and I kept coming back. I hated the thought of you suffering alone and even though I couldn’t
do anything about it, I still felt like me being there was somehow a comfort to you.” He folds in
himself, shame darkening his features. “Maybe I was punishing myself because I couldn’t get to
you.”

Barry mulled over Cisco’s words, turning them over and over in his mind. He understood where he
was coming from; he stayed in the dark with Barry. He had witnessed horrors, seen Barry break, bend, give up, and at first, it enraged him. He once thought that Cisco couldn’t possibly love him after the things he saw after he watched The Flash, the hero’s unbecoming. He still did, though, he loved him despite seeing him break, shatter to pieces under the fists, knives and wicked lies of a monster.

He was still here even though he watched Barry become a puppet, dancing with every cruel pluck of his strings. Cisco watched his friend fall apart, and it was only now that Barry realised the hatred he thought he saw a flicker of wasn’t directed at him. Cisco was angry with himself, for invading, for not being able to do a God damn thing. Like Len and Sara, he had been left pounding on the glass, screaming, begging, pleading for Zoom to stop, desperate to save him but ultimately unable too.

If he stripped back the nightmare, then he’d find Cisco at the heart of it, pounding, with bloody fists, at an invisible, unbreakable wall. For months Cisco had remained silent, suffering, unwilling to share Barry’s secrets. Tonight, no matter that Barry’s mind still felt frazzled from the nightmare, they would talk about it. Cisco could finally set free the harrowing tales, and for once Barry would be the listener, the comforter, the friend drying the tears and offering reassuring words. Perhaps then, when dawn broke, they would both feel a little lighter, a little closer to a better day.

XxX

It’s a busy day in the city, there is some special black-tie event happening tonight at some fancy hotel, some poor idiot thought it would be a good idea to have an elaborate fundraiser in a city that is known for Meta-Humans and some of the worst thieves. It’s an invitation for disaster. Central city police may have been able to wrangle some of the less powerful Meta’s, but a lavish event filled with the cities wealthiest would be the ideal place to attack. A few million dollars’ worth of antiquities, vintage wines and jewellery were up for auction, it would be worth the risk to steal; especially now there is no Flash to protect them and the innocent bystanders.

It’s safe to say that Len has a had a bad feeling in his gut ever since he saw the fliers at Jitters and to be honest, a part of him would very much like to steal a few of those valuable items. There was always a thrill in stealing; he enjoyed it more than the actual payoff. He’d found that same kind of thrill when he’d been on the Wave Rider, racing through time, saving people, the hero thing was pretty addictive. Not that he considered himself a hero, he hadn’t done enough good deeds to earn himself that title and truth be told he probably never would. He’d done far too many bad things, he doubted he’d ever be worthy of being crowned a saviour.

At the end of the day, he didn’t need some fancy title or a city cheering his name; because all the mattered was that he had helped save Barry. Rip had been right; it was the most important mission of his life. Perhaps saving this one life, this one beautiful, strong life would be enough to wipe his slate clean. Or at least be a start. Regardless of whether or not he was worthy of being a hero, his instincts were telling him something bad was going to unfold, and if he could stop it, then he would do his damn best.

For now, he’ll wait, keep his eyes open and listen carefully; all it takes is one whisper to uncover a secret. Though he doubted there was a crazed Meta-Human or cunning thief sitting in his midst, Jitter’s was mostly frequented by hipsters, young mums and workers on their lunch breaks. The most dangerous people here would be himself and Sara, who was currently ordering them coffee and dropping off her resume. Len didn’t think she last long in this job, one complaint and she’d file over the counter and threaten to scold the poor fool with coffee.

It also depended on how much she wanted to apply to art school; a badly burnt hipster wouldn’t
look good on her application. He’d been rather surprised when Sara announced a few weekends ago that she wanted to follow her old passion and attend art school. The girl before the Gambit, the girl before the assault and the league wanted to travel the world, painting its many beauties. She wanted to study at the best schools, learning all the tricks of the trade. Those dreams were swept away in the North Atlantic Sea, her inner artist ripped apart by a cruel world.

He hopes she can find that part of herself again, the free-spirited girl who dreamt of painting beautiful masterpieces. Len doesn’t remember what he used to dream about us a child. Did he want to be a doctor, or a musician or perhaps an engineer? There is no memory of these things, all he was ever taught was to be a thief, a liar, a cold-hearted killer. That person still lived inside him, he doesn’t think he’ll ever truly shake off those parts of himself, they are too deeply embedded. He will no longer be those things, though, he’ll be better, he’ll find new hobbies, new things to seek.

He didn’t need anything more than he had right now, even if right now was starting to get a little rough again. The late stage of pregnancy was tiring and painful on Barry. The nightmares had resurfaced in the last week, after nearly a month of absence. With only five weeks to go before Nora was born it was no wonder that Barry’s body and mind were under a lot of stress. Len wished he’d talk about the new nightmares, in the past he would always reveal them, but lately, he has stayed silent. Barry’s mind had conjured up some new terrifying dream to plague his sleep; Len only hoped that in time he’d confide in them before the stress could do serious harm.

Caitlin had made it very clear that Barry had to take it easy; these last few weeks were often the hardest on the body. They’d been keeping him company at home, spending their time finalising things for Nora’s arrival and staying away from any situations that could cause panic attacks. Things had been going smoothly until the new nightmares; it’s why the uneasy feeling in the pit of his stomach made Len feel so apprehensive. There was a shift in the air, the scent of trouble brewing, wafting towards him from the neatly stacked fliers.

He was still a thief at heart; an event like tonight was an unmissable opportunity. It’s a good thing he played for the other team now or else might have crashed the party, but he’d turned over a new leaf, so no matter how exciting it would be he’d hold back. Besides his instincts were never wrong and by the end of the night he might be chasing after some eager thief or Meta-Human, it’d be just as fun. It had been far too long since he’d blown off some steam and Sara wouldn’t be opposed to joining him.

Unfortunately this feeling he got usually meant something terrible was going to happen. He’d ignored it in the past, many times, and every time someone would get hurt, killed or end up in jail. Most of the scars he’d collected had been from ignoring his instincts. Mick had gotten badly burnt because he was an idiot and didn’t heed the little voice in his head, the one shouting at him to not go through with it. After that, he always listened to the warning bells ringing.

“That went better than I thought it would” Sara pulled up a seat across from him, placing two red mugs onto the table. “It turns out that I still have people skills. Okay, I flirted, but I think I’ve got the job.”

“When in doubt bat those pretty lashes” Len grinned, trying to shake off the eerier feeling settling around him like a heavy mist “I will be placing bets on how long you last just so you know.”

“Thanks, Leonard, you have so much faith in me” she retorted, dumping three packets of sugar into her espresso. “Oh, they don’t serve the Flash anymore, so I just got you a double shot.”

Len frowned, hadn’t they made that drink in his honour? Did his absence mean he was no longer worthy of their admiration? The city hadn’t seen The Flash since Zoom kidnapped Barry nearly eight months ago, had they given up, lost hope in the hero who saved them over and over? What
did people think happened to him? Did they believe that he just left them, abandoned them to the Meta-Humans, left them alone to fend for themselves? They had moved on, stopped believing in heroes, they’d turned their backs on The Flash’s memory.

How dare they be so petty. If only they knew the truth, knew that their hero had been suffering the worst kind of torture for months, he’d been alone in the dark, falling apart while they removed his memory from their lives. Barry deserved better than to be swept under the rug, to be forgotten, he had done so much for this city, and this was their thank you? He’s so irritated that he can’t even bring himself to drink the coffee, he hopes to God Barry doesn’t learn about this, it would break his fragile heart.

“I guess they gave up on him” Len said bitterly “typical.”

“People tend to lose hope quickly” Sara sighed “we shouldn’t tell Barr, he doesn’t need to know about this right now.”

“Agreed.”

“If you’re thinking of punching someone then keep it together,” she warned, sensing the raging storm within “Barry needs you.”

Len expelled the rage from his lungs, uncurling his fists and shrugging off the stiffness to his shoulders “I could still write a nasty letter of complaint, though.”

“Yes, you could” she smiled over the rim of her mug. “Have I told you how happy Lis and I are for you two?”

“Don’t get all sappy now,” he said, lips curling into a teasing smirk “you’ll make me misty eyed.”

“You are the worst,” she remarked, “I don’t know we put up with you.”

“Oh, I’d say it has something to do with my charm and dashing good looks.”

“Unbelievable” she rolled her eyes “I was trying to say something nice.”

“Thank you,” He said sincerely.

“That better” she smiled, raising her mug in toast to their newfound happiness, “Cheers to a happy future.”

Before Len could do the same his cell phone burst to life, buzzing loudly. Seeing the call was from Iris made his stomach summersault, he knew he should never ignore his instincts. He was already standing before she even spoke, voice shaky, words frantic. He couldn’t understand her, there was something about Henry returning, an argument, then Barry had fainted, and they were now on their way to Star Labs. That’s all he needed to know, he didn’t wait another second, he was heading towards the door as fast he could, heart in his throat, hands trembling, gut twisting.

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Len rushes into Star Labs, heart pounding in his chest and fear twisting in his gut. The elevator ride has never taken so long, it’s like time is purposely slowing down, teasing him, mocking him for thinking he deserved to be happy. Sara is the voice of reason at his side, telling him to breathe, Barry will be fine and so will Nora. The doors open and off he goes, sprinting towards the console room, Sara matching his pace. When the reach it Len finds Joe and Henry having a heated argument, Cisco is watching them from behind the desk, turning to Len and Sara as soon they
enter, eyes wide and pleading.

Caitlin appears from the medical bay, walks up to Henry and Joe and tells them in an icy cold tone that could rival his own to stop it, or she’d physically remove them from the building. They go silent, stunned, Caitlin gives them a pointed look then steps around them heading, moving their way. She beacons them forwards, wordlessly she takes them to the med bay. Len’s heart is a war drum in his chest; each step has a new knot forming in his gut, the lump growing bigger in his throat.

When he enters the room and finds Barry awake, looking a little worse for wear, but he’ll take it over the many terrifying scenarios his mind had conjured. Exhaling loudly, he falls into the chair next to Barry, taking his hand into his own. Barry smiles weakly at him, squeezing his fingers gently, Caitlin is explaining to them that Barry’s collapse was from high blood pressure. She rattles off a few more fancy words then tells them Barry is going to be okay, as long as he gets plenty of rest. It’s only when she leaves that he notices Iris had been in the room as well, sitting in a chair the opposite side bed.

“You had us worried there for a minute there, Scarlet,” Len said, once it was just the three of them in the room.

“I had myself worried there for a minute” he admitted “but I’m okay” his free hand glided over his stomach, fingers fanning out over the roundness “we’re okay.”

“What happened?” Len enquired. “Iris said there was an argument with Henry.”

“He seemed to be going at Joe when we just arrived” Sara added.

Barry sighed heavily, eyelids fluttering shut. “He came to tell me he is starting to be okay with Nora and I was so happy” his eyes opened, glistening with tears. “I thought things were going to be fine, and then when Iris mentioned us… well, apparently he’s not okay with me dating an ex-criminal” he looks at Len, expression slightly guilty. “The last time I saw him I told him he had to accept you and…” he shrugs, a tear trickling down his face. “We just started yelling, I went to stand up, and I got dizzy then everything went black. I woke up just after they brought me here.”

“I’m sorry, Barr” he brushed away the stray tear with a steady finger “I didn’t mean to cause any conflict between you and your father.”

“It’s not your fault, Len” he reassured, taking his hand, brushing a gentle kiss over his knuckles. “We’ll work through it or we won’t, either way, you are a part of my life now, and I wouldn’t want it any other way.”

“Likewise, Scarlet” he moved in, pressing a whisper of a kiss on his lips.

“Aw,” Sara cooed “you two are adorable.”

“The same goes to you, Sara” Barry continued, reaching out to take her hand. “You’re my friend. You have been there every day since I came back, you both have, and that means so much to me. You both mean so much to me. Which is why I want to ask you guys something… I’ve been meaning to ask this for a while now actually, I would like it if you would both be Nora’s godparents.”

Len couldn’t hold back the burst of joy in his chest, chasing away the panic and fear from before, words wrapping around, sparking embers. He’d been given lots of titles in his life, thief, killer, crook, now he had one to be proud of. Catching sight of Sara’s smiling face revealed she was
feeling as overjoyed as he was, two lonely, cold-hearted killers, saved by the love of one Barry Allen and his unborn daughter. It was unexpected, he never imagined amounting to anything, and yet here he was, finally someone worthy.

“It would be my honour, Barry” Len replied.

“Mine as well,” Sara said, eyes glistening “thank you, Barry. We’ll always look after you both, no matter what.”

“I’d walk through fire for you, love” Len vowed, “and you know how much I hate the heat.”

Barry laughed, eyes alight with happiness “Oh come here you” he pulled Len closer, using the labels on his jacket to drag him in for a kiss, only their lips never got to reach, because they were interrupted by Cisco knocking at the door.

Len turned towards him; Cisco cowered slightly under the heated gaze.

“Sorry, to break up the party but… ah, we’ve been having a little Meta problem for the few days, nothing serious” he explained hurriedly, “but our task force is having trouble catching them so we could really use your help. And I know this is terrible timing, but something tells me they might attack the fundraiser tonight and while no one has been killed yet it would be best not to tempt fate.”

Len hesitated, on the one hand, he’d love to go chasing after Meta-Humans, and this morning he would have said yes, but now Barry was in the hospital, and even though Caitlin assured them he was fine he didn’t want to leave him. He owed Cisco one, though hell he owed the whole team one, and it would be selfish of him to not help out when he was able too. This is what being a better person was all about, protecting the innocent, being selfless when all he wanted to do was spend the night at Barry’s side, making sure he was rested, safe. Barry would be okay, though, he wasn’t alone, and if anything happened, they could let him and Sara know straight away. So he made the selfless choice, the hero’s choice.

Smirking at Cisco, he said, “I’ve always loved crashing a party.”

XxX

Len is starting to get sick of his past turning up and biting him in the ass. First, it was Mardon who let escape only to have the bastard come back and attempt to level the city with a storm, now it was Sam Scudder and Rosalind Dillon. The last time he saw them was two years ago, the night of the particle accelerator explosion, he’d held a gun to Scudder’s face, only seconds away from the pulling trigger. When Len took off that night he assumed he’d never see them again, now they were back, and Scudder was out for blood.

Over the past four days, the duo hadn’t just been committing a string of robberies; they’d been hunting for him. Scudder knew who he ran with, he knew who to ask, and while no one knew of his whereabouts, it was only a matter of time before someone pointed Scudder in his direction. Len wasn’t going to be easy to find, he never was, even Lisa had hidden her new life well, but when someone is desperate enough, crazed enough they’ll find you. And Scudder seemed to be broken, the guy had always been reckless, a self-obsessed bastard, but this new man was deranged. Whatever happened the night of the particle accelerator explosion had changed him; his ability to walk through mirrors was the least of their worries.

They had to take him out before he could find them. Len didn’t want Scudder anywhere near Barry. They had made a choice to only inform Barry of the basics, after this morning he didn’t need
any more stress. Once they had apprehended them Len would tell him the truth, he didn’t like leaving him in the dark, but this was the right thing to do. Tonight they would attend the fundraiser, Cisco predicted it would be their next hit, and as an ex-thief Len could see the allure of it.

He’d cased a few of these types of things before. In the past he’d worked a few of these events, going undercover as a waiter, people never notice the people carrying the sparkling champagne, and over priced canape, they were invisible to the rich and powerful. They were fools, Len tipped-toed silently around them, cataloguing their expensive jewellery, swiping the wallets and returning them cashless without them even batting an eye. While they drank their champion and laughed their fake laughs, he was robbing them blind.

A greedy thief never missed a night like tonight and Scudder had always been driven by greed. He would no doubt make an appearance and Len would stop him before he could harm anyone before someone led him to the quaint West house in search of him. There would be no putting Barry in danger. If Scudder was half out of his mind, there was no telling what he’d do. Len was grateful that his desire for blood seemed to come in second to his need for money.

His greed would be his downfall.

XxX

Barry wakes with a start, taking in a deep, shaky breath to calm the burning in his lungs, to silence the scream threatening to rip from his throat. It takes a few moments to regain his bearings, to remember where he is. He’s at Star Labs, this is a safe place, he’d been dreaming. He’s not strapped down on a table, Zoom looming over him, cutting viciously into his stomach, tearing him open and taking his child. He’s not bleeding out in the dark, it was just a dream. He draws in a deep breath, exhaling the fear, the unreleased screams, the unheard pleas.

Outside the room is quiet, earlier it had been filled with chatter, plans being made and put into motion. Cisco had asked Len and Sara to attend a fundraiser tonight in the city, in hopes of catching two Meta-Humans who had been committing a string of robberies over the past four days. He hadn’t been present when Cisco gave them the low-down, he’d wanted to be involved, he wanted to help, but when Caitlin said he needed bed rest and no stress she meant it, chasing down Meta’s wasn’t exactly stress-free.

Begrudgingly he gave in, feeling frustrated and hurt. Helplessness settled over him once more, he’d never been excluded; he’d always been the one rushing out to save the city and catch the bad guy. It had been so easy, so fun, at least in the beginning, before he met the Reserve Flash he never stopped to consider what harm could come his way. Being a hero meant saving the day, it meant being strong, brave, selfless and that selflessness is what brought his world down.

It was never supposed to end like this when he first put on the red suit he didn’t foresee a monster tearing it from his skin. When he set out to be a hero he never once saw his downfall, he didn’t stop to notice the villains standing at his side, helping, guiding him forwards. Twice he let it happen; twice he played the fool, twice he paid the price. At least from the outside, he was safe, that’s all he wanted for his daughter, for her to be protected from the same fate that befell him.

If he had to be the observer then he could accept that, it would keep them from harm, he only hoped Len and Sara were safe. They were up against a Meta who could walk through mirrors and another who could cause vertigo, they were petty thieves, not cold blooded killers and yet the worry for them settled heavy in Barry’s bones. They had left an hour and a half ago, heading back to Lisa’s to get ready for the party; they would be back before then to go over the plan once more.
Breathing deeply he tried to calm the panic in his heart, they hadn’t even gone to the party yet, and he was consumed with fear. He knew they’d be fine, they had travelled through time, defeating the world’s worst tyrant. They could take out two Meta’s in their sleep. They would be all right, tonight would go smoothly, and before morning light he’d be safe and sound in Len’s arms. Henry was coming at seven to take him home; they’d talked for hours after he woke up, working out their issues, shedding overdue tears and sharing much-needed comfort.

It would still take a little more time, but he was coming around, he was willing to accept Nora and Len, he would shelf his own feelings for his son at long last. It was a start, another step taken, another piece falling back into place. Barry had drifted to sleep with a smile on his face, hands cradling his stomach, slumbering peacefully for hours until the darkness rippled and the nightmare came to roaring life. By now he should be used to the horrifying sight of Zoom cutting Nora from his body, the endless stream of crimson and the harrowing screams.

It was just a nightmare, just images flickering in his head, a twisted show playing every time he closed his eyes. Deep breaths settle the pounding of his heart; hands roaming over his abdomen reassure him that Nora is safe. It was nothing more than a horror show; they were safe and sound, protected and loved. Sighing wearily, Barry retrieved his phone from the table next to him, it was six now, Len and Sara should be back soon.

He wanted nothing more than to crawl onto Len’s lap, feel his strong arms wrap around him, shielding him from the world. He couldn’t though, not right now, Len had a job to do, a city to protect. He couldn’t help but smile to himself, when he first saw that glimmer of light hidden in Len’s eyes all those months ago he felt an urge to nurture it, fan the embers into a fire. Underneath the rubble and the cold, snarky exterior was a good man, a soul worthy of saving.

Len had turned himself around, he’d boarded a time ship on a quest to save the world and came back victorious, a hero. He lost his best friend in the fight, he was worn down, heartbroken and yet he still raced out to save him from Zoom. Barry was proud of him; he had become the man he always knew lived within; a hero, his hero, his anchor, his everything. Fate might be twisted and cruel, pulling strings and toppling kingdoms, but it at least brought them together.

A small happiness to light even the darkest days.

Tonight he’d let Len be the hero, no matter how fearful he was or how much he wanted to crawl into his arms and stay there. Barry was strong, he was, he was, he was, he could make it through one night. When Len arrived he’d wish him good luck and kiss him long, deep, drawing in strength from him. He’d watch Len leave, and he would be okay, they would all be okay, and by tomorrow they would be telling him how they took out the Meta’s and saved the night.

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It was six thirty-three by the time Len and Sara arrive, Caitlin had been checking Barry’s blood pressure when Len walked in, taking the air from his lungs. He was dressed in a well-tailored black suit; the buttons of his white collared shirt open, revealing an expanse of pale skin, his navy blue tie was casually draped over one shoulder. Sara walked in behind him, looking stunning in a red gown that hugged her figure perfectly. They both looked beautiful.

Len strode over to the bed, leaning in to greet Barry with a tender kiss. He melted under the touch, wanting more if only his mind would allow it. Having a hormonal driven body with a shattered mind was frustrating. A physical, very human part would love nothing more than to deepen their kisses, turn them into something adventurous, daring, but then a memory would flicker, unravelling the desire. The kiss would end before it could really begin; breathing out deeply, he would banish the unpleasant memories. It was going to take time, a lot of time; he’d get there,
though. A few months ago he couldn’t have even handled a kiss; it was a step by step, day by day process.

“You look handsome” he whispered, breathing in the crisp, spicy scent of Len’s aftershave “be safe tonight, okay?”

“Of course, love,” he promised “and you take it easy, we’ll be back before you know it.”

Barry kissed him longingly, ignoring the watchful eyes around him, he owed himself this. Len wasn’t Zoom; his kisses weren’t sharp, dangerous things. The hands resting on his body were full of love; they wouldn’t shred his clothing or leave bruises that lasted for days. There was nothing but love to be found in Len’s kisses, they were tender whispers of devotions.

When they left, Barry rested his aching back against the mound of pillows, sighing contently, the taste of Len’s kiss still on his lips. Henry would be here shortly to bring him home; he was looking forward to sinking into a hot bath, relaxing his aching muscles after spending a long day in bed. He heard footsteps approaching; he sat up, eager to get home, to stretch his out sore legs. The man in the doorway wasn’t his father, it was a man he hadn’t thought much about of late, and seeing him was truly a surprise.

Standing in the doorway was Harrison Wells, hesitating on the threshold, waiting to be invited in or shut out. The man hadn’t said anything to him since he came back, he hadn’t reached out or offered support, Wells had stayed in the shadows just like he always did. Watching, observing the disasters that unfolded around him, always the cause, never the solution. Barry should tell him to fuck off, it had been five months, five fucking months and now he was here, standing in the doorway with haunted, guilty eyes.

The guilt was tangible, a dark, ugly cloud hanging over his head. Why was he so guilt ridden? Did he know that Zoom wanted more from him? Had he seen the sick, perverted desire flicker like lightning in Jay’s eyes, had he known all along? Surely not, he had been just as surprised when they discovered that Jay was Zoom as everyone else was, or was it another act? He had stolen part of Barry’s speed to give to Zoom, and he may have confessed to that sin, but he knew Wells would go to any lengths to get his daughter back.

Jessie, poor little Jessie who was held captive by Zoom, but escaped unscathed. He never touched her; he didn’t break, bend, rape and beat her into a shadow of her former self. She’d never saw the monsters real face, never felt the wrath of his fists, the sharpness of his teeth, the brutal force of his thrusts. Swallowing down the anger, the cruel thoughts, he tries to reason with the doubt poisoning his mind. Wells couldn’t have known what Jay was planning, no one knew, and that was okay.

Seeing Wells had released some old painful feelings, but he was okay, he was better now. He was breathing out the hate, the distrust, it was okay, everything was okay. Harrison didn’t mean him any harm, the guilt in his eyes was not because he’d set Barry up to fall. With a shaky voice, he told him to come in, eyeing him cautiously as he walked closer, stopping beside the bed, arms folded protectively over his chest. Now that he was standing closer Barry could see the pain in the deep set of his eyes, the heavy slump of his shoulders.

“I wasn’t sure you were ever going to talk to me again” the words feel sticky, hard to get out around the emotion building in the pit of his throat.

“I am sorry, Allen” he sighed, dropping into the empty chair. “I should have come to see you so much sooner, but” a quivering hand removes the pair of glasses from his face; he’s seen Wells do this many times. He’s thinking, troubled, trying to find the right words to use. When he does, the glasses slip back on “I could give you a million excuses, and none of them would be good enough.
Hell, my sorry isn’t good enough, but here I am.” He shrugged, hopeless, eyes downcast “you saved my daughter, and I left you on my earth at Zoom’s mercy. That is unforgivable.”

“You tried, you all tried” he found the rage quietening, “Zoom closed the breach after he took me; there was no other way back.”

“Of course, there was, Barry” he looked up, eyes burning with rage “we could have done something to save you! Instead, we argued, we fell apart, and that’s not good enough. We failed you, and nothing is ever going to make that okay.”

He knew this, he’d heard it before. They tried, they fought, they broke, and in the end, they failed, and because of it Barry’s suffered. They didn’t save him, and maybe they should have been able too, perhaps there had been a way, but they were too broken to find it. None of that mattered now, he was home, he was recovering, healing day by day, there was no point in dwelling on what could have been done. The past was set, unchangeable, they had to let it go or else they’d drown.

If he didn’t fight every day for his future, for the better, brighter days than he was might as well have never left the asylum. He had to let go of the guilt, the anger, it served him no good to hold onto it. Moving forwards meant forgiving his team, his family and himself. He needed to make sure everyone knew that he wasn’t angry with them; he still loved them, still trusted them. They had been there to help guide him through his recovery, even if he hadn’t known it at the start. They waited patiently for him to return; they loved his daughter and had gone to great lengths to make sure her arrival would be safe. They hadn’t failed him, not this time.

“None of it is okay” Barry spoke, voice steady now “it’s never going to be okay, but that doesn’t mean I blame you or anyone for what happened to me. Zoom is the only one who can be held accountable; he is the one who should be sorry.” Zoom was never sorry, he would have never been sorry; he delighted in torturing, in raping him. Zoom is the one person Barry will never forgive, but he won’t let his hatred for him steal anymore more his life or poison his thoughts towards his unborn daughter. Nora will never know of the monster he was. He wasn’t ashamed of her conception, he felt no need to hide it from others, but he didn’t want something like that hanging over her.

In time that might change, there might come a day where he can no longer hide her true parentage, it wouldn’t stop him from keeping her safe for as long as he could, though. He’s getting sidetracked, he’s meant to be absolving Wells of his guilt as he has done for the others. “He’ll never be sorry, for any of the things he did, to Jessie or to me or to anyone. That’s because he was the villain, he was the monster. You’re not Doctor Wells; no matter what people tell you or what you tell yourself, you are not the monster here. I forgive you – I forgive everyone – for not being able to rescue me. I just need you to do one thing for me?”

“Of course, Barry, anything” he sounded desperate, pleading to be given a chance to make amends for the wrongs he thought he had made

“Please forgive yourself.”

Wells blue eyes glistened, mouth twisting in a brittle smile, a little of the guilt dropped away, the rest would need more time. “You are a remarkable young man, Barry Allen. You didn’t deserve any of this, and I am still sorry it happened to you. I can’t promise I’ll ever fully let go of the guilt I feel, but I swear I’ll try for you. I owe you that.”

Barry’s offered him a weak smile, footsteps sounded from just outside the room, “That’s all I ask.” Henry appeared in the doorway, it was time to go home.
Len makes his way up the front steps of the West house, moths dance around the porch light, tiny wings beating against the hot glass. Wood creaks under his stealthy footsteps inside is silent, there has been a key left under the mat for him to use. It’s the worst place to leave a key, the second most dangerous place is under a rock but this is a safe neighbourhood and inside lives a detective, only a fools stole from a cop’s house. Len isn’t a thief in the night; he’s coming home, making his way silently through the house and to Barry’s side.

Tonight had been a total waste of time. Scudder and Dillon hadn’t made an appearance, the whole event had gone smoothly, not one glitch or Meta-Human to be found. Len had observed every person in the crowd, studying their plastic smiles, listening to their hollow laughter, waiting for the familiar faces to appear. There had been no evidence that Scudder and Dillon were going to show up tonight, it had just been a wild guess, and in this city, it was better to be safe than sorry.

He’d been hoping they would show; he wanted to have them locked up in Iron Heights before they could crash into his life. Every moment they were out there they put the people he loved in danger. He didn’t have to worry too much about Lisa or Sara; they were more than capable of protecting themselves. It was Barry, who was in the greatest danger, heavily pregnant and powerless he would be no match for them. It’s not that he thought of Barry as some damsel in distress, he was still a hero in Len’s eyes, he was strong, a fighter without question but he wasn’t in a position to protect himself.

Len vowed to always look after him, to always look after Nora, and he’d succourer every inch of the city, leaving no stone unturned in his pursuit for Scudder. There was nothing more he could do tonight, though. He’d crawl into bed beside Barry, hold him tight in his arms and in morning light he’d tell Barry what was really going on. It wasn’t fair to leave Barry in the dark any longer, not when he could be in danger. Tip-toeing into Barry’s room he finds him snuggled beneath the blankets, holding tight to the reindeer Sara bought him for Christmas.

He drinks in the sight of him, taking in every little detail he can make out in the dim glow. He can’t help the smile, the flutter of butterflies in his stomach that sweep away the cold dread that had been present all evening. Tonight they are safe, he is at Barry’s side, able to protect him if any monsters dare show their faces. He tip-toes across the threshold, making his way towards the pile of clothes he’d left there the night before, sighing contently, he headed to the bathroom to get changed.

He’s half way there when it happens; there is a shift in the air, cold dread surges through him, alarm bells sounding. Mirrors, the walls had been lined with glistening mirrors, reflecting the twirling dancers and sparkling jewels. By now he knew better than to ignore his intuition, he should have paid more attention to the uneasy feeling in his gut that followed him home, up the stairs and into this very moment. He spins around so fast that the world tilts, feet unsteady under him for the briefest of moments. He charges forward, not caring about the noise he makes, alarm bells are sounding and a sense of panic settling in his bones.

Bursting into Barry’s room he finds glistening, terrified hazel eyes staring at him from across the way. Scudder holds him tight, a knife pressed, making him against his pale throat, Barry gasps in ragged breaths that sound more like sobs. Len freezes, Scudder is backing towards the mirror, he has to get to Barry before it’s too late. He holds his hands up, placating, gaze flickering between Barry’s wide, frightened eyes and Scudder’s manic gaze. He can’t let him take Barry; he won’t let him hurt him or Nora. He just needs Scudder to lower the knife so he can make a move. He casts one last look at Barry; it says ‘hold on,’ it promises ‘I won’t let him hurt you’. Barry gives him the faintest of nods, fear leaving his eyes, replaced with steely calmness.
“Scudder, let him go” Len demanded “this is between us; he has nothing to do with it. Let him go, and we’ll settle this.”

“You don’t know what it was like” he spat, ignoring Len like he hadn’t even spoken “being stuck in the dark for two years. No sound! No Sight! Nothing!” he screamed, any moment now Joe and Iris would come rushing in, and this whole situation could blow up. “At first I didn’t remember, then it slowly trickled back in, and now it’s all I can think about. I can hear voices in my head, whispering to me. It’s all your fault, Snart. I wish you pulled the trigger.” He took a step back; Barry struggled, planting his feet firmly on the ground.

“Sam, you don’t want to this” fear pulsed under his skin, tightening around his lungs and quickening his heart. “Please, let him go.”

“I’ve never heard you say please before, Snart” he snarled, knife edge pressing painfully into Barry’s skin. “You know, I went asking around for you, everyone said you just vanished. Poof, gone.”

The tip of the blade trailed up Barry’s throat, gliding dangerously over his lips, caressing his cheek. The fear in his eyes was heartbreaking, body trembling, eyes clouding with memories; he had to get Scudder away from him now. Any moment Barry could have a panic attack, each second he was held captive was damaging the recovery he made, re-breaking the pieces that were lovingly restored.

“I guess while I was in the dark you were busy making a family for yourself” Scudder continued, drawing blood under the sharp tip of the blade. “How would you like it if I took it from you?” he took another step towards the mirror, panicked, Barry tried desperately to escape.

The blade catching at the pale exposed flesh of his throat had him freezing, chest heaving, eyes impossibly wide. Len searched his mind frantically for a solution; Barry was hyperventilating, quivering, fear tangible in the air. Another step, Scudder’s back was against the mirror, sound could be heard from one of the bedrooms at the end of the hallway, he had to do something. If Scudder wanted revenge then he could have it, he could take out his rage and sufferings on Len, he’d sacrifice himself for Barry any day.

“If you want revenge then I am right here,” he said, loudly, in hopes of waking the rest of the house. Barry would need their comfort after he was gone. “If you’re going to be putting someone in that mirror then that someone is going to be me.” He kept his tone aloof, hiding the tremor in his voice by drawl laid on heavy. “Let him go, and I’m all yours.”

“Len no” Barry pleaded, tears making tracks down his ashen face “Please, don’t.”

“What’s it going to be Scudder?” he challenged, outside he could hear someone getting up, footsteps, the flick of a switch echoing down the hallway. “Make a move.”

His grip lessened, knife no longer digging threatening into a trembling throat. Stepping sideways, he gestured to the mirror, glass swirling to life under his fingertips. Len stepped forwards, eyes never straying from Barry’s pleading face. Standing before the swirling glass, he hesitated, not willing to go through until he was sure Barry and Nora were safe.

“Drop the knife Scudder” he growled, “and I’ll step through.”

“Step through, and I’ll let go.”

“Not how this works” he barked, whirling around to face him, “Let. Barry. Go.”
“I’ve never seen you care so much about someone” malicious intent flashed in his brown eyes, a malice grin lazily spreading across his face “Maybe you’ll both like to spend all eternity in their together.”

It only took a moment for everything to fall apart, a heartbeat, a breath and the room erupted in chaos. Joe appeared in the doorway, gun raised, shouting at Scudder to the drop the knife. He didn’t listen, the bad guys never listen. Without warning, he shoved Barry towards Len, the force toppling them backwards, towards the rippling glass. Time slowed down, they were falling, falling, a pulsating energy lacing around them, sinking deep into their bones, electric and freezing. The sensation vanished as quickly as it came, leaving them tumbling back, through the glass and into complete darkness.
It’s bitterly cold in the dark. It’s the kind of cold that makes bones ache, lips turn blue, and finger tips go white with numbness. The only source of light filters in from the world outside the glass, darkness stretches out in every other direction. Chaos followed their fall into the looking glass, panic and shouting creating mayhem. The following events happened too quickly for Len to remember correctly, by the time he had gotten to his feet Scudder was gone, and Joe was staring into his eyes, through the glass, with utter terror.

Things happened quickly after that, and in truth, Len didn’t pay attention to what was going on outside the glass prison. Barry was his primary concern. He sat huddled against a wall of nothingness, shaking, gasping around tiny choked of sobs. He was going into shock, spiralling fast into a panic attack. Shrugging off his jacket he draped it over Barry’s shoulders, rubbing warmth into quivering bones. It took an age to calm him, when they were delivered to Star Labs by a frantic West family, Barry had grown silent.

They now sat in the dark, watching as Cisco and Harrison Wells placed some device against the glass, Len didn’t remember what it was but it he knows they needed it so they could understand them. Mirror langue is a thing, apparently. He is stuck in a fucking mirror, how did he not see this coming? He should have paid closer attention, should have listened more carefully when Cisco said that there Meta could be hiding in plain sight. Instead, his mind kept wandering back to Barry, distracting him from doing the job right.

When Len pulled off a heist or even the simplest of robberies, he always took a deep breath, clearing his mind of everything but the job. Thoughts and concerns for Barry had flickered in his head all evening, clouding his usual sharp, focused mind, now his fears had come to roaring life. Barry was suffering, he was scared, and it was all Len’s fault. He should have known better, trusted his gut, listened to the alarms warning of impending danger. There is nothing he can do now; they are stuck here until they either find Scudder or Cisco and Harrison figure out how to get them out. In the meantime all he can do is offer Barry comfort, shield him from the cold, the darkness and hope that he’ll be alright.

“Len, can you say something?”

Looking up from he was huddled on the floor, next to Barry, he saw Cisco standing on the other side of the glass, fiddling with some circular device that’s been attached to the mirror. “Have you figured out how to get us the hell out of here?”

“Yes, it’s working,” he said triumphantly, “and no, we’re working on it. Sara and Lisa are on their way here, and once they arrive, we’re going to try and track down Scudder in case we can’t get you both out.” His gaze drops to Barry, who is staring blankly at his socked feet. “Barr, are you holding up okay?”
He looks up, blinking, shivering “Yeah, I think so.”

“Hang in there, okay? We’ll get you out soon” he wrapped his knuckles against the glass then walked away, leaving them alone in the dark.

“You really doing okay, Scarlet” Len asked, resting a hand on his stomach, feeling for Nora’s little quick kicks.

“I’m not sure” he answered, voice breaking “I feel like I am in one of my nightmares.”

“Nothing in here can harm us” Len affirmed, “it’s just you, me and the cold.”

Barry huffed, a broken laugh escaping into the darkness. “I know… It’s just so much like my nightmares. I keep expecting Zoom to appear out of the dark” his breath hitched, Len pulled him onto his lap, cradling him protectively in his embrace. Barry rested his head against Len’s chest, letting out a tired sigh. “I keep having nightmares where he kills you. You’re trapped behind a glass wall, and you can see him hurting me.”

There doesn’t need to be an explanation as to what hurting means, the bitter, ugly way Barry says the word, voice trembling and cracking tells him hurting translates to raping. The mere thought makes his stomach churn. He’d nearly gone out his mind just watching Scudder hold the knife to Barry’s throat if he saw that he’d lose his freaking mind. He’d almost tackled Scudder to the ground the moment he saw the smallest drop of crimson; it was only Barry’s safety that held him back.

“You pound and pound against the glass until your first are bloody” he continued, voice echoing in the hollowed out space “sometimes Sara is there as well… it always ends the same, no matter what. Zoom phases through the glass and rips out your heart and all I can do is watch him kill you.” Dampness from Barry’s silent tears seep through his shirt, “I thought I was going to lose you tonight… I thought it was going to happen again. Everything would be ripped away, and I’d be back in the darkness, alone and afraid. I thought it would all start again, the pain, the torture…” he trails off, voice lost to heavy sobs.

“Shh, it’s okay, love, we’re going to be okay” He tilted Barry’s face up, holding his chin gently in the crook of his fingers. “I’m sorry I let you down, tonight. I shouldn’t have let this happen. I should have told you the truth about Scudder; you could have been more prepared that way.” Fingers brush away the tears “I should have trusted that you’d be able to handle it. I was just so worried for you, for Nora. We all were. We didn’t want to drag you into this if we didn’t have too. I am sorry, this happened.”

“You don’t have to be sorry,” Barry sniffled, “I understand why you chose not to tell me. Caitlin did make it very clear that I wasn’t supposed to have any stress and I know the team, and you made this decision with the best intentions.” He nuzzled into his chest; bring a ghost of a smile to Len’s face. “But no more secrets between us, okay? I can handle it; I don’t need protecting all the time.”

“No more secrets” Len promised, sealing his words with a kiss.

XxX

His body hurt, aching deep in his bones. The pain was never ending when Zoom held him captive; there was always bruised flesh, crimson streaks stark against pale skin. Zoom took great pleasure in leaving marks, bruising skin, breaking bones and tearing cries from an abused throat. Pain was an old friend by now; he knew the deep ache of a broken a bone, the throbbing of a bruise, the sensation of burn, the sickening feeling of being torn from inside.
He was familiar with the new aches and pains of his body. His lower back ached deeply, as much as any bruise ever did. The cramps reminded him of how his body spasmed violently for a few days after Zoom electrocuted him. He knows that on rainy days his fingers and ribs hurt. Memories of how they were first broken flickering in his mind. The pain is immense, his body throbs, he’s tired, exhausted and frustrated. They’ve only been in the mirror for a little over half an hour, and already he longs to rest in a soft bed; anything would be better the hard surface of the nothingness beneath his feet.

He’d tried getting comfortable on Len’s lap, snuggling close, seeking the warmth, the sound of his heart, the feel of his breath. He’d stayed safe in his arms four fifteen minutes, head tucked beneath Len’s chin, dozing slightly, listening to the murmured voices coming from the other side of the glass. The pain in his lower break grew worse, forcing him to move, to pace the cold, dark, empty out space. He can feel Len’s eyes watching every step he makes from where he sits, huddled into himself for warmth.

Barry may have abolished Len of his guilt, but he can still see the remorse glimmering in his tired eyes, it’s in the slump of his shoulders and the tension of his jaw. He doesn’t blame him; this wasn’t his fault, Barry had dealt with Meta Humans enough times to know that something always eventual went wrong. It’s Murphy’s Law by this point; whatever could go wrong does go wrong, it’s the rule of his life. Compared to his past as the Flash, this experience isn’t the worst thing to happen to him.

Being stuck in a mirror was child’s play, Scudder wasn’t a monster; just some poor guy who’d started unravelling, Barry knows how that feels. Once Cisco and Wells got them out of here, they would be fine; it was just a mirror, nothing more. There wasn’t anything lurking in the dark, the only person watching him was the man he loved. There wasn’t a beast hiding, waiting hungrily for a taste of flesh. Walking back towards the light, towards Len, has the panic fading; he keeps his back turned to the abyss.

Len stands next to him; strong hands rubbing tenderly at his sore back, touch chasing away the chills. Head heavy, he rests his forehead against the cold glass, breathing out a weary sigh; this is going to be a long night. Hearing approaching footsteps he looks up, hoping to see Sara and Lisa returning victorious, dragging a ruffled Scudder with them. Len had sent them to an abandoned building on the outskirts of town, it had been the last place he saw Scudder, and since they had no other way of finding him, it was their best shot.

It isn’t Sara and Lisa; it’s Henry, clothes rumpled and eyes blurry from being woken in the early hours of the morning. He’d rented a motel room for the night since the West house was full and he and Joe still had some prickly energy between them. Calmly he makes his way to the mirror, stopping right before Barry, hand pressing against the glass like he can force it to release them by sheer willpower. Glass stays intact, it won’t shatter; they are its prisoners, trapped in the dark.

“How are you holding up, slugger.”

“I’ve been better” he admitted, “Everything hurts.

“Where are you getting the most pain?” Henry asked, the doctor in him taking over.

“My lower back mostly” he replied.

“Any stomach pains?”

“There is a heavy feeling like I used to get before my” he trailed off, face flushing, he’d never talked to Henry or Len about his anatomy before, let alone his period, he’d felt embarrassed by it.
for most of his adult life. The embarrassment wasn’t the only reasons his words faltered. Backaches, a feeling of heaviness in his stomach, those were signs of labour. Oh God, oh God this couldn’t be happening, he couldn’t be going into labour. He was stuck in a mirror for fuck’s sake. Nora couldn’t come now; it was too early, she still needed more time.

“Dad, you have to get us out of here” his voice was shrill, panic bursting to life, tightening around his lungs “Please, I can’t have Nora now.”

“Son, it’s okay, you need to calm down,” Henry said, voice soft, like it, used to be when he woke up from having a nightmare. “Labour doesn’t happen in a matter of minutes. I could be wrong. Just sit down and take some deep breathes. I’m going to get Caitlin. Len, keep him calm.”

Barry watched him rush off, trying to hold back the flow of fear that wanted to run rampant through his body. Len steers them away from the glass, helping him to sit down the ground, before dropping down next to him. Taking several breaths, he attempts to strive off the wild, panicked thoughts. Everything will be okay; he’s with Len, Cisco and Wells or Sara and Lisa will get them out of here, it’s all going to be okay. Unless it isn’t, unless the darkness reaches out its clawed hands, devouring them, taking them away to a world of pure terror.

In the few days of his imprisonment, he used to believe he would be okay, even though he was locked away in a bloodstained asylum on another earth and very, very far from home. He believed it was going to be alright in the end. Even after being raped he still thought he’d be fine, his friends would show up, and he’d go home and forget that this nightmare ever happened. Then Zoom kept raping and beating him; his mind started to splinter, began to unravel, leaving the painful truth behind.

In the beginning, he denied everything, locked up the truth, until the bars came loose and there was no more denying what was being done to him. That day was the beginning of his undoing, acceptance felt like a heavy weight descending upon him, sinking him down, down, down. That was the moment he began to fall apart, that was the moment a little voice finally acknowledged that he was trapped, scared, and helpless. The voice shouted over and over ‘I’ve been raped, I’ve been raped, I’ve been raped. It hit him like a train, the sickening truth pouring through him like poison. How was he ever going to be okay, how was he going d to find a way back from this?

“Breathe, Scarlet, breathe” Len’s words bring him back from the brink, dark thoughts receding.

Breathing deeply, he focuses on how far he’s come. He had crawled his way out of the darkness, dragged himself over the sharp, ugly memories, fighting, fighting, fighting each day so that he could make it to the next. He had fought so valiantly, faced every demon, relived every painful memory, unpacked every box so that he could make it to the better, brighter days. Months of struggling had paid off; he’d pushed himself to the cusp of a new life, found love in Len’s arms. He could make it through this, he could survive anything, and this time he wasn’t alone, he’d never be alone again.

“I’m oka-” Barry’s words are cut off by a wave of pain wracking through his body. A cry rises up his throat, startlingly loud in the dense silence surrounding them. There is no air in his lungs, the pain consumes him, worse than being beaten, more sickening then being electrocuted, and then it’s gone. He heaves in deep lungful’s of air, bones shaking. Oh god, it’s happening, it's really happening. He is going into labour.

XxX

“Len… oh God, Len!”
The shrill, fearfulness of Barry’s voice is a knife to Len’s heart. He feels so useless, so helpless, Barry is in agonising pain and the only help he can offer is a comforting touch and right now that’s not enough. It’s been an hour since the first contraction, it feels like a lifetime. There is absolutely nothing he can do; he can’t shatter the glass, though he has tried, fists and feet failing to leave even the smallest crack. Unless Lisa and Sara return or Cisco and Wells find them a way out, then, Barry is going to give birth to Nora in this God forsaken mirror.

He trusts he hopes; the team can get them out, Barry deserves better than this. Outside looking in are Caitlin and Henry, monitoring Barry as closely they can, they are limited by what they can do and God if they don’t get out of here soon then Len would have to deliver Nora. It’s a terrifying thought; they are alone in the dark with nothing to help them. He has to remind himself that labour doesn’t happen in a matter of hours, it takes time, a lot of time and that gives them a glimmer of hope. In the time being, he tries his best to comfort Barry, rubbing his back and holding his hand through ever contraction, whispering sweet nothingness in his ear while he pants and groans in pain.

“You’re doing really well, Barry” Caitlin acclaimed from the other side of the glass “just keep breathing; it’s going to be okay. We’ll get you both out.”

“Oh God it really hurts” he moaned, one hand balled tightly into a fist and the other gripping at Len’s.

“Do you at least have a theory as to how to get us out of here?” Len demanded, “this isn’t the ideal place to deliver a baby, you know.”

“I think we might have a plan” Cisco appeared. “First, Harry and I thought about just smashing the glass, but then we realised that would be a very bad idea” he rapped at the glass. “There is a form of energy travelling through the glass – I’m keeping it simple here for you too, dude – so if we broke the glass there is a chance you two would be stuck in there forever.”

“Which we don’t want, so what is the plan, Cisco?” Len growled, growing frustrated.

“Alright, alright am getting there,” he said, hands up in defence. “Our plan is to get your cold gun and freeze the glass, it should stabilise the mystic portal energy we have going on here, then we can hopefully break the mirror, and you two are home free, theoretically.”

“And what if that fails and we get stuck here?”

“We’re going to break a small portion of the glass first,” he replied, “I need the gun, where is it?”

“At Lisa’s, in its case under my bed,” he answered “this plan better work.”

“If it makes you feel any better Lisa and Sara are out looking for Scudder” Caitlin added “We will get you both out, Len. I promise.”

Barry let out a guttural cry, sparing Cisco into motion. Len turned his attention away from the outside world, focusing in on Barry, his flushed, sweat-soaked face crumpled in pain, soft whimpers escaping through parted lips. When the contraction ended he slumped forward, Len caught him before he could topple over, gingerly lifting Barry onto his lap, he sagged against him, like a marionette with its strings cut. All they could do was wait, hold on and hope for the best.

There was a helpless feeling settling in Len’s gut, guilt devours him, self-loathing making itself known. His instincts said things were about to go south, the little voice in his head made itself known, shouting loudly that danger was coming. He’d been blinded by his worry for Barry, he
thought at first that the bad feeling had something to do with him fainting, he’d let himself believe that was the only thing that would go wrong. He shouldn’t have been so foolish, now Barry is in labour, and it’s his fault their stuck in this fucking mirror.

Barry moans, fingers grasping at the fabric of his shirt, scrunching it tight as another contraction rocks through him. Now is not the time for a pity party, his guilt won’t do them any good. He has to comfort Barry, guide him through this like Caitlin taught him and if necessary he will deliver Nora. He hopes it doesn’t come to that, giving birth wasn’t going to be easy on Barry; having someone touching him there had all the potential to set off a number of triggers. They had all known it wasn’t going to be stress-free, Sara and himself were meant to be the ones talking Barry through it, keeping him calm while Caitlin did all the work.

None of them had an easy job ahead of them, but Len preferred not to be the one causing Barry any panic or discomfort, he’d always actively avoided placing Barry in a situation that caused anxiety or a trigger. The handful of times he had stirred a deep, painful memory loss left him feeling awful, guilt-ridden, hating that he had hurt the person he loved. He was afraid of what would happen if they didn’t get out of here; the contractions were growing closer together, and if Len had to deliver Nora, then that left no one to comfort Barry. He needed a hand to hold, a whispering voice of reassurance, a person to rub his back and tell him to breathe and keep him calm.

Please let them get out of here in time.

XxX

It doesn’t happen like it does in the movies, there is no huge gush of liquid. It’s more of a heavy trickle that slowly builds before stopping altogether, leaving a damp mess behind. Barry stopped the moment he felt the first trickle; his aching muscles had driven him to once again pace the hollowed out space. Panic seizes him; he looks to Len who is huddled on the ground for the warmth, his eyes saying more than words could. He’s frightened too, as frustrated and helpless as Barry feels.

Barry's terrified that they won’t get them out of here in time; he doesn’t want his nightmare to come to life. He’s dreamt about this, giving birth to Nora in a sea of nothingness, screaming in agony, crying tears that no one wipes away. He isn’t alone, though, this isn’t a nightmare or the asylum, it’s going to be okay, they are going to be fine. Len is here, and if worse comes to worse, he trusts him to deliver Nora safely. It’s not ideal, the thought unsettles him, slightly embarrasses him. Len may have seen the scars on his wrists, but he hasn’t seen the thick, overlapping mess of scars disfiguring his inner thighs.

He had no recollections as to why Zoom felt the need to slice over and over into the delicate flesh of his inner thighs. He’d made up his own stories; it was a sick declaration of love, a twisted punishment, then the other night Cisco told him what had actually happened. Zoom was bored, the ugly scars crisscrossing his inner thighs were because his captor was bored and decided Barry’s skin made a perfect canvas. Somehow that was worse than a punishment, an insane act of ownership, it was meaningless.

Which seemed a silly thing to think, since none of this was meaningless to him, every scar meant something different; they were the visible reminders of the wicked, messed up things done to him. Every little thing Zoom did to him, be it done in malice or out of boredom, would affect him for the rest of his life. Even when he made it through the fire, the dark days, to the better, brighter ones he’d still have the scars, the memories lurking in the depths of his mind. They would come out to play, they would sneak into his dreams, but it’s okay, he stopped believing in a miracle recovery a long time ago.
He stopped needing a magic fix the day Len told him that he loved him, even though he was broken, bloodstained and haunted. Len’s love enabled him to love himself again, to accept the scars, the dark parts of his shattered mind. It was okay to be broken, to be jagged around the edges, he was still worthy of love, of happiness. So if Barry has to show Len’s his scars he knows it won’t change anything, Len won’t love him any less because of them. No matter how ghastly or startling they were to see.

“My… my water just broke” he panted, feeling another contraction start. His stomach muscles contorted; he throws his head back, crying out, every nerve igniting. Len rushes to his side, strong hands rubbing his back, trying in vain to ease his distress. “Len, if… we can’t get out of here; I want you to know I am okay with you delivering Nora.” He panted “I trust you; I know you’ll look after us both.”

“I’ll do everything in my power to make sure you’re both safe, I promise” he vowed.

“I know” Barry nodded, shivering. The dampness between his legs is growing cold; the sensation makes his stomach churn, memories floating up to torment him, reminding him of the hundreds of times other liquids were drying between his legs. “I’m cold.”

Len wrapped him in his arms, trying to warm him even when his body was as cold as ice if anything Barry’s heated, flushed skin would warm him. Outside the mirror, there was motion, sharp, hurried footsteps coming towards the glass. Lisa and Sara appeared at the mirror’s edge, looking weary and defeated, Scudder was nowhere in sight.

“We couldn’t find him,” Sara said, breathless, “we asked around and even went back to the hotel, but there is no sign of him anywhere.”

“If he returns to the warehouse I left a listening device there, that Cisco gave us, so we can catch him” Lisa added, “I’m going back out, I’ve got a few leads to follow up on.”

“We’re kind of running out of time,” Len said, “Barry’s water just broke.”

“Shit” Sara cursed “I’ll go get Caitlin, I just saw her in the med bay.”

“I’ll get her” Lisa turned to Sara, kissing her quickly “I’m going back out there.”

“Be careful” Sara gave her one last kiss before she took off. She returned her attention to the mirror, expression grim. “Barr, are you doing okay?”

“Cold,” he repeated, “and labour pain is worse than I anticipated.” If on cue, another contraction surged through him. He doubled over, a scream shredding his sandpaper throat. When the pain subsided, he swayed dangerously. Len held on to him tightly; he’d never let him fall, he’d never let go. “I don’t want to make this situation worse, but I’m starting to feel like I need to push.”

“How far apart are the contractions?” Sara asked, trying to sound calm but her eyes betrayed her.

“About three every ten minutes” Len replied, “We’re running out of time.”

“Fuck” Sara slammed her fist against the glass “I’m going to check and see if Cisco is back, hang in there, okay.”

Barry watched her dart away; a blurry motion of blonde hair and dark clothing. Fatigue taking over he felt his legs buckle; Len’s secure grip the only thing keeping him standing. He eased them onto the ground, settling Barry between the V of his legs. He was so tired; the pain is too much, the cold, dampness between his legs makes him shiver for more reasons than the frigid air. Memories
flicker to life, pictures playing behind closed curtains, a gruesome picture show of a dozen and a
dozen more aftermaths.

He’s no longer in Len’s arms, no longer safe and protected. He is lying on a blood-stained mattress,
sobbing, heaving through corrupted lungs, choking on the air that tries to make its way down his
bruised throat. He’s shaking, trembling, skin ice cold despite the sweat that coats it. There are
fluids everywhere, saliva glistening on roughly kissed flesh, drying on parted lips, there are small
beads of crimson mingling with the sweat, there is red mixed with cum drying on quivering thighs.

He just lies there and lets its trickle out of him, he feels disgusting, dirty, like all the soap and water
in the world will never make him clean. He’ll never be untouched by those hands, the bruising
fingers and sharp teeth; he’ll never be rid of his seed. He never gets used to the sickening feeling of
sticky skin, no matter how many times he finds himself with blood stained thighs. The images
unfold, skipping like a broken record player, he’s face first against a wall, he’s on his hands and
knees, he’s on the floor, bent over a table. Each time he is left alone, weeping, breaking, bleeding.

“Hey, Scarlet, breathe.”

Len’s voice cuts through the flaring memories, guiding him back to present. He isn’t in the asylum;
it’s not blood and cum drying between his legs, he’s okay, he’s safe. Pain charges through him,
chasing away the memories, forcing away every thought, every feeling. It takes hold of him; it’s
worse than anything Zoom did to him and yet it still feels connected to him, like even from the
grave he is inflicting pain and misery. He is partly responsible for what he feels now; this time is
different, though.

No matter how intense the pain or the fear becomes, Barry has to hold on, has to take a deep breath
and remember that it’s all going to be worth it. Soon, whether or not he gets out of here, he’ll be
holding Nora in his arms. He isn’t trapped in an abandoned asylum with a monster; instead, Barry
is here with the man he loves. It’s just pain; he’s made it through so much already, he can get
through this. He just has to let go of the haunted feelings darkening his mind.

He is about to give birth to his daughter; he won’t let the memories of Zoom or the things he had
done tarnish this beautiful moment. With all his strength he cages the troubled, swirling thoughts,
locking them away, send them off to a remote part of his mind. Coming back into the moment, no
longer held down in the darkness, he can sense the excitement building beneath the pain and
fatigue. Soon, so very soon he’ll get to meet his little girl.

She’ll be beautiful, with chubby red cheeks and hazel eyes that flash with lightning.

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Cisco’s plan works. The glasses shatters into a hundred tiny, frozen glistening pieces, after that the
room erupts in a flurry of motion. Before Barry can even take in their newfound freedom, he is
scooped up in Len’s arms and whisked away to the med bay. Sara and Len help him change into a
gown and settle him on the bed before Caitlin, Cisco and his father come into the room. It’s time;
he’s excited, he’s terrified, he just wants it to be over.

Len and Sara take their rightful places beside him, offering him their hands to hold and
encouraging him to breathe when another contraction wracks his body. At the foot of the bed,
Caitlin is waiting patiently for him to place his feet in the stirrups. He’s scared, he’s trying not to
let the fear and dark memories ruin this moment, but when he thinks about opening his legs,
exposing himself, his scars, he freezes. Sara whispers in his ear, “you’re safe, Barry’ she says,
squeezing his hand in reassurance ‘it’s okay, just take a few deep breaths and do it one leg at a
time.’
Even with Sara’s words of reassurance, it’s still difficult; he has to reach deep within himself for an ember of courage, a gleaming shred of strength. No one rushes him; they promise safety and comfort him with gentle words and tender touches. With courage building in his chest, strengthen igniting in his veins he finally allows Caitlin to guide his legs into his stirrups, closing his eyes, so he doesn’t have to see the reaction to his scars. He knows Caitlin had seen them before when she first examined him all those months ago, and Cisco had witnessed their beginning but his father hadn’t even know they were there.

Henry’s gasp of horror makes his stomach sink; he knows how ghastly they look, thick, purple, raised lines making ugly patterns on pale flesh. Opening his eyes, he finds his father swallowing down his grief or perhaps his rage; he wipes away a tear with a shaky hand. Looking up he catches Barry looking at him, he offers him a small smile, rubbing absently at his leg in an attempt to comfort him. Caitlin settles down between Barry’s open legs, looking up to meet his gaze, she tells him in a gentle voice that she is going to do an internal examination.

Swallows the fear rising in his throat, he turns his gaze towards Len; he isn’t alone, he is safe, it’s going to be okay. His body stiffens when he feels Caitlin’s fingers gently enter him, biting back the cry, the swell of panic in his chest; he lets Len’s blue eyes carry him away. A bright, joyful future stretches out before them, images of them teaching Nora how to talk, to walk and ride a bike carry him away. He is miles from here; they are sitting on the front porch watching Nora ride her first bike, laughing happily. There is a house, a home, every corner filled with happiness; sparkling memories are being made every moment, every day. The darkness can’t reach here; the monsters will not sneak in and steal away the brightness.

This is the future waiting to unfold, it’s on the horizon, and Barry just had to make it through the night, hold on, fight, make it the fire and the smoke one last time, and he’ll be standing on the curve in the path. The fingers probing him will not tear violently into him; they will not leave bruises or draw blood. Those days are over; those days belong to another time. Hands offer comfort, support, they are not cruel or taking and tearing, they are here to hold, to wipe away tears. Violence belongs to the past, the present may be scary and painful, but those touching him will not harm him, will not destroy him.

“I can feel her head.” Caitlin said, slowly removing her fingers from his body, the sensation made him shiver, “When you feel the next contraction start pushing.”

“Oh okay,” he nodded, bracing himself.

A heartbeat later his body tensed; howling scream climbing up his throat as he bore down, pushing, pushing, pushing until the pain subsided. He was left gasping, sweating and gripping hold of Len and Sara’s hands for dear life. The next contraction hit only moments later, crying out he pushed with all the strength he had, body trembling under the effort. Slumping back against the pillows he let out a pitiful sob; the pain was overwhelming, lungs screamed for a rest. There was no time to rest, to sleep, the contractions came wave after wave, tearing howling cries from his throat, bring words of encouragement from the people surrounding him.

It felt like an eternity of agony, of wailing cries and pushing. Push, breath, scream, push, scream, it was all-consuming, there was no escape, not even the white rabbit could lead Barry away from this. It was too much, it was maddening, it felt he was dying. He collapsed back against the pillows, sobbing, choking on air that felt like shards of glass in his throat and gasoline in his lungs. It hurt; it hurt like nothing had ever hurt before. He couldn’t do this; he wasn’t strong enough, he wasn’t, he wasn’t, he couldn’t.
“I can’t do this” he sobbed.

“Yes you can, Barry” Caitlin affirmed, “She’s nearly here, just a few more pushes.”

Pain stole him from the moment; he pushed despite the fatigue, the trembling of his bones. Released from the torment momentarily he sagged back onto the pillows, struggling to refill his lungs, to hold onto the courage, the strength.

“Keep going, Barry, just one more push” Caitlin urged.

“It hurts” he cried “I can’t, I’m not strong enough.”

“You are strong enough, love. I know you can do this.” Len encouraged “just one more push, and you’ll have your little girl.”

Len’s words were the fuel to his fire, embers sparking one last, offering him one last moment of strength. With all his might he pushed, one last scream shattering the world around him, when it died from his lungs he heard the faintest cry. Exhausted, boneless he collapsed back, a sob of relief escaping past parted lips. At the foot of the bed, Caitlin was holding a crying baby; she was so small, so beautiful. Caitlin cut the cord then bundled her up in a blanket, handing her to Henry so he could check her vitals.

“You did great, Barry” Caitlin praised. “You’ve just got to deliver the placenta, now, a few big pushes and it’ll be out.”

Taking a deep breath, he found the last shred of energy and pushed; pushed, trying to ignore the strange sensation he felt when it came out. When he opened his eyes, Henry was making his towards the bed, smiling, teary eyed and holding his precious little girl in his arms.

“Congratulations, son” gently he placed the wiggling baby into Barry’s waiting arms “you have a healthy baby girl.”

“Hi, baby” he cooed, taking in her chubby cheeks, hazel eyes, tiny flailing hands and a small tuft of red hair, her name wasn’t going to be the only thing of his mother’s that she would have. “I am so happy to meet you.”

“Hey, little one, you are the cutest baby” Sara gushed.

“She’s perfect,” Len said, pressing a kiss to Barry’s cheek.

“Yeah, she is” he murmured, feeling fatigue tangle around him, eyelids growing heavy, arms trembling and weak.

“Barry, are you okay?” Caitlin asked, sounding alarmed.

“Just tired” he slurred.

He couldn’t hold his head up; it felt too heavy, arms trembling and darkness swirling in the corner of his vision. He suddenly felt very, very far away, blood turning ice cold in his veins, in the distance he could swear he heard yelling, something about bleeding and transfusions. A voice, close to his ear, said ‘love, this is going to hurt’ and he thinks nothing of it, Nora is here, the pain has stopped. He’s wrong, pain rips through him, shatters the darkness threatening to drown him.

For a few moments clarity takes over, there is something inside him, reaching deep into him, tearing, ripping. Bones begin to shake; there is nothing he can do but scream, scream, *scream* and
hope, pray it ends. Voices are calling to him from afar, telling him it’s okay, just breathe, it’s going to be alright. The voices apologise, and hands try to soothe him, chase away the immense pain, but it’s far too great. He feels like he is being split open, torn apart from the inside.

The evading force leaves him; darkness rushes up to greet him; he allows it to take him. It doesn’t matter now; he is too tired to care. It’s going to be alright, Nora is safe, she is here in his arms, it was okay to let go, sink into the dark. He let it sweep him away, dragging him down, down, down. When he reached the bottom, he couldn’t stop the radiant smile from breaking over his face, because the last thing he had seen before the tremendous pain wracked his body was lightning flashing in his daughter’s hazel eyes.

XxX

It’s a new day when Len opens his eyes, mind foggy and struggling to get the cogs turning. Last night seems like a distant memory, the fear and panic lost to the early hours of the dawn. He hasn’t been asleep more than three and half hours. He’d lost the battle at around four in the morning; he’d been striving off sleep ever since Barry passed out. For a split second, for one heart-wrenching moment, he thought he was going to lose him. Caitlin and Henry were rushing around trying to stop the bleeding and get an IV into him before it was too late.

Len could only watch in horror; he barely heard Caitlin tell them that only part of Barry’s placenta had come out and she would have to reach inside his uterus to get the remaining part and hopefully that would stop the bleeding. Those words snapped him back to attention, turning towards Barry he pressed his lips against his ear and whispered to him that this was going to hurt. He wasn’t prepared for the scream that tore from Barry’s throat, shrill as a banshee’s cry, it will never leave him and neither will what happened next.

Nora’s skin sparked, zapping with yellow lightning, it skittered across her pink flesh and danced in her eyes. The electricity seeped from her, pouring into Barry, they had to take a step back for their own safety. The scene before them was astonishing. In a matter of minutes, it was over lingering bolts of lightning crackling and zapping over exposed skin. Nora let out a loud wail, and Barry lay motionless. Len was frozen in place, staring in awe at the tiny baby, fussing baby, snapping out of his daze he rushed forward, once Nora was safely cradled in his arms her crying stopped.

Nora saved Barry’s life, the bleeding stopped, and his vitals returned to normal. He was going to be okay; he would wake up when his mind and body were ready and when he did he would discover that he had his speed again. The tests that Caitlin ran confirmed he had the speed force back in his system; whatever Nora had done not only saved his life but returned his powers. Cisco and Caitlin were trying to figure out exactly how this happened, Len honestly didn’t care, he was just grateful that both Barry and Nora were alive and well.

Nora was a perfectly healthy baby girl; she was a little on the small side, but that was too be expected. She was beautiful with her chubby cheeks, hazel eyes and vibrant red hair that Len learnt came from Barry’s mother. She was perfect in every way. Deciding it was time to get up; he heaved himself of the flimsy mattress, it was only once he sat up that he realised there was someone else in the room. Henry was sitting at Barry’s side, a slumbering baby resting in his arms. Len hadn’t found himself alone with Henry before; they hadn’t exactly sat down and got to know each other. It was probably time to start, they were both a part of Barry’s life, so there was no point making things awkward or having any hostility between them. Len wasn’t very good with people, he tended to rub them the wrong way, and he’d never in his life sought after the approval of anyone. He didn’t care what people thought of him, but he doesn’t exactly want Henry to hate him either.
He’ll start small. He gets up off the bed, body tired, sore and heavy. Henry doesn’t notice him approach the bed; he clears his throat awkwardly when he reaches Barry’s side, instinctively taking his hand. His skin is cool to the touch, colour slightly paler than usual. For some reason Barry’s body wasn’t healing, when Nora returned his powers or shared hers with him, whatever it was she did, the bleeding internal stopped, potentially saving his life. The small injuries caused by the birth and Caitlin having to remove his placenta hadn’t yet healed.

It could possible take a few hours, Len didn’t know for sure; he didn’t exactly understand half the things Cisco and Caitlin were saying to him. What he did know was that Barry was alive, there were no life-threatening injuries, and he’d wake up soon. Until then Len would stay by his side, he’d attempt to make some sort of peace with Henry, and he’d take care of Nora. At the moment, though, he could really use some coffee and maybe some food; his exhausted body could certainly use the energy.

“I’m going to get some coffee” he announced, “would you like some?”

Henry looked up from Nora; the adoration sparkling in his eyes made Len smile; at last, he had accepted his granddaughter. “I could use the walk” he stood up, making his way over to Len, carefully placing the sleeping baby into his arms. “I’ll see if I can find us some food, too.”

“Thanks,” he said, gaze never leaving the precious bundle in his arms. “She’s perfect, isn’t she?”

“Yeah, she is” he smiled, stroking her pink cheek. “You really care for my son, don’t you?”

Len looked up, answering with the God’s honest truth. “More than words can say.”

Henry nodded, looking from Len to his son “I’m glad he has you. After all, he’s been through, not just with Zoom, but everything, I’m glad he has someone special at last, someone to always come home too.”

“Barry saw something good inside of me even when no else could” he wasn’t sure why he was telling Henry this, the words were coming free on their own accord. “He saw the parts of myself I thought I lost long ago, if it weren’t for him then I probably wouldn’t be here right now.” Looking down at Nora, he couldn’t imagine being anywhere else, but here, there was no greater place than right here, at Barry’s side. “I’ll always do my best to protect them, protect them both. I promise you that.”

“You make him happy, that’s something I thought he’d never be again after what Zoom did,” he said, voice tight with emotion “you helped him to get better, to find a semblance of normalcy and happiness, that’s what’s important. We’ll all do our best to protect him, to protect Nora, but I think you and I both know that life throws plenty of hurdles our way. So if you just promise to make him happy, make, smile, make him feel loved then that’s enough. That’s all I ever wanted for him.”

Len smiled, fighting down the swell of emotions and swallowing the lump building in his throat. “I’ll do everything and anything for him, for them, always.”

XxX

The darkness is pleasant; there are no taunting memories, no monsters hiding, waiting, in the shadows. There is nothing. It’s the first time he’s found the dark peaceful in months. It shifts, there is noise, chattering voices drifting by. He follows the voices, rising up, up, up out of the abyss, opening heavy lids to find himself surrounded by family and friends. At first, he struggles to remember where he is and why his family and friends have gathered around him.
Fog clings to him, tethering him to the peaceful nothingness he’d found himself submerged in, then there is the faintest sound, a barely there cry, and the memories come rushing back in glittering pieces. There had been darkness; it was cold, a mirror, his water broke, he gave birth. The jumbled pieces slot together, last night replaying in his mind with perfect clarity. He takes a shuddering breath, memories and emotions raging beneath the surface. He studies the faces standing over him, taking in their relieved smiles and weary eyes. When he finds Len the rest of the room fades to grey, all he can see is the man he loves nursing his sleeping daughter; it’s the most beautiful sight he’s ever seen.

“Hi” his throat hurts from screaming, he tries again, “Hi, baby.”

Caitlin helps him to sit up, propping him up with pillows, once he is resting comfortable Len places Nora into his waiting arms, she is the most precious gift he’s ever been given. There is no stopping the swell of tears, the wave of devotion surging through his chest. Nora fuses, failing her tiny hands in the air, Len strokes softly at her brow, her hand reaches out, taking hold of his pinkie, her fist is no bigger than the ring he wears. Barry can’t help but laugh, happiness bubbling to life within him. She can barely even open her eyes, but she already knows who her parents are.

The thought catches him off guard, for so long now it felt like she was Len’s, even if it were just a beautiful lie, but just because he wasn’t her blood didn’t mean he couldn’t be her father. When she grew up, she’d ask about her other father, and perhaps one day Barry would tell her the truth. While she was still young, innocent, he’d love nothing more than to let her believe Len was her dad. It was something he’d have to talk to Len about, it was a lot of reasonability, and they hadn’t been together all that long.

Catching the tears of joy, the adoration glistening in Len’s eyes he knew he’d love nothing more than to be her father, the love Len held for her burnt as brightly as Barry’s did. It was a conversation for another time, now the emotions and fog were receding the memories of what happened after he gave birth were resurfacing. There had been pain, immense, overwhelming pain that made him feel like he was being split open. There had been panicked voices, a strange, zapping energy coursing through his veins. No, not strange, familiar. It had been so long since he felt the speed force pulse beneath his skin. An image of Nora’s eyes flicker in his mind; they had flashed with lightning, she was a speedster.

“What happened,” he asked hoarsely, looking around at the surrounding faces.

“What do you remember?” Caitlin spoke first; she was standing on his left, worrying her bottom lip between her teeth.

“I remember holding Nora, I saw a flash of lightning in her eyes then I started to get dizzy, tired” he replied, “the last thing I felt was an immense pain.”

“Part of you placenta stayed attached to the lining of your uterus” Caitlin answered “I had to manually remove it in hopes of stopping the bleeding, so that’s what caused the pain. I’m very sorry, Barry. I can’t imagine how awful that must have been for you.”

“What happened after, that?” he pushed, sensing a strange, uneasy tension in the room “I have a vague memory of feeling electric current run through my body” Th memory of Zoom torturing him with the cattle prod emerged, he locked it away. What he felt last night had been different, it had been the speed force, he was sure of it.

“We were having trouble stopping the bleeding,” Henry said, voice grave “we could have lost you if it weren’t for Nora.”

The thought catches him off guard, for so long now it felt like she was Len’s, even if it were just a beautiful lie, but just because he wasn’t her blood didn’t mean he couldn’t be her father. When she grew up, she’d ask about her other father, and perhaps one day Barry would tell her the truth. While she was still young, innocent, he’d love nothing more than to let her believe Len was her dad. It was something he’d have to talk to Len about, it was a lot of reasonability, and they hadn’t been together all that long.

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“We were having trouble stopping the bleeding,” Henry said, voice grave “we could have lost you if it weren’t for Nora.”
“Nora?” had the speed force he felt belonged to her? “What exactly happened? I can sense there is something you’re not telling me.”

“Nora saved your life, Scarlet” Len stated, sitting down on the bed next to him “she somehow channelled her power into you, and it stopped the bleeding. She is a speedster as we predicted and it appears she gave you your powers back.”

There was the answer he’d been terrified of, ever since he first felt the trickle of electricity spark to life under his skin. Only he didn’t feel it now; he’d always felt the presence of the speed force, there had always been a pleasant strumming in the background. Searching inward he found no spark, no flicker of the lightning dancing through his bloodstream, he just felt tired, sore, especially between his legs. “I don’t feel it” He looked to Cisco and Caitlin, “I don’t feel the speed force.”

“The tests we’ve run suggest it’s there, it’s just at a lower percentage than it used to be” Caitlin explained “the readings match yours from the night of the Particle Accelerator explosion, over the following nine months that levels grew stronger. When you woke up from your coma it became more apparent; it’s also when the Meta-Human gene showed.”

“Our theory is Nora somehow used her speed to reignite yours” Cisco clarified, “we think when Zoom took your speed a small part was left behind and when Nora sent the lightning through you, it re-awoke it.”

“So what does this mean?” The words are sharp glass rising up his throat, he’s terrified, and he hopes that they can see that, that they won’t say ‘it means you’re The Flash again’ because he isn’t sure he can ever be that again. In time he’ll come to terms with having his powers back, he has missed running at incredible, impossible speeds, but he hasn’t missed being a hero. He buried that part of him under a tree in the middle of a cold autumn night months ago, he wasn’t sure he’d ever be ready to unearth The Flash.

“It means whatever you want it to mean” Caitlin offered him a gentle smile. “We don’t we let you and Nora get some rest?”

“Okay,” he nodded, he was starting to feel overwhelmed and some time alone, to think, to process would be much appreciated. “Thank you.”

“It’s no problem, Barry,” she said, “also a fair warning, you are going to be very sore for a while so stay in bed as much you as can, okay?”

“Sounds perfect to me” he replied, feeling exhaustion creep back in.

“We’ll be right outside if you need us, Barr,” Joe said, steering Iris out of the room.

Slowly everyone trickled out, leaving Barry alone with Len, Sara and his beautiful baby girl. They both sat beside him on the bed, all eyes on the slumbering baby, who at only minutes old saved a life, saved his life. She truly was a hero in the making. Barry had long ago accepted that might never be The Flash again and that was okay. He had a new purpose in life, a new reason to get up in the morning. There was no pressure on him to give more than he could, to be more than he was.

It doesn’t matter to anyone if he is a brave hero or a broken mess; they have shown him time and time again that they love him no matter what. A swell of joy and pride blossoms in his chest, after months of suffering, months of rebuilding, recovering, he’s finally here; finally at the curve in the path. He faced his fears; he fought his way through the pain, walked through the fire and straight through the smoke to this very moment, he’s right on the cusp of the better, brighter days. He’s
finally standing at the fork in the road; he just has to move forward in the right direction.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, so I know the birth featured in this chapter is very impractical, and I might have side-stepped some details, but hopefully in the past when I mentioned Barry getting his period and feeling different somewhat explained that his anus is also like a vagina. I could have avoided this or changed his anatomy but ever since the start I wanted to write that birth scene. It could have possible fit in with C-section, but I wanted the rawness of it, the emotion. Nora saving Barry’s life had been on the table for so long now that it was so amazing to finally write it and I hoped you felt the importance around it as much I did. Things are going to start looking up for Barry very soon, I’m sad to say we are nearing the end, I’ve been writing this story for months so when it’s all over I’m not sure what I’ll do with my time. Thankfully there are few more chapters to be written and a happy ending sitting pretty and shiny on the horizon. I will see you all in the next chapter :)

Begin Again

When did everything fall apart
when did the nightmares start
why is it so hard
to find a way to begin again
oh to begin again

Rachel Platten - Begin Again

The warm water cascades down around him, trickling over bare skin, easing tensions from tired, aching muscles. It feels heavenly, chases away the deep chill in his bones and rejuvenates a foggy mind. The bathroom at Star Labs doesn’t have the same cosy atmosphere like the one back home, but he was in dire need of a shower, to wash away the sweat and clear his mind. Caitlin wanted to keep him at Star Labs until day’s end, just to be on the safe side. Considering how exhausted he felt he wasn’t about to argue with her, he had nearly died last night after all.

Nausea rolls through his stomach; he places his hand on the space Nora used to be, it’s a little strange to not find her there, right beneath his fingertips. He can’t help but think back to the first few months; it seemed impossible to him now that he hated her so much. Joy exploded in his chest like fireworks every time he looked at her, spellbound by her beauty, her presence. Never again would he have ill feelings towards his daughter, she was his light, his joy. She was everything Zoom never had the chance to be.

Surely once he had been as innocent as Nora, then it was ripped away, forging the monster that shattered lives. Or maybe he was never innocent, perhaps there was always darkness within his heart, counting down to the day he became a beast. Whatever caused the darkness inside his heart, the evil within his mind was not part of Nora. She wasn’t even a day old, and she had saved his life. Her destiny was to be a hero, to be good. She could do better than Barry; she could carry on his legacy if what he had was even worth calling that.

He could pick up the mantle again, step back into the scarlet suit and race around the city, save the day, be the hero. Those days belonged to the past, belonged to the person who didn’t know the true meaning of fear or know what the sharp edge of a knife felt like. The Flash was buried beneath a tree, lost to another world; the person left in the carnage would have to be enough. And he was enough, his family, his friends, Len, they all loved him. They didn’t care if he was a hero or the old Barry Allen; they loved him no matter what.

Sighing, body tired and legs weak he went to turn off the faucet, wanting nothing more than to crawl back into bed and curl up with Nora and Len. Just before his hand reached the handle, he saw a flicker of something on the white tiled floor. Upon looking down, he saw the water swirling down the drain turning pink. Air caught in his throat, his lungs, memories violently forcing him back in time, to another place a whole world away. The floor beneath his feet is not glistening clean white, it’s grey from grime, from all the other hundreds of feet that have stood here.

The water is tinted bright red that slowly fades into a pale pink. His body hurts, trembles, legs struggling to keep him upright. His gaze is transfixed on the water, watching the blood escape down the drain with the water and soap. Zoom doesn’t always let him shower after he rapes him, but today he behaved, he was a good boy, this is his reward. Not that it makes a damn difference; the water and the soap aren’t enough to cleanse his body, his soul.
He may have washed away the blood, the semen, but when he gets out he’ll still feel dirty, *used*. He’ll step out and redress in the same clothes that smell of sweat, fear and sex; he’ll return to the locked off ward and wait. Zoom will be back; he’ll sneak in at the early hours of the morning or in the late hours of the evening. He’ll force himself on Barry, taking, breaking and claiming. It doesn’t matter if he scrubs his skins raw, if he used all the soap in the world, Zoom’s only going to make him bleed again, make him *dirty* again.

The grey tiles fade away, taking a deep, shuddering breath Barry finds himself once more in the Star Labs bathroom, curled up on the shower floor. He isn’t sure how long he’s been here, the water is still warm, and no one has come budging in to make sure that he is okay. Rising to unsteady feet, he shuts off the water, climbs out of the shower and wraps the towel around his body. It takes longer than it should to get dressed, between his legs throbs painfully, the stitches sometimes pulling uncomfortably. He’s used to this kind of pain; he knows that walking and sitting is impossible and that the bleeding can start up again any moment.

This pain is different, though, it’s from giving birth, the bleeding is normal, he’d read about it in the papers Caitlin gave to him. It’s just a period, he’s okay, he’s safe, and once Barry gets dressed, he’ll head back to his room and crawl into bed with his daughter and the man he loves. A knock sounds at the door, startling him, he’s only half dressed but he calls out to invite the person in, they must have started to worry about him after all. He probably shouldn’t have been so stubborn, insisting that he could do this by himself.

He’d need the time alone, though, he knew wasn’t going to be getting much down time in the future so Barry would take what he could get. He needed this time to process, last night had unsettled him, and the trauma of Nora’s birth and the return of his powers were a lot to deal with. on top of everything else. A few moments of silence under a steaming shower had been what he needed, or so he thought, apparently he couldn’t even do this simple task without getting triggered. Still, he had pulled himself back from the brink; he could at least be proud of that.

Caitlin opened the door, smiling tenderly at him. “Sorry, I meant to give you these before” she held out a packet of pads to Barry; he tried not to feel awkward as he accepted them.

“Thanks, I noticed a bit of blood while I was in the shower” he replied, choosing not to bring up the panic attack, there were still some things he preferred to only share with Len and Sara.

“You’ll have some heavy bleeding for the next few weeks,” Caitlin explained, “if they get too heavy or clotted you need to let me know, okay?”

“Yeah, okay,” he said, feeling a blush creep over his face. After everything Barry's been through with her, he’s still embarrassed by his anatomy. He should be proud of his body, it survived being struck by lightning, it survived every horrid, wicked thing Zoom did to it and it survived childbirth. If it weren’t for his anatomy, then he wouldn’t have a beautiful daughter, the little light of his life. It was time to stop being ashamed, embarrassed; his body was something to be cherished.

For so long his body belonged to Zoom then when he started feeling like he owned it again he gave a huge part of the that ownership to Nora, now at long last, it was finally his. Every freckle, every mole and scar belonged to him. It was an amazing feeling, knowing his skin, his hands, his lips, belonged completely to him once more. Cruel hands, sharp teeth and bruising fingers may have touched him, explored every inch of this skin, but he wouldn’t allow those memories to hold ownership of his body.

He would be proud of its strength, admire the way it worked, he would continue to accept the scars because like Len said, they showed that he had survived and that wasn’t something to be ashamed of. Neither were his periods or the stretch marks on his stomach; they were a part of him, each a
story to unfold and tell. He doesn’t realise he’s crying until Caitlin steps closer, a delicate hand pressing ever so gently against his cheek, a painted thumbnail sweeping away a tear.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah” he smiled through the tears “I’m happy… I’m just, finally happy.”

Caitlin mirrored his smile, her own big brown eyes glistening with tears. “I’m glad, Barry. You deserve to be.”

He embraced, hugging her tighter then he had held her in months. “Thank you, Cait, for everything.”

“You don’t have to thank me, Barr” she replied, voice muffled with tears “I’ll always be here for you.”

“I know” he eased back, holding her at arm’s length “I’m going to get changed, thank you for the pads.”

“No problem,” she said, wiping away a few stray tears “I’ll wait outside for you.”

He nodded, watching her leave then turning back to the task at hand. A few minutes later he walked out to meet Caitlin; she looped her arm through his as they made their way back to the Cortex. By the time Barry got back into bed, he was struggling to stay awake, the pain between his legs having grown worse from the walk back. Caitlin left him with Len and Sara while she went to get him some painkillers; he shifted uncomfortably on the bed, hating the awkward feeling of the pad.

When Len placed Nora into his arms, all thoughts of the discomfort washed away. Nora could chase away any pain, ease any distress. He should get some sleep himself before she woke for her next feeding, but how could he close his eyes and miss a moment of this? He’d had to force himself to leave her for the shower; it was only his need for a moment of reprieve that pushed him into action. Now his mind is clear of circling, anxious thoughts he can focus on the important things. Like the beautiful baby, he holds in his arms and the man he loves, who is sitting beside him, looking as weary as he feels.

“You should get some sleep” Barry whispered, as not to wake Nora “both of you” he looked at Sara, her hair styled in a messy bun, and dark circles hang under usually bright blue eyes. “We’re not going to be getting much of it anytime soon, so we might as well get some while we can.”

“I agree with you there” Sara kissed his cheek then walked towards the spare bed, kicking off her shoes before crawling in under the covers.

Len stayed a moment longer, hesitating before Barry persuaded him to get some rest. Toeing off his shoes he crawled into beside Sara. Barry couldn’t wait to get home, to sleep in his own bed; there was room for all of three them there. This would have to do, for now, he’d let them sleep while he nursed Nora, breathing in her sweet scent, drinking in her soft features, tonight he could sleep, safe and sound in their arms.

XxX

Len wakes to a high-pitched cry, instinctively he sits up, ready to comfort Barry from whatever nightmare has awakened him in the dead of night, but the cry does not belong to him. It’s Nora; she’s wailing loudly from her place in the bassinet. Barry is already making his way towards her, body moving stiffly, face pinched in pain. Caitlin had warned them he would be sore and tired for
about a week, and he’d need to take it very easy. It’s why he had stayed over with Sara so they could help out; Barry needed to let his mind rest and body heal.

Sara had already stirred awake beside him at the sound; she untangled herself from the blankets, announced she was going to get Nora’s bottle and ordered Barry to sit down. Reluctantly he obeyed, making his way gingerly back into bed, Nora fussing in his arms. Len helped him get comfortable, tucking pillows behind him and placing one on his lap so he could rest his tired arms. Nora settled, happy to suck on Barry’s fingers until her bottle arrived.

“Do you need any more Tylenol?” Len asked.

“I’m okay at the moment, thanks” he murmured, voice thick with sleep “it just twinges a little when I walk and the, ah, the pad makes me feel a little uncomfortable.”

A light shade of pink blossomed on his cheeks; it would have been endearing if Len didn’t know that Barry had often felt awkward about his anatomy. He’d never outright spoken to him or Sara about it, but he’d spent enough time with Barry to know when something bothered him. Len hadn’t had any experience in the past with carries; he had practically raised Lisa, though so he knew all about periods and the long list of symptoms that went with them. Barry shouldn’t feel embarrassed or awkward about his body; he was beautiful, especially right now, surrounded by a golden halo.

“You don’t have to feel uncomfortable talking to me about these things, Scarlet” Len declared, kissing his exposed shoulder. He truly looked gorgeous in the dim light, nursing his child, dressed in a shirt a few sizes too big for him. One day, when more time had passed, and Barry didn’t shiver or panic at intimate touches, he’d show him just how much he loved his body. He’d worship every inch of skin, kiss every scar, remind him that there is pleasure to be found under the sheets. For the moment he’ll tell him with words, with gentle kisses and tender touches.

“You body is something to be marvelled at” he reached out to touch Nora; she seemed impossibly small compared to his hand “just look at what it created.”

Barry looked to Len, eyes shining with love and devotion, a heart-warming smile gracing his face. “How did I get so lucky?”

Len grinned, feeling his chest swell with emotions he never dreamt of experiencing. “I ask myself that every day.”

Like always, he lets Barry make the first move, meeting him half way in sweet, leisurely kiss. Nora began to cry, ending their kiss all too soon, sighing tired Barry soothed her, promising that food was coming.

“I used to be bullied because of what I am,” Barry said, picking up the thread of their conversation “being a carrier, a nerd, bisexual, whatever was different about me was fuel for fire to the other kids. When I first got my period I was in gym class, and I collapsed to the ground in pain, I told people my appendix ruptured, but word somehow got out.” Len listened silently; he had the feeling Barry had never spoken to any about this before. “Someone filled my locker with pads and tampons and when I opened it they all came tumbling out. I was mortified; I hated my body so much.”

Absentmindedly he wipes at his eyes, they shimmer in the light “I started taking the pill, and eventually, the pranks died down, but it followed me all through high school. When I got to college, I didn’t tell a soul about being a carrier. I was so ashamed for so long.” He kisses Nora’s forehead, a single tear drop landing on her head, trembling fingers brush it away. “I’m not going to be ashamed of my body anymore, not my periods, my scars or my stretch marks. I made something
incredible with this body, and I won’t be ashamed of that.”

“You shouldn’t be, love,” Len whispered, “your body has survived so much, you have survived so much, it’s time to celebrate that, to appreciate it.”

Barry turned to him again, tears making tracks down his face; Len kissed them away, feather light touches, promises of devotion, acceptance, love and understanding.

“I love you” Barry whispered against his mouth, tongue skimming across Len’s bottom lip in invitation.

Len responded; letting Barry pull his strings, take complete control of the kiss. He’d never given himself over to anyone like this, never allowed a single soul to have this much power over him. He trusted Barry with his heart, with his life. In a time far off he would have his turn to take the reins, he’d be able to let his hands wander, explore, and he could kiss Barry as greedily as he desired. That didn’t mean what they had, what they were doing wasn’t wonderful. The gentle, laziness of the kisses were a welcome change to his past needy, lust-fuelled ones; he was perfectly content with the tender touches. He was just happy to be Barry’s at long last.

“I love you too” he murmured, lips red and tingling from the kiss “so much.”

Nora stirred again between them, bawling loudly, Barry tried to pacify her, this time the tears would not stop. Sara reappeared a second later, blinking tiredly as she stumbled her way towards the bed, handing Barry the bottle before crawling back in next to him.

“Sorry, I may have forgotten how to do heat milk efficiently.” Sara apologised, resting her head on Barry’s shoulders and sighing heavily. “A whole summer of babysitting wasted.”

“It’s fine, Sara” Barry reassured, Nora drank greedily, “It’s not like I’ve had any experience before, so I can’t exactly judge.”

“Well, it’s a good thing you’ve got us” Sara murmured “Did Len tell you about the time we kidnapped him as a baby? He was so adorable.”

“You kidnapped yourself as a baby?”

The bemusement in Barry’s eyes was adorable. “One of the Time Masters lackey’s was trying to erase us from the timeline by killing our younger selves.” Len informed, “Kidnapping ourselves was Rip’s best plan of action.”

Barry laughed, shifting Nora in his arm’s so he could burp her, watching him with her was never going to get old. Every time Len looked at them, he felt pride swell in his chest, a surge of devotion and the need to nurture and protect coming to life, even stronger than before. He couldn’t help but feel like she was his that feeling had stirred awake long ago and seeing her now only intensified it. Apart from Lisa, family, blood, had always meant neglect, abuse, but with Barry, he had a chance to have a real family, one of love, happiness and joy.

Both of them deserved to have a family, to give Nora the best life they possibly could and if Barry asked him to be part of that, from now to the end of days, he’d say yes. He never imagined he’d be a father, he never imagined he could love someone the way he does Barry, and yet fate plucked his strings and sent him this way. The journey may have been dark, painful and full of terror but now they’ve reached the light, it’s soft and golden and growing brighter by the day. This was just a taste of the future, it wouldn’t come easily, nothing ever did, but it was worth the fight, worth the wait, because it was going to be everything they deserved.
He’s exhausted, drained of every last ounce of strength. If he let his eyes slip close then he would inevitably succumb to sleep. He can’t surrender; to sleep is to dream and in the depths of his mind a new terrifying nightmare has unfolded. The nightmare rolls in like storm clouds, wreaking havoc and causing destruction to his fragile, weary mind. Out of the dark, born from fears that have been embedded deeply, comes a new horror show, another night terror to plague his sleep.

He no longer finds himself in the asylum; he is home; waking in the dead of night to the sound of Nora’s distressed cries. He’s alone in the bed, room pitch black until the light illuminates the darkness, scattering the shadows. When he sits up, body stiff and sore, he discovers he isn’t alone at all. Zoom is standing by the bassinet, holding Nora in his arms, she wiggles and wails desperately. Barry doesn’t even have time to panic or recoil in fear; he is lurching towards the monster that holds his daughter. He never makes it to her in time, his hands grasp at empty air, and the sheer force of panic drops him to his knees, a scream tearing from his throat.

When he startles awake, scream dying in his lungs, he jumps out of bed and rushes to his daughter’s side, his scream having woken her, it’s probably woken the whole house. It’s only been two days since the nightmares started but between that and Nora’s around-the-clock care his body is wracked, mind a mess of thoughts and emotions. He should let Len or Sara take one of the late night feedings, then he’d have no reason not to sleep, and he doesn’t want to watch Zoom steal his baby girl again.

Nightmares and a fussy baby aren’t the only things keeping him from sleep; the pain between his legs has gotten progressively worse over the last day. He’s been overdoing it, declining all offered help, forcing himself to get every bottle, change every diaper and attend to her every need. He knows his family and Len and Sara are here to help and would happily pitch in. Ever since the nightmares, he can’t stomach the thought of letting anyone else near her. Which is ridiculous, no one is going to harm her. He is so tired and emotionally drained that he can’t find an end to the disturbing thoughts and consuming fear.

He starts to cry, no longer able to hold back the river. Fatigue, pain, hormones and emotions unravel him, setting loose, broken sobs and cascading tears. If he just slept, laid his weary head to rest then when the morning came, he might feel alright, but when he closes his eyes, he finds Zoom waiting. Moving makes the pain between his legs flare and sleep slips away; vivid memories flickering to life, phantom hands ghosting over skin, there is a sensation of him inside stirring nausea in his gut.

God, he should sleep, let his mind clear, rest, then he would surely be fine, better. He’s worked himself into a mess, the tears won’t stop now they’ve started, and he can’t quite catch his breath. If he doesn’t calm down, he’ll have a panic attack and most likely wake Nora, who is finally sleeping. He goes to get up; he just wants to hold her, let the warmth and smell of her chase away the storm raging within his head. When he attempts to rise the pain inside flares, it’s too much, too familiar. He collapses back to the bed, a weak cry escaping past chapped lips.

“Barr, are you okay?”

Sara appeared in the doorway, rushing towards him when she saw the state he was in. They were at Lisa’s apartment today, Barry thought a change of scenery might help lift his mood, and he was tired of finding his family hovering around him. They were trying to help, like always, but he still didn’t like being crowded. Len and Sara knew were well aware of that, they knew when to step back and when to push; it was a song and dance they knew all too well. It was probably time he let them push, let them in, so he answered Sara honestly.
“I’m so tired and sore” he divulged. “I keep having nightmares about Zoom taking Nora, now I don’t want to go to sleep or let her out of my sight. I know I should let you guys help, but I can’t stop because if I do, I will fall asleep or think and if I think then I will feel, and I am in so much pain.” He knows he is rambling, words jagged and broken by sobs “the pain reminds me of being raped, and my head is tricking my body, making me imagine his hands on me or feel him inside me,” he folds into himself, crying uncontrollably.

“It’s okay, shh, it’s okay” Sara gathered him into her arms, “Just breathe, Barry. You’re safe, Nora is safe. It’s all going to okay.”

Desperately he inhales deeply, filling burning lungs, “It really hurts, Sara.”

“When did you last take some Tylenol?”

“About three hours ago, Len gave it to me.”

“Okay, would you like me to call Caitlin?” She asked, “She might have something stronger to give you.”

Barry nodded. He was trying to pull himself together, to calm his racing heart and end the flow of tears, only to find himself breaking further. “I thought I was going to be better now; I thought these God awful days were behind me.”

“Honey, what you are experiencing now is most likely just from lack of sleep, and the major hormone changes your body is undergoing” Sara reasoned, holding him at arm’s length so she could meet his teary gaze. “It’s going to be okay; you are going to be fine. Len and I have got you. We will look after Nora tonight, okay? You need to let your body and mind rest. I know you don’t want to face any more nightmares, but you need to sleep or else you won’t be of any use to Nora. I’m going to get my cell and call Caitlin; I want you to get into bed and try to relax.”

He nodded. After Sara had left, he went to slip under the covers just as Nora started to stir. Despite the dull throbbing, he struggled towards the bassinet, scooping her up before settling back into bed, wincing as he sat down. Her cries grew louder, he should get her bottle, he’s honestly not sure he’ll make it to the kitchen, though; his legs are quivering just from that small walk. Sara returned a moment later, cell in one hand and bottle in the other. Barry accepted the bottle and started to feed his hungry daughter.

“Caitlin is on her way over” Sara announced, pocketing the phone “she should be her soon.”

“Thank you” he murmured “I’m sorry for all this.”

“Barry, you just had a baby, and you’re still recovering from everything you’ve been through, you are allowed to have a bout of baby blues” Sara declared, with a soft smile. “Tell me about the nightmare, what happens in it?”

“There isn’t much to say” he shrugged, eyes never leaving Nora’s sweet face, the feel of her against his chest, in his arms, was calming the storm. “I wake up in the dream and Zoom is standing by the bassinet holding Nora. She is crying, I lurch at Zoom, but I’m too late.”

“I want you to try something, okay,” Sara said “I want you to close your eyes, let the dream unfold around you and when it gets to the part where Zoom takes her, you are going to reach him. You are going to be fast enough to stop him.”

“I can try,” he mumbled. “Not right now, though,” he shook his heads, trying to shake away the fog, the anxiety.
“It’s okay, you can do it whenever you are ready” she rubbed soothingly at his arms, knowing that gentle touches always helped ground him. “Once Caitlin’s seen to you I’m going to take Nora so you can get some rest, is that okay?”

He nodded, reluctantly, his desire to look after Nora pushing him to make the right choice. Sara was right; he wasn’t going to be any good to her in this state. He needed to sleep, give his body some much-needed rest and his mind a chance to piece itself back together.

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Barry spends the rest of the day dozing after Caitlin gave him a mild sedative to help him relax. He doesn’t like the feeling of being drugged, the heaviness of his limbs make him feel vulnerable, weak, the loss of time is disorientating. Noises float in the air; tired eyes struggle to open, catching only glimpse of the world around him. He sees Len feeding Nora then blinks, and she is asleep, Sara is sitting beside him, hunched over her art book. Blink, and she’s gone, replaced by Len who is reading a book, Blink, and he’s alone, blink, and it’s dark, the smell of dinner wafting in.

Finally the heaviness, the grey fog recedes, allowing him to at last take in the surroundings. Sitting up takes more effort than it should, dizziness makes the room tilt and spin, taking several deep breaths helps ease the feeling. Looking around the room he finds himself alone, not even Nora is in her bassinet. He would panic, only the drug lingering in his system stops him from feeling such an intense emotion. He never liked sedatives, they make him numb, cut off and untethered to the world.

It’s disconcerting, reminding him of the days when the white rabbit led him away to his fantasy world of paper flowers and cotton candy clouds. He won’t allow himself to get lost in the numbness or a world of imaginary things. Closing his eye, focusing his senses he takes in the heaviness of the blankets against his legs, the smell of spices drifting down the hallway, the sound of socked feet walking on hardwood flooring. Upon opening his eyes, he finds Len standing in the doorway, Nora sleeping soundly in his arms. At the sight of them, his little family, the numbness releases its hold on him, floating up, up and away.

“Hey” he greets them voice hoarse from lack of use “how long have I been out?”

“Most of the day” Len answered, crossing the threshold and crossing the short distance to bed. “It’s about a quarter to eight now.” Len sits down next to him, eyes tired and brows pinched in concern. “How are you feeling now, Scarlet?”

“Better” he forced a smile, not liking the sight of distress on Len’s face, “I’m sorry, I over did it, and I fell into a pit of despair.”

“You don’t have to be sorry, love” Len reassured, leaning forward to kiss him tenderly on the forehead “not ever, okay?”

“Okay” Barry nodded, eyes lids growing heavy once more “before I succumb to sleep again, there’s something I want to ask you.”

“Ask away, Scarlet.”

He’s wanted to ask this for awhile now; the words have been teetering on the tip of his tongue for weeks, maybe even months, he just hasn’t found the courage to speak them. The fear of rejection is what has kept them at bay, kept them waiting patiently to be set free. There is no reason to worry, to fret, Len loves him, he loves Nora. They are a family, even if they are a little broken. It’s okay, though because they are also strong, so strong. At last, he opens his mouth to let the words out, lets
them leap into the air and settle over Len.

“Will you be Nora’s father?”

Len’s eyes flicker with a variety of emotions. Barry wished he could hear his thoughts, get a glimpse into his carefully guarded mind. When the emotions play out, only one is left, the victor of whatever battle had been raging within his head. Barry had prepared himself for a number of reactions; he wouldn’t hold it against Len if he didn’t want this. He didn’t sign up to be a father, even if Barry may feel like he was Nora’s father already, that didn’t make it so.

He’d devoted so much of his time to Barry, saved him from Zoom, the darkness, the nightmares; he didn’t owe Barry anymore of his life. He’d given his heart to him, never leaving Barry’s side or letting him get lost in the grief. Here he was nursing his daughter, taking care of her when he didn’t have too. The pure happiness and swell of tears in his icy blue told Barry all he needed to know. Len leant towards him, capturing his lips in a shaky kiss. When they parted Barry could see him trying to blink away the tears; the sight made warmth blossom in his chest, chasing away the coldness that seemed to linger there ever since Zoom.

“I’d love nothing more than to be her father” Len finally said, emphasising the last part “and I promise you, I will be so much better than my own father.”

“Len” Barry shifted closer, cupping Len’s face between his palms “I know you’ll never be like your father. I met the guy, remember? I never saw even a flicker of him in you. I only saw the good.”

Len closed his eyes, trying to hide the tears that made tracks down his face; Barry leant forward, kissing them away. Tiredly, he rested his forehead against Len’s, their breath mingling, hearts beating as one. They stayed like this for what feels like an eternity, breathing the same air, living with the same heart. Only their moment ends too soon, reality rushing back in, catapulting them back into the wild, mad world. Nora has woken, Sara is in the doorway telling them dinner is ready and the tranquillity of the moment lost. It’s okay; it’s fine, Barry can face the world as long as he has these two by his side, guiding him, helping him to stand again every time he stumbles and falls.

***

Later that evening, once Barry and Len have gotten into bed, he does what Sara suggested early that day. Closing his eyes, leaving the safety of Len’s strong embrace and letting moon lit room fade away, he replaces it with the eerie, lonely, dimness of his room back home. The room comes to life around him, every nook, shadow and speck of dust bursting to life. Zoom stands menacingly by the bassinet, malicious intent glinting in his eyes as he looks down at the distressed baby squirming in his grasp. Barry leaps out of bed, speeding across the room and snatching his daughter from the monster’s clutches.

He spins around to find Zoom glaring at him, shouting, raging, eyes oozing black. He charges towards them, this time Barry doesn’t fear him; he merely steps aside at the same time the bedroom door swings open. A stream of blue knocks Zoom to the ground. He screams in agony; the ice has struck him in the crotch; Barry takes a small bit of delight in the site. Len steps into the room, aiming the cold gun at Zoom’s head and pulls the trigger without hesitation. He falls to the floor, head smashing into thousands of sharp, frozen pieces.

When Barry wakes, warm golden sunlight is cresting on the horizon, he feels lighter. He’s cut one more string tethering him to Zoom, used a sharp knife and a wrecking ball to slash and smash away the hold he’s held over him. It feels like he can truly start moving on without the feel of phantom
cares, the traumatic nightmares or whispering voices. He’s reclaimed his body; now he’s going
to start recovering his mind too. In the wake of his dream, he feels inspired to march forwards, be
brave and courageous. He’s finally escaped from the Zoom within his dream world; it feels as
powerful as it did when he escaped in reality.

Twice he has set himself free, with the help of the man he loves, of course. Len saved his life, he
slayed the beast, but it was Barry who had the strength and courage to run out the door, run
towards freedom and straight into Len’s arms. He hasn’t walked the road to recovery alone; there
have always been lights to guide the way, to show him safe passage out of the storm. He’s not sure
he would have survived the aftermath if it weren’t for Len and Sara. They had been the only ones
who were able to reach him in the darkest hours, the blackest days. They saved his life, with their
friendship, with their compassion, understanding and most importantly their love.

XxX

Oliver and Felicity are coming to visit today and Barry should be ready by now but he’s been in
the bedroom for the past ten minutes, and Len is starting to worry. He’s waiting in the living room,
nursing Nora who is happily watching her arms flail around in the air. She’s only two and half
weeks old, and already she shows interest in everything, there’s no doubt she’s going to be as
smart. Right now she is acting like a well behaved little angel, staring up at the world with bright
hazel eyes and charming people with her rosy cheeks.

Give her five more minutes, and she’ll start the terrors, crying and fussing until she is in Barry’s
arms. Her fussiness also extends into the night; she hasn’t been sleeping much, waking at odd
hours, wailing loudly until Barry picks her up and it has to be Barry or else she’ll continue to
scream her little lungs out. Poor Barry is practically a zombie, Len, Sara and Lisa do what they can,
but no matter how hard they try to calm Nora down she won’t settle unless she’s in her father’s
arms.

Len has a theory, one he ran by Cisco a few days; who is now working on a solution to this
problem. His theory is that it has something to do with the speed force, even though both their
powers aren’t at full capacity Barry still has a different sort of energy flowing through him, and the
theory is, so does Nora. When Barry nurses her, his energy must resonate with hers, therefore she
finds it more soothing than the rest of them. Cisco should have something they can use to create a
replica of Barry’s energy any day now.

Len hopes he hurries because Barry needs to get some sleep, the only time he catches any shut-eye
is when he nods off or the short intervals between Nora’s naps. He suddenly gets to his feet,
making his way towards their shared bedroom, his instincts kicking in. Lisa had gone to a lecture
and Sara had left to get some food before Oliver and Felicity arrived since they hadn’t had any time
to get the grocery shopping done in the last week. Lisa had been snowed under with exams, Sara
had gotten a job at Jitter’s, and Len and Barry had been so busy with Nora they hadn’t had the time
for the mundane things.

The bedroom door is ajar, Len knocks, but no answer comes. Pushing the door open he steps
silently into the room, finding Barry curled up on the bed, half dressed and slumbering deeply. He
can’t help chuckling at the sight of the serene expression on his face warms his heart. Quietly he
places Nora into her bassinet; she starts to fuss, so he switches on her star mobile, her eyes grow
wide in excitement as she watches the planets spin around and around.

Heading back towards Barry he takes note that he’s fallen asleep before he even had a chance to
put on his jeans. He’s clad only in his underwear and undershirt, sweater and pants left forgotten at
the foot of the bed. Len doesn’t mean to, but he can’t help looking for the scars he’s been told
about, the ones Zoom cruelly curved into the skin of his inner thighs. He’s seen the marks left on his wrists, felt the keloid scars against his lips, hoping to chase away the memory of ill-fitting cuffs.

He hasn’t seen all there is to see, Sara’s told him about the burn marks under his arms and the ones scattered on his torso from the cattle prod, there barely-there scars left by claws and sharp teeth. Barry’s skin is a canvas of suffering, of misery and he would love nothing more than to kiss every scar, to erase the painful memories of each and every one of them. One day he might get the chance, there is always a possibility that once Barry’s powers kick back in they’ll heal, fade away like they were never even there.

Len knows all too well that scars last a lifetime, even if they vanish Barry will always remember them; remember how they came to be. It doesn’t matter to him if Barry has these scars for the rest his life or not, he’ll love just the same. Sitting down on the bed, he carefully wakes Barry, using gentle touches to bring him back to the waking world. Lashes flutter, large eyes stare up at him, unfocused for a few moments then recognition settles in, a groan escaping as he curls further into himself.

Len laughs affectionately, stroking nimble fingers through Barry’s messy damp hair. Gradually Barry unfolds, sitting up with his knees drawn up to his chin; stifling a yawn as he reaches for the oversized red sweater. Len asks if he would like him to leave so he can finish getting dressed, Barry declines, allowing him to stay for the first time. The simple act of trust has Len’s heart quickening. Barry has kept his body hidden for so long, hiding in oversized sweaters and the blue parka. To be let in passed the towering walls and the many layers is a privilege, to be shown the marks left behind is a sign of how far he has come.

When Barry sat up the position briefly exposed the scars crisscrossing the delicate skin of his inner thighs, Len pointedly looked away, not wanting to make Barry uncomfortable or worse, frighten him. He’d struggled enough with Caitlin touching him during labour and again the other week when she had to give him a follow-up examination. Barry still associated a lot of things with pain and violence which was completely okay and normal. It’s why Len is always so cautious with his touches. So of course, he would respect Barry’s privacy and turn his gaze away when he went to retrieve his pants.

“You don’t have to look away, you know,” Barry said, sounding small “I don’t mind if you see my scars.”

Len met his gaze; seeing the heavy weight of emotion glistening in the swell of tears, turning the words to lies. Barry did care if he saw the scars; he wanted approval, to be told there weren’t ugly, that they didn’t make him any less desirable. Barry has come a long way with accepting the scars on his wrist, but these had a deeper hold on him, they troubled him so much more. He could see a small part of Barry had let go of the hatred towards them, the disgust, otherwise, he couldn’t be offering Len a chance to view them.

He took Barry’s hands into his own, once more kissing the raised, scarlet vines lacing around his slender wrists. Looking up to meet Barry’s gaze, he saw a look of determination spark in his eyes, a moment later he slowly lowered his legs from where he had them drawn against his chest. The scars marring his inner thighs are even worse than Len envisioned, Zoom had mutilated him. The thick, angry uneven lines overlap, spreading down as far as his knees and up as high as his groin, a few paler lines disappear under the martial of Barry’s boxer briefs. Whatever blade Zoom had used had been blunt; Len can tell by the jaggedness of the cuts. God, it would have hurt, his heart breaks at the thought of Barry having to live through this.
“I couldn’t remember why Zoom did this to me,” Barry said quietly, “then one night I was talking with Cisco, and he told me that Zoom did this because he was bored.” Venom tainted his words, fists clenching, nails biting into skin. “I have to live with these scars for the rest of my life because he was bored.”

Rage pools in Len’s gut, skin growing hot; never has anyone made his blood boil. His anger was always cold, he rarely got mad but when he did the anger came out as ice. That’s how he used to destroy people, with cold, icy rage. Zoom awakens fury; the only other person who had stirred such an emotion was his no good father, and they are both dead, so he has nowhere to channel the wrath. No, that’s a lie, he can channel it into something else, something helpful. He swallows his fury so that he can give Barry the proper attention, devotion he deserves.

“I’m so sorry, Barry,” Len says, the sight of misery on his partner’s face, upsets him greatly. “I wish I could fix them for you. I wish I could erase everything he did to you, but I can’t” his voice breaks, hating that he can’t magically fix the marks Zoom left behind. “I love you regardless of them; they don’t make you any beautiful to me or any less strong.”

Barry smiled through the tears, throwing his arms around Len in a crushing hug.

“If or when your speed returns there is a chance they might fade” He continued, trying to offer Barry a little hope, a ray of sunshine in this never ending storm. “If they don’t, that’s okay, because I love every inch of you Barry Allen.”

Barry hugged him tighter, nestling his face into the crook of his neck, breathing him and whispering “I love you too, so much.”

XxX

Felicity is gushing over Nora, Oliver is sitting next to her, eyeing the baby curiously, like he doesn’t quite know how to handle something so small and precious. Sara has made everyone coffee and covered the table with pastries from Jitter’s; anyone would think they were feeding an army. The air is filled with idle chatter; Barry only partly listens, his mind is still sitting in the bedroom, the memory of Len’s touch against his skin stirring butterflies in his stomach.

He’d taken Len’s hand, strong and powerful, into his, with complete trust Barry rests Len’s palm on upon the disfigured flesh. He doesn’t know what he is seeking, acceptance maybe or perhaps he just wanted Len’s touch to erase the sharp memory of the blade. The last person who’d felt him intimately had used brutal force, leaving bruises that faded and scars that never would. Words became lost to him, trapped in the breath he held. Len’s hand relaxed, fingers fanning out over the raised skin, sending shivers up his spine.

“Scarlet?”

His nickname is laced with a dozen questions, none of which Barry could answer. He honestly didn’t know what he wanted from this only that his hand had sought out Len’s on its own accord. He trusted that somewhere, deep inside, a piece of him knew what he was asking. Len sensed the emotional turmoil brewing; it was written in his eyes, in the shape of his mouth and the hesitation in his touch. Taking a deep breath to clear his mind of the gathering storm clouds Barry focused on the warmth of the hand against the mutilated skin.

Len must have sensed the shift in his energy, gingerly; he moved his hand, fingers trailing over the jagged marks. There something healing in Len’s touch. Barry felt himself relaxing, letting his eyes slip shut. There was no fear, no matter where Len’s nimble fingers glided. There was only trust, only love. When it was over, the warmth from Len’s fingers still lingering on his inner thighs, they
lied down, limbs tangled, bodies pressed close together.

“Are you okay, Barr?” Len asked, running his fingers lazily down his jawline, skimming down his neck, past his shoulder and down his arm, entwining their fingers.

“I’m good” he smiled, struggling to keep his eyes open “Are you okay?”

“I’m perfect” Len kissed the tip of his nose, making Barry’s smile brighten. “We should get up, though; Sara will be back soon.”

“And Oliver and Felicity” he sighed, “I don’t want to leave your arms through.”

“You don’t ever have to.”

Barry closed the last inch of space of between, lips meeting lips in an anchoring kiss.

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“Barry, you’ve been awfully quiet.”

The sound of Olive’s voice pulled Barry from his thoughts, shaking the memory from his head he offered Oliver what he hoped was a reassuring smile. “Sorry, I am just exhausted” which was the truth, Nora’s constant need to be held by him and him only was wearing him down. He loved nothing more than holding his baby girl but that didn’t change the fact that he desperately needed sleep and her not letting anyone else hold her or liking her bassinet was becoming a problem. One hopeful Cisco could have sorted soon; otherwise, he was going to collapse.

“I take it Nora hasn’t been sleeping well?” Felicity supposed. She had been nursing her for about ten minutes now, in another five she’d demand to be back in Barry’s arms.

“She doesn’t like being away from Barry too long” Sara replied “we figure it has something to do with the speed force and, what was it?” she asked Barry “your different frequency.”

“Yes,” he nodded, taking a drink from the coffee he’d let turn cold. Still, caffeine was caffeine, and he had missed it.

“Wait?” Felicity exclaimed, “you’ve got your powers back?”

“Kinda” Barry shrugged, hoping she’d drop the subject; he wasn’t ready to talk about this. He’d said goodbye to the Flash, watched him disappear in a shower of shredded leather. That part of him had been buried, lost to the past, to the world that nearly destroyed him.

There was an awkward silence that followed, Oliver and Felicity apparently wanted more of an explanation, but the three of them weren’t about to give them one. Thankfully, Nora decided she’d had enough of being in Felicity’s arms and her cry shattered the stillness.

“Oh, God, what did I do?” she asked, looking confused and slightly horrified.

“It’s fine” Barry sighed, taking his wailing daughter from her arms “she does this when she’s been away from me too long.”

“That would be cute if not for the fact it looks like you haven’t slept in days” Felicity smiled sympathetically at him “have you guys got Star Labs working on something to help?”

“Cisco is on it” Barry responded, “I’m going to get her a bottle, excuse me a moment.”
On the way to the kitchen, Nora quietened, happy to be safe in her daddy’s arms. Barry set about making her milk, something he learnt to do one handed very quickly. However, it was times like these that he wouldn’t mind having his speed. If his speed did return then he had two choices, bury it and pretend he didn’t feel the strumming of the speed force in his veins or use it for his own gain. Like making milk or doing household chores, which sure, he had used his speed to do mundane things in the past, but he figured since he was out saving the world it was okay to speed clean his room.

The idea of using it to for personal gain didn’t sit right with him; if he wasn’t going to use it to save lives, then he didn’t deserve the power at all. Could they take it away again? Like they had all those months ago? Surely they could but would they? If he gave up his speed again he’d have to live with the scars for the rest of his life; he’d never again get to feel the adrenaline or the joy of running at incredible speeds. One day Nora would come into her powers, and he could have the chance to teach her, to train, to make her faster and stronger than he ever was, so that no monster could ever catch her.

Nora started to fuss; he’d lost track of time, the electric bottle warmer beeped, letting him know the milk was ready. Body tired and sore, he slipped to the floor, stretching out his legs and leaning against the cabinet doors. Nora’s little noises of delight brought a smile to his face, scattering the whirling thoughts. Eyes struggled to stay open, once Oliver and Felicity left he was going to lie down with Nora and have a nap, it was the only way he would get some rest. He always worried about upsetting or hurting her if he had a nightmare, but he hadn’t had one in two weeks, it was a new record and a welcome relief.

“Barry, what are you doing on the floor?”

Looking up he found Oliver standing by the breakfast bar, arms folded across his broad chest, brow knitted in concern. He found Oliver’s presence comforting; there was an energy that rolled off him that made him feel at ease, safe. Smiling he said “it’s a good as a place to sit as any,” then he patted the floor in invitation for Oliver to join him. Rolling his eyes Oliver walked towards them, sitting down next to him, offering a gentle smile.

“Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Ollie, I’m doing fine, really” he declared “I just need about a weeks’ worth of sleep, but emotionally I am doing great. No nightmares, no panic attacks. I feel like I’ve finally reached the other side and it’s all uphill from here.”

“Sara said you struggled the first few days after Nora was born, so I’m glad to hear you’re doing better now.”

“The first few days were the most difficult, labour and getting trapped in the mirror – we told you about the mirror right?” Oliver nodded “right, well I was struggling, but the baby blues are over, my hormones have settled, and like I said, I am doing fine.”

“That’s good then” he smiled “if you ever need to talk to me about anything, I’m only a phone call away.”

“Thank you, and I know” he sighed, setting the empty bottle aside and resting Nora over his shoulder, patting her back. “Please don’t bring up my powers; I can see you want to. I don’t want to talk about it, though. No offence.”

“Okay, I won’t” he promised, “can I ask about something else then?”
“Yeah, anything else is an acceptable topic.”

“Okay then” he paused, turning so he was fully facing Barry, expression serious “Are you happy?”

No one had directly asked him this questions, though they probably didn’t need to, they’d been with him enough throughout his recovery to know the answer already. And the answer was yes. He was happy, happier than he ever thought he would be, given all that he'd been through. “You know, I thought I would never be happy again” he divulged, “I thought Zoom stole every ounce of joy from my life, I thought I would be haunted by what he did to me, buried in nightmares and panic attacks for the rest of my life. But for the first time, in a really long time, I am happy, and I am starting to live again, to begin again.”

Oliver reached out to squeeze his shoulder, smiling fondly at him “I always believed you’d make it through this. You are so strong Barry, and I’m so proud of you.”

Barry ducked his head, hiding the glittering tears. "Thank you, Ollie. I couldn't have made it this far without Len and Sara" he paused, wondering if Sara had told him that he and Len had gotten together. Surely Oliver must have noticed the way they acted around each other. “Especially Len… he saved me... his love saved me.”

Oliver nodded a knowing look shining in his eyes. “I know where you're coming from. But don't forget, you saved yourself too.”

He hadn't forgotten that. He survived four months of torture, of endless suffering. He escaped from Zoom, used what little fight he had left to carry himself to safety. He lived through the aftermath, relived every wicked, horrible thing done to him and came out stronger. He now wore his scars like tiger strips, proud to say that he survived the ugliest, crueller monster, proud to say he made it through the darkest days. “I know.”

“Good.”

They both sighed, letting silence fall between them only to have it broken by Nora letting out a tired cry.

“I better go put her down for her nap before she gets too worked up, If she’ll settle in her bassinet, that is.”

"Can I get you anything?” Oliver asked as he stood up, helping Barry up after him “or five you a hand?”

“Another coffee would be great; I need all the caffeine I can get these days.”

“If you need to rest Felicity and I can always come back later?”

“It's okay” he reassured. “You haven't told us about the ‘throwing star killer’ yet?” he added, giving him a pointed look.

“You heard about that?” Oliver asked, ducking his head to hide the guilt.

“We get the news here in Central City too, Ollie.”

“We didn't want to drag you into it.” He confessed, "you've been through enough.”

“That doesn't mean we're not here for you. Even if I can't actually do anything, you can still talk to me. I’m better. I won't break.”
“I know that Barry.” he said gruffly “you can't blame for me wanting to keep you safe. Besides, you've got Nora to look after now. I'd never take you away from her.”

Looking down at the beautiful baby in his arms, he couldn’t imagine wading into a war he might never return from. The thought sent a chill through him. Looking up he caught Oliver’s gaze; he hoped his eyes conveyed all he wished to say. He couldn’t stay and talk any longer, Nora was growing more upset by the minute. Oliver smiled and nodded at him, expressing that he understood exactly what Barry was thinking. Turning away Barry headed towards the bedroom, smiling as he remembered what he’d said to Oliver. For the first in months, even though he was bone tired, he was truly happy. He'd finally found the light, the brighter and better days.

He was ready to begin again.
Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delayed update. I realised I messed up the timeline and had to take the chapter down and correct it. Once again I hope you enjoyed. I did a fair bit of re-writing with this as it touched on some delicate issues and I wanted to get the portrayal as real I could. I will see you lovelies next week :)

_I'm waking up, the world is turning_  
_The sun is shining again_  
_I'm holding on to things I shouldn't_  
_It's time to let them go_

*Firelight - Brand New Day*

It’s late, or maybe it’s early. Outside is dark, silent, the kind of silent that only happens when the world falls asleep. It’s the lull that comes after midnight but vanishes in songbird and engines starting as the sun breaks over the horizon. It’s usually the quietest part of the evening when not even creatures stir, and the neighbourhood homes go dark, families having long since gone to bed. It’s late if someone is just getting to bed, stumbling back from the clubs or putting away overdue homework and calling it a night. It’s early for those who are awoken by strange, unsettling dreams or if they have a flight to catch or a job to get to.

It doesn’t matter what time it is to Barry, it could be the middle of the night, or right on dawn, he just wants to sleep, and the numbers on a clock wouldn’t stop him from doing so. The pain filled cries of his daughter, however, keep him from sleep, from resting his tired bones. She’s inconsolable; face flushed, cheeks tear-streaked, lungs letting out an almighty wail. She’s been like this for three nights in a row, she’s starting to get her first tooth, and it’s making her miserable.

Henry had assured Barry she would be okay in a few days until then he was left to wander the house in the late hours. Over the past four months he had been staying between Lisa’s and his family home, right now Lisa had a lot of exams due, and he didn’t want Nora’s nightly crying to distract her. Not that he felt much better about keeping his family awake, at least when he took Nora downstairs it quietened her screams. Pacing the length of the living room he desperately tried to soothe her. Her distraught cries were breaking his heart; he hated not being able to settle her. He felt like he was doing something wrong like he was failing her.

It didn’t help that on this day, twelve months ago, Zoom took him. He remembers it like it was yesterday, Wally had been excited to move in, and Barry had been as determinate as ever to take out Zoom and save Earth 2. By nightfall his plans unravelled, on the cusp of midnight he was swept away to another world, by the time the clock struck twelve in some far away warm and happy home, he was being raped. That’s all it took, a day, a few moments and his world was torn down, shattered like glass.

Collapsing on the couch, exhausted, emotionally and physically he starts to cry. There is a trickle of fear stirring awake, setting him on edge, breaking the pieces that have lovingly been replaced. There is an irrational fear roaring in his ears if he could just get some rest he is sure it would fade.
Nora won’t stop crying, and the voices keep funnelling fear through his tired body. Nora must be able to sense it; it’s probably why she keeps crying, growing more distressed as he does.

He needs to shut the thoughts down, force himself to believe, to know that when tomorrow night comes, Zoom will not appear. He will not steal him from his home again. He is gone, dead and tomorrow is just another day. The next four months are not going to be hell; he is home, he is safe. He should get Len, crawl into bed beside him and let him soothe his frantic nerves and calm their daughter. That means getting up, it means opening up about the swirling, maddening thoughts and he just can’t right now. It’s too late, or maybe it’s early, either way, there is no way words are going to spring free from his mouth, not enough to express the racing thoughts in his head at least.

He can’t stay still and do nothing while listening to Nora sob, his own tears joining in. Slowly he rocks them both back and forward, holding her tightly to his chest, taking deep breaths to calm the pounding of his heart. Her sobs turn to sniffles, tiny fingers curl in the fabric of his shirt, she’s still distressed, but at last, there is silence. When the rocking stops, she starts up again. Barry can’t make his body work anymore, all he can do is hold her and whisper nonsense words in the dark.

Footsteps approach from behind, his body tenses, has his worst night come to roaring life? No, of course not, the beast has been slain. The footsteps belong to Joe, who is reaching out to take Nora from his aching arms. Joe has her settled within moments, the blue light of the device Cisco gave them, glowing on the waistband of his pants. That thing was a lifesaver; it was the only reason Barry had gotten any sleep in the past four months. Joe sits down next to him, Nora, at last, drifting off. Barry sighs in relief, huddling into his Joe’s side, using his shoulder as a makeshift pillow.

“How are you going, Barr?”

“I need sleep” he mumbled, “then I’ll be okay.”

“We know tomorrow’s going to be difficult for you” Joe whispered, “it’s fine not to be okay, it’s stirring a lot of emotions in all of us.”

“There’s always something else,” he sighed “I spent the last four months coping just fine and now one day has me unravelling.”

“It’s not just one day, Barr, it’s ‘The Day’ and however you feel is perfectly acceptable.”

“How do you feel?” he asked, turning the tables for once, mostly because he was too drained to speak.

“I feel a lot of things, mostly fear, a little sad” he answered honestly “but what I feel most of all is graduate.”

“Why?” he asked, looking up at the man who had raised him, who’d loved and protected him when no one else would.

“When Zoom took you, stole you from us, I felt like my whole world toppled down around me” he admitted. “I was helpless to save you, to reach you. You were in my line of sight and then – not even the blink of an eye – you were gone, and the fear that hit me knocked me to the ground. At that moment I thought we’d never see you again, not alive at least.” His words were steady, his eyes, though, they told another story. The emotions glistening within the unshed tears spoke volumes of the pain that was felt throughout those four months. “I know what he did to you was awful, you have suffered through more than anyone ever should, but you are still here, and for that I am grateful.”
Blinking the tears from his eyes, Barry wrapped one arm around Joe’s shoulders, snuggling in close.

“You came home to us, and I will always be grateful for that.” He continued “You’ve come so far, so fast, Barr,” He kissed the top of his head “I am so proud of my baby boy.”

Sunlight began to trickle in through the windows, lighting up the dark, scattering the shadows and those who hid amongst them. Today would be a challenge, for everyone, it would stir awake forgotten memory, release a storm of emotions and return old demons. Tomorrow would be better, tomorrow hopefully he wouldn’t think back to the dark days, he’d have to try or else he’d spiral, break, and he couldn’t allow that to happen. He had a daughter to care for, friends who needed to see him better, a partner who would hold onto him tight, anchoring him to the light. The past was behind him; the next four months would be different, they’d be filled with joy, with love.

Finally, Barry drifted off to sleep, safe and sound in his family home and safe he would stay.

XxX

When Len wakes up the bed is empty, the place his partner should be has grown cold. Barry must have been gone awhile; there is a fuzzy memory of him walking out of the room with Nora in his arms after that Len must have fallen back to sleep. There was a time when even the slightest sound disturbed him, set off warning bells and had him reaching for the newest weapon. Growing up he was often woken by his father shouting or glasses breaking in violent rages. Lisa would sneak into his room and crawl into the bed next to him, together they hid under the covers, trying to block out the cruel world around them.

It only got worse from there, once he’d been to jail he never slept deeply again. Until now, here he could let his guard down, lower the defence shields and fall into a restful sleep. The exhaustion probably also had a hand in the matter, the last four months had been tiring on everyone. It was nothing a few cups of coffee couldn’t fix, and he would gladly be fatigued if it meant staying up with Barry and their daughter through the nights. There had been plenty of sleepless nights over the last for months, but at least it was Nora waking them and not the terrible nightmares.

Barry had made huge improvements in the last four months; the nightmares had completely stopped, the anxiety attacks only happened if he was stressed or overly tired. He was able to get out of the house more; they’d taken Nora to visit Sara at Jitters and to Star City when Sara took Lisa to meet her father after he was realised from rehab. Len had, however, notice that in public places Barry became more alert, eyes taking in the environment around him, body tense and ready to spring at a loud sound or stranger getting too close.

He stayed close to Len’s side and chose to sit in corners with a clear view of his surroundings and exits. Len couldn’t fault him for that; it was something he often did himself, he never liked the feeling of being boxed in, cut off from a clear escape. So if Barry wanted to sit in the shadows he would happily go there with him, keeping his eyes trained for any potential danger, he had a family to protect after all. Unfortunately, he couldn’t protect Barry from finding out that Jitters no longer served ‘The Flash’. On the day Barry found out, he pretended not to care, but Len could see the hurt glimmering in his gaze, caught sight of the slight downward tilt of his chin and sag in his shoulders.

They never had much of a chance to talk about it any further, there was always something else demanding their attention, be it Nora or a Meta-Human rearing its ugly head. Over the past four months more and more Meta’s had been surfacing, and when the task force couldn’t stop them, he and Sara had stepped up. A part of him felt bad; people had started cheering their names, seeing them as the hero’s while the real hero waited on the sidelines. They all agreed that they would
never push Barry into being the Flash again and Len didn’t care if he ever saw him in scarlet again, he would always be a hero in his eyes.

He just wasn’t sure if Barry truly wanted to hang up his cowl. His speed was still dormant, or at a lower percentage, he didn’t understand the scientific term, what he did understand is this: if Barry wanted to use his powers he could. He just had to want to. And the debate was just that, did he want to be the Flash once more and his fear and PTSD was holding him back or was he really done with that part of his life? If anyone was going to broach the subject it should be him; he was just waiting for his partner to be ready.

Today would not be the day. It was the anniversary of the day Zoom took Barry, and they had all discussed at length how important it was to be supportive and gentle with him for the next few days. Sara had even taken the day off work to spend with them; they were going to curl up on the couch and watch movies or maybe go to a drive to the coast to just get away. Whatever Barry felt up to they would do. At this moment a rumpled Barry stumbled into the room, collapsing onto the bed at Len’s side.

“How long have you been awake?” Len asked, carding his fingers through his hair.

“Sometime before dawn,” Rolling over onto his back, Barry let out a long sigh “I hope her tooth comes in soon, I would very much to sleep.”

“I’ll look after her tonight” Len declared, casually draping his arm over Barry’s waist. “What would you like to do today?”

“Apart from sleep?” he asked, cracking open an eye to peer over at Len “I’m not sure. I’m a little anxious about how today is going to go.”

“That’s understandable,” he said, stroking lazy circles on Barry’s stomach, fingertips ghosting over the small expanse of exposed skin. “I’m here for you, love.”

Barry turned onto his side, their noises a breath away “I know. I think I just want to try and make today feel as normal as possible. I don’t want to think about what happened to me on this day a whole twelve months ago. It’s over; I’m here, you’re here, let’s just focus on that.”

Len kissed the tip of his nose, leaving his lips lingering near in an invitation Barry happily accepted. Today their kisses were lazy, lingering, tasting of morning breath. In the past the kisses had started to change, a spark flaring between their lips, their exploring tongues. Hands had begun to wander, seeking, discovering, testing limits and boundaries. Len would allow Barry to touch him anywhere. He could run those long fingers to any destination he desired, though they never strayed further than his lower back.

His hands had to be careful, steady, and ready to stop if they felt a shiver, a shudder or muscles tensing with the force of a caught breath. There were rivers and roads to go before their kissing became anything else, before Len could worship the man he loved. He’d wait; he’d wait a thousand lives times and a thousand more just to be able to show Barry how much he loved him. Sex was always how Len expressed his love to his partners, words had never come easily to him, and it was so much easy to speak with kisses, with pleasure.

Since sex was off the table for the time being it had forced him to use his words, to say the things he usually expressed through acts. It had become easy to say ‘I love you’, it felt like second nature to whisper it to Barry every night before they went to sleep. Time had changed them all; it taught
Len to love, to let down his walls and allow others into his heart. Sara had softened, the loss of Laurel would always hang heavy on her shoulders, but it wouldn’t stop her from living, from creating. Barry had grown stronger, getting happier day after day as he shook off the darkness left by Zoom.

By now they were very different people, and their journey had not yet ended. It was getting easier to navigate, the woods thinning out and the lights glowing brighter in the distance kept them on a steady path. The better days were here, but there was still so much to seek, still plenty of first and milestones to come. They were nearly out the woods, only today they would not walk the path to freedom, today the road was too treacherous. Today Len would hold Barry in his arms, shield him from the storm and when a new came, they would start their journey again.

XxX

It’s after midday by the time Barry wakes again. The house is filled with noise that drifts up from downstairs, chatter; footsteps and a phone ringing, judging by the melody it sounds like Cisco’s. For a moment he just lies there, staring up the ceiling, trying to not think about why there are so many people gathered in the house. Everyone would be affected differently today, already the air was charged with a dense energy, the collective feelings of his friends and family pooling to make a sea of emotions.

He knew his friends were here to help, to be supportive, but in all honestly he would prefer to spend the day with Len, Sara and Nora. They had talked about driving to the coast, a day by the seaside sounded nicer than the energy fuelled home. He’d feel terrible if he left, though, everyone was here for him, and he didn’t want to make them leave or shut them out again. They hadn’t spent time together as a group since Christmas and maybe having everyone here today would be a good distraction. He owed it to them to try at least; if he got overwhelmed, then they wouldn’t hold it against him if he needed some time alone.

With a sigh he climbs out of bed, the side where Len usually sleeps is empty; the sheets cool to the touch. He’s probably downstairs with the others, Nora isn’t in her crib either so she’s definitely downstairs, getting spoiled and showered with love. Speaking of showers, he should take one before heading down; he hadn’t had the time to have one last night. He’s hunting through his drawers for clean clothes when Len appears in the doorway, offering him the mug of coffee; it’s even in his favourite cup too.

“Oh, hey,” he said, accepting the coffee, “Thank you.”

“No problem” he replied, “thought you could use the pick me up before coming downstairs, it’s a full house.”

Barry grimaced; he had been expecting nothing less. Still, there was a small part that hoped the four of them could sneak away. He owed it to his friends to give them a chance to help; they had all suffered that day, and the least he could do was be there for them like there were him. “I can do this,” he told himself, Len smiled proudly at him, sparking an ember of courage “I can do this” he repeated, feeling the ember burn bright. “First I’m going to shower and change, though.” He looked down at the milk and food stains covering the oversized shirt he wore. “Tell everyone I will be down soon.”

He kissed Len on the cheek then headed towards the bathroom, playing with an idea in his mind. Lately, he was feeling more comfortable in his own skin, it had taken months, but he finally felt at home in his body. When winter bled into spring and the days grew too warm to wear, to hide in oversized sweaters and hoodies he was forced to reveal the scars. While he had accepted the marks on his wrists very few people had seen them and on the first day he exposed them to the world, to
his family, their faces twisted in pity.

Barry felt a twinge at their expressions, felt like recoiling when hands reached out to touch, curious eyes analysing the thick, vine-like scars. Iris’s fingers trembled as they ghosted over his wrists, eyes glistening with tears; it took all his strength not to snatch his hand away. Wally gawked, face paling, Joe who had seen the scars months ago, walked over to Barry. Pulled him into a hug, whispering to him that it was okay, give them a moment, when Joe let go Iris and Wally had composed themselves and the rest of day carried on like any other.

With acceptance coming from all around it helped cut away the lingering feelings of doubt, the hidden voices that crept out in the late silent hours of the evening to dismantle the progress he made. Another string was served, left in the cold winter days, spring brought confidence, awoke forgotten desires. Those desires came to life when he kissed Len, pushing him passed shy, sweet kisses into something deeper, something terrifying and wonderful all at once.

The desires bursting to life were not sexual; the kisses never escalated past a somewhat heavy make out session. The idea of sex still terrified him, it’s not that he didn’t trust Len because he did, he trusted him more than he thought he could ever trust again, it’s just his mind still associated sex with violence. He knew very well what Zoom did to him was not sex; it was degrading, violent, painful. It didn’t change the fact his mind was riddled with triggers, that his libido was nonexistent.

It didn’t stop him from seeking, wanting to explore Len’s skin, to learn the tales behind his scars, to know what lie beneath the clothes. These feelings were driven by emotion, a need he didn’t quite understand yet. It’s why as he hesitated on the walk to the bathroom, searching his mind and heart. If he asked Len to join him he knows with certainty that Len wouldn’t expect anything, he never touched him without consent, never kissed him without being a hundred percent sure Barry wanted one. If they stood under the warm spray of water together then Len would keep a safe distance, he’d keep his gaze level unless Barry showed him he could do otherwise.

If he made this choice, he knew he could change his mind, revoke at any time and not be met with resistance or punishment. Turning around he found Len leaning casually in the doorway, a smile on his face and light in his eyes. Butterflies stirred in his stomach as he went to speak; only there is a sudden lump in his throat, words held back by a rush of fear. Outside a dark grey cloud blocks out the sun, casting the hallway in darkness, it mirrors the rapid change in Barry’s mood.

He’d been so sure, so ready then there was the smallest trickle of fear, a whisper of doubt and the words scattered like ash in the wind. No matter how hard or valiantly Barry tried to take control of his life, his choices; there was still darkness living, breathing, within him. The fears lived on a subconscious level, flittering up and taking control even when he was sure he had hold of the reins. Up they rose, freezing him in tracks, sweeping away the confidence, shadowing him in doubt.

It wasn’t doubt towards Len that had the words falling into the pit of stomach; it was a flicker of Zoom’s hungry eyes gazing at his naked, bruised and bloody flesh that had the desire shattering. Twelve months ago Zoom showed no restraint, no mercy as he shredded Barry’s suit, forced him down onto an old mattress and raped him. He tore Barry apart, broke him, ruined him in a matter of moments and continued to do so over the next four months.

Now, twelve months later to the day Barry is still trying to shake off the rust. Zoom’s control, his power over him isn’t strong like it once was, but there are still a few threads tethering him to the past, the darkest hours. In honestly he should have known that today wouldn’t be a good time to try something new. He wanted to prove to himself that he could do this, that he could shed his clothing and reveal every inch of himself to Len, to share something pure and intimate between them. In
time he will be able to, in time the words won’t be lost in tendrils of fear, in time he’ll shake off the rust and unshackle the chains.

“Are you okay, Scarlet?”

Barry’s mind rushed back to the present at the feel of Len’s touch, the darkness and panic receding as Len anchored him to the world. “Yeah, sorry, I’m just tired.”

Len gave him a look that said he wasn’t buying this; he didn’t push the matter. He always waited for Barry to open up, to be ready. “If it’s too much to see everyone today I can ask them to leave?”

Shaking off the cobwebs, he pulled himself together, “Today isn’t just about me. We all went through hell, and the least I can do is be there for them too.” Len smiled fondly at him, hand moving from his shoulder to cup his face, Barry leant into the touch. “I’ll be fine,” His voice wavered, Len’s brows furrowed in concern. “I’m going to have a shower, and then I’ll be down.”

Len hesitated, Barry forced a smile, hoping it was convincing, hoping it was enough to cover the turmoil he knew would be glimmering in his eyes. Len’s hand slowly dropped away; the skin felt cold; already missing the warmth and comfort of the touch. For a moment Barry thought he was going to speak again, push and pull until he opened up, but Len never forced him to do anything he wasn’t ready for. Barry turned away, forcing himself to move or they would stand there all day, silent, waiting to say the things he was currently unable to.

Sagging against the closed bathroom door, he felt guilt stir awake in his stomach; tears sprang to his eyes. He felt guilty for turning away, for shutting Len out instead of opening up but the words wouldn’t come, they were trapped behind the swell of fear. Len wouldn’t hold this against him; he’d never be angry at him for not being able to express how he felt or for needing to step away and gather his thoughts, collect himself. It didn’t change how he felt, though.

He was disappointed; he’d been so sure he was ready, the words balancing on the tip of his tongue then something trigged the alarm, and the words tumbled backs down his throat, drowning in the rise of panic. His subconscious fear ruined the moment, dashed his chance of reaching another milestone. Sigh expelling loudly from his lungs, he once more forced himself into action, stripping off his clothes and stepping in into the shower. He just had to get through today; he’d be alright.

XxX

There is something healing about the sound of waves lapping against the shore, the sensation of sand between toes and the wind whispering over bare skin. It’s a picturesque afternoon, the sun hangs low on the horizon, casting its orange light over the calm ocean. The shores are mostly empty, in the distance a man walks his dog, and up by the dunes, an elderly couple sits, watching the world pass them by. Barry stands on the shoreline, watching the waves ebb and flow around his feet.

It makes him a little dizzy, and before long he looks up, catching sight of a flash of blonde hair and a freckled face. Sara appears beside him, looping her arm through his in a silent encouragement to walk with her. Casting a look back, he spots Wally and Iris swimming out in the deep waters, Joe watching from the shallows. Cisco is sitting on the beach with Nora and Len; he’s building sandcastles for Nora, who is smiling and attempting to eat a fistful of sand. She’s not overly happy when Len stops her, though she perks up a moment later when Caitlin and Henry appear. Caitlin starts showing her the seashells she’d be gathering; she tries to eat them as well.

Barry turns back to the path before him, laughing to himself. Sara smiles up at him; she looks beautiful with her windblown hair and sun-kissed skin; there is a light glimmering in her eyes that
could rival the sun. She’s happy, content and after everything she’s been through, she deserves to be. They both deserve to be happy, to feel loved, they had been broken by the hands of cruel men, taken from their lives, bent and broken until they were unrecognisable. They had to crawl their way back, over ash and glass, through fire and smoke until they could stand again until they could begin again.

In the aftermath, they emerged stronger than ever, even if there weren’t who they were at the start. At least they fought; at least they kicked and screamed their way back from the abyss. There may still be shadows dancing at his feet, tripping and tumbling him back into the dark, into haunting memories, but he is strong enough to stand, to walk in the golden light. There are still deep seeded fears that have to be brought out into the light, set free on an ocean breeze if Barry ever wants to be rid of them.

If he had done this already, purged the ugliest, deepest fears, then maybe this morning he wouldn’t have choked on his words. He would have been brave enough to take Len’s hand and lead him to the bathroom, stripping away his layers and climbing into a warm shower with him. He wanted it so much, to share his body with Len in a non-sexual way. He wanted to make his deep subconscious know that Len’s hands would not wonder, would not touch or harm, they’d only nurture and love.

“How are you doing, Barr?” Sara asked, taking him from his whirling thoughts.

“I’m okay,” he said honestly “a little anxious, but I’m pushing through it.”

“You don’t have to be okay today” she reassured, brushing away a few blonde strands from her face “if you want to be a mess then that is totally acceptable.”

“How did you cope with the anniversary of your capture?” Sara had only spoken of her ordeal a handful of times, often using it to point out that whatever Barry was going through was normal or to assure him she knew exactly what he was feeling. She had never told him about the things done to her, not in the same great detail that he’d spoken to her and Len about his own torture and rapes.

“With tequila and sword fighting, not in that order, though” She confessed. “I didn’t handle what happened to me very well. I also had to deal with what happened before, the choices I made that lead me to get on the damn boat. I let the darkness in; I lay Nyssa teach me to be a killer, to be cold, so I didn’t have to feel the guilt or the fear. Nyssa may have saved my life, but she awoke a dark part of me that I never knew existed.”

“I’m sorry.”

“You don’t have to be sorry; I’m okay now” she smiled softly “Is there anything else on your mind?”

He cast his eyes to the ocean, sighing wearily. If there were anyone who could help him overcome this, then it would be Sara. He didn’t know why today it suddenly seemed so important to shower with Len; he’d toyed with the idea for a while now, imagining what it would be like to expose all of himself to Len. The thought made butterflies stir in his stomach, a barely there shiver race up his spine, the thought was always mixed with trepidation and thrill of excitement. It seemed a perfect way to say ‘fuck you’ to the memory of Zoom, a shout into the void to remind him he owned his body again and now the only man who could see it, explore it, was the one he loved.

“I thought… I thought was ready to ask Len to join me in the shower” he kept his eyes on the sea, watching a seagull bob up and down on the waves “Not for anything sexual, I’m not ready for that… I just wanted to… I don’t know; share more of myself with him. I was about to ask then I
had this surge of panic and” he looked back to Sara “I just couldn’t, no matter how ready I thought I was. I felt disappointed in myself after.”

“It took me a long time to be comfortable with being intimate with someone” Sara divulged “and for you, it will probably be different, it is for everyone. You will know when you are ready, though, and you will have a few failed attempts, I certainly did, and that is okay. The time will come when you are comfortable to share a shower with Len, to have sex with him, just never push yourself. Len loves you; he’ll wait until you’re ready.”

“I know he does” he sighed in frustration “I just hate feeling like I’m walking a line between being okay and being ready to do things only to still have fear pull me back into the dark.”

“I know the feeling well” Sara squeezed his arm lightly. “You’re almost out of the woods Barr, but there are still obstacles in your path, and it’s frustrating as hell. A good way for us to get you through this is to start exposure therapy, but we’ll talk about that later.” They began walking again, cool water rippling around their bare feet. “For now, don’t think about the setbacks or the disappointments, they are going to continue to happen. Focus on how far you’ve come; not how far you have to go. I know this middle ground is a pain in the ass, but it’ll be over soon.” She moved to stand in front of him, keeping their eyes locked “don’t lose sight of your achievements, Barry.”

Barry felt her words seep into him, muscles relaxing and frustration expelling from his lungs in a long sigh. He does as she said, taking a moment to reflect, to embrace his strengths, to recount the milestones. It had been four months since he last had a nightmare; the only thing waking him in the night was his daughter. He is no longer broken, shackled in isolation, lost in grief, consumed by darkness. He is strong, getting stronger by the day. He’s relived every painful memory; he’s faced his nightmares, silenced the voices of doubts, and accepted the scars.

He’s learnt to love and be loved in return, he survived giving birth, survived every wicked, torturous thing done to him. In the future, he will be brave enough to share a shower with Len, to share his body, until then he casts his doubts, disappointments and fears into the ocean, letting them get lost in the cold waters of the deep blue sea.

XxX

It’s late by the time Len crawls into bed; Barry is already sleeping, glasses still resting on his nose and an open book on his chest. Len carefully takes the glasses off; placing them on the nightstand, next he picks up the book, flipping the cover over to see that is yet another parenting book. Len flicks through it; if anyone should be reading parenting advice books, it should be him, Barry is doing an excellent job at being a father. He is completely devoted to his daughter, always talking to her and teaching her things, even though she is too young to understand anything he says. It doesn’t’ stop Barry from talking to her about science, explaining the laws of psychics, the ways of the speed force and a lot of other things that Len can barely understand.

Len’s favourite is when Barry talks to her about the people he loves. He tells her stories from his childhood, the many misadventures he had with Iris are Len’s favourite to hear. He tells her about his friends, his mum, which always makes his voice take on a soft edge, words bittersweet. Seeing Barry with her always made him smile, heart, fluttering in his chest at the sight of his little family. He never thought he’d get the chance to have a family, to be better than his father. Barry had given him that chance; he’d given him everything.

Placing the book on the nightstand he settles down next to Barry, who stirs awake, tired eyes blinking open. Nothing will ever beat these stolen moments, these tiny pockets of time where they can lay side by side, gazing longingly at each other and ignoring the mad world around them. When time starts up again it isn’t as heavy as it once was, the fears and burdens of the past having
withdrawn their claws, allowing them to go free. The world outside isn’t as frightful anymore; their futures while still unclear, are bond together. Len’s home lies within Barry’s heart. Wherever time may take them, they’ll be there together, protecting each other from the storm.

“What are you thinking about?” Barry asked groggily.

“How much I love you” he smiled, tilting his face forward to kiss Barry’s nose “and our little girl.”

“We love you too” he breathed “always remember that. Even if I act weird or get triggered or whatever, I’ll always love you” he shakes his head, eyes fluttering closed “sorry, my tired ramblings probably doesn’t make sense.”

“It’s okay,” he moved closer, draping an arm over Barry’s waist.

He couldn’t help thinking that what Barry just said was in connection to the strange way he acted this morning. He’d thought perhaps an old forgotten memory had stirred loose, freezing him in his tracks and hurtling him back to the past. It wasn’t unusual for Barry to suddenly become tangled up in panic, the smallest thing could trigger him, a smell, a sound and for a few heart-pounding moments, he would become lost in the dark. As time went on it happened less, and he’d grown strong enough to pull himself back from the brink, but life was still a minefield, triggers waiting around every turn and in hidden in the shadows.

It was something they needed to spend time working on, even if Len hated the idea of putting Barry through the trauma. In the long run, it would be beneficial, making it easier for Barry to get by and march the rest way of the way out of the woods. In the morning he’d talk to Sara and Lisa about it, the more support Barry had throughout this, the better, and Lisa’s knowledge on exposure therapy was far greater than theirs. For the moment he can at least help by getting Barry to open up, if he is up to it, that is.

“Is this about this morning?” Len asked quietly, studying his partners face carefully, his eyes were glassy from fatigue, lids straining to stay open, after a moment, he nodded, struggling to keep his gaze fixed on him.

“I wanted to ask you something… then I got scared.” He lowered his eyes, biting his bottom lip, “Not because of you. I’ll never be afraid of you… I just had a wave of panic” he trailed off, still worrying his bottom lip between his teeth.

“I know you’re not afraid of me, Barry. I also know that doesn’t stop any subconscious fears around the things we do and say.” He smoothed his thumb over Barry’s mouth, letting it rest over the reddened spot. “What did you want to ask me, Scarlet?”

Barry looked up, a light shade of pink colouring his cheeks “I was going to ask if you wanted to join me in the shower.”

Len is slightly caught off guard; it wasn’t the answer he was expecting. He knew what Barry had been seeking was an innocent invitation, their intimacy had been growing, but Barry still had miles to go before he was ready to go further than kissing. Len is perfectly fine with waiting; he’s not exactly young anymore, so the intimacy they share suited him just fine. That’s not to say he isn’t looking forward to them sharing more. He does enjoy the thought of the day where his kisses can reach new places; his hands can bring pleasure, erasing the paths Zoom’s hand had made.

Sharing a shower is a huge deal, it evolves trust, courage. There is a sense of pride swelling within his chest, every time Barry reaches a new milestone he falls in love with him a little more. He can’t help thinking back to the start, to the cold, sombre days when Barry was in pieces, screams
shattering the nights and panic attacks consuming him. Barry has come so far in such a short amount of time, not that he ever doubted that Barry wouldn’t make it through the storm. There were days he worried it would take years to get even a glimpse of a smile, but Barry’s strength prevailed.

“I’d very much like to share a shower with you, love,” Len said with a smile, “but take your time; it’s a big step, and you need to be ready. Don’t push yourself, I’m not going anywhere.”

Barry closed the distance between them, kissing Len slowly, deeply, leaving no space, no air between them. When they broke apart, they breathed in deeply, lips red and eyelids heavy. Nothing more needed saying tonight; they shared one more kiss before fatigue had them drifting off. Len fell asleep with Barry in his arms; their daughter would soon wake so they had to steal as much shut-eye as they could. In the morning their journey would continue, pushing them closer to the edge of the woods, to the end of this chapter and the beginning of a new one. Tomorrow they will wake in each other’s arms, hearts beating in time, to a brand new day.
Fear on Fire

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the update! I hit a bit of writer's block, but I am back on track. This chapter is nice and long to make up for the late posting.

Hold on for dear life
Until it's all gone, we'll come alive
And set fear on fire
We'll set fear on fire

Ruelle – Fear on Fire

Warm water trickles down his back, steady fingers dancing over skin, tracing tattoos and whispering over scars. There is so much intimacy to be found in these touches, yet they aren’t seeking anything, not today, they are simply re-learning the touch of human skin, the simple pleasure found in closeness. They don’t stray far; they are always light, a little cautious, but always steady. This is how Barry will once again learn to trust, to know he can explore and ask without being punished.

Len lets his nimble fingers skitter over his wet flesh; he answers questions about tattoos and scars. There is complete trust between them; Barry knows Len won’t touch without permission, won’t ever harm him the way Zoom did. They’ve been showering together for about three weeks now; the first time happened a week after the anniversary of Barry’s capture. They were at the apartment as they are now, Barry walked into the bedroom, leaning casually against the doorjamb with a gentle smile and light shade of pink colouring his cheeks, and asked for Len to join him for a shower.

Len hesitated, it’s only been one week since he lay beside Barry, late at night, listening to him confess that he’d like to share a shower with him. Now Barry’s standing before him, hand outstretched, radiating confidence, looking so ready to share this intimate experience between them. The conversation had been placed at the back of his mind, lost in the fuzziness of fatigue and day to day life. Now the day has come, Barry has once more fought through his fears, his doubts and is ready to take another step.

“Are you sure, Scarlett?”

Barry ventures towards him, Len slowly rises, closing the space between them with slow and cautious steps, giving Barry plenty of time to change his mind, to hesitate. Instead, when he reaches him, Barry takes his hand and leads them towards the bathroom. He watches Barry turn the faucets on, waiting by the closed door and ready to leave if he changed his mind. When Barry strips of his shirt and tosses it into the laundry basket, Len feels a flurry in his stomach, a sense of privilege dancing with the butterflies. He’s so proud of his partner, he removes his clothes with steady hands, stripping away his layers and shaking off the rust. Zoom’s control over him seems to be gone; there is no more holding Barry back, today he is leaping forwards without the shackles of fear.
Barry’s standing before him clad only his underwear, scars, stretch marks, moles and skinny frame freed of the layers they’ve been hidden beneath for months. As much as Len wants to touch, to explore the pale expanse of skin, feel every mole and kiss every scar, he won’t. There is no heat in Barry’s gaze, only trust and a light pink colouring his cheeks as he removes his underwear. Then he is stepping into the shower, Len’s view hidden by the mottled glass.

Len undresses slowly, still giving Barry time to say stop, to say he isn’t ready. By the time he is standing there naked, Barry still hasn’t asked him to leave. Walking towards the shower Len hesitates, asking one more time if he is sure. The door swings open and Barry smiles at him, eyes alive with trust, glittering with love and Len knows without a doubt he is truly ready, so he steps in under the warm spray of water. There isn’t much space between them; he can feel the wet heat radiating from Barry’s skin, it’s difficult to keep a safe distance, to avoid pressing up close to his naked flesh.

“Len, I’m okay,” Barry reassured, body pressing closer. “I trust you.”

“I know you do, love,” he said, reaching up to cup his face. “I still want you to tell me if I’m standing too close or doing something – anything – that makes you uncomfortable or could set off a trigger.”

Barry smiled; leaning into the touch, body relaxing under the soothing heat of the water “I will, I promise. But I feel fine; I feel safe.”

“And you always will be safe with me, Barry” he vowed “always.”

Back in the present, Barry’s fingers have left his arms; he enjoys tracing the edges of the feather that is inked on his forearm, fingers grazing over the birds that billow out of the feather and drift all the way to his chest. They’ve become comfortable over time, shyness and cautiousness no longer prominent, at least on Barry’s half. Len was never shy; he’d never felt ashamed of his scars, it’s why he never found Barry’s own scars anything but beautiful. They had their tiger stripes, their battle scars, stories etched into their skin, showing the world they had survived.

Len was always cautious, though; they were working on Barry’s lesser triggers. Not that any of them should be considered minor, but compared to the severity of some of them it made sense to separate the worst from the bad. The bad was the fear of dripping water, having things like leaves or confetti scattered over his head. The severe was being held down, having people stand behind, especially men, this had made showering a little tricky, but like always they talked it through and worked it out.

It became apparent that Barry didn’t like being snuck up on or having people wrap their arms around him from behind months ago. Sara was the only person who could spoon or approach Barry from behind but even then he needed forewarning. When they first showered together Barry had kept his front to Len the whole time, it wasn’t something he’d been aware that he was doing until Len discussed it with him later. When Zoom raped him, he mostly forced him onto his stomach or his hands and knees, there were also times when he’d laid Barry on his back and bent his body into painful angles to get at what he wanted.

Zoom had taken Barry in almost every possible way; he’d made sure to be violent, seeking pleasure while causing Barry immense pain. Every time Len heard Barry talk about one of his rapes his blood boiled, wishing over and over that Zoom was alive so he could kill him again, slowly, so very slowly. Zoom wouldn’t be rising from the dead; Len could only hope his afterlife was agony. Instead of thinking of the hundreds of ways he could have hurt Zoom, he thinks about all the ways he’ll spend one day pleasuring Barry. When he is ready for their bodies to press close, when he allows Len’s hand to wander, explore, he’ll remind Barry that sex is meant to feel good, that his
body is supposed to worshipped, not owned and marked.

They still have a long way to go. He’s just starting to handle the dripping of a running tap, and even then he is anxious and agitated for a few hours afterwards. They are tackling this one issue at a time, pushing too hard could cause a relapse and Barry has come too far to have a setback now. When they aren’t working on triggers, they are enjoying life, taking Nora to the park, visiting everyone at Star Labs or heading out to lunch. He and Barry also try to get out for some alone time, they go to the movies or to get coffee, it’s nice pretending to be an ordinary couple.

Barry also set up date night, which is usually every Thursday unless there is a Meta attack, which to Len’s annoyance ruined their movie date last week. Life is surprisingly normal, otherwise. It’s not perfect, and there are still struggles and battles to be fought, but Len wouldn’t trade it for anything. He’s found a home with Barry, and there’s nothing better than that. He’s happy, genuinely happy for the first time in his life, there are no shadows or demons from his past holding him down; reminding him that he’ll never amount to anything.

The voices had been wrong, his father had been wrong, he was something, he was a father, a partner, a part-time hero – though he still didn’t feel deserving of that title – The papers certainly had no trouble calling him one though. He wasn’t Captain Cold anymore, he couldn’t exactly go out and fight Meta’s with his old alias, it could lead them back to Barry, to Lisa and Nora, so now he wore a mask and Cisco had smugly dubbed him Citizen Cold. This wasn’t as cool sounding, but his identity needed to remain hidden for the safety of those he loved.

He kept Central City safe with the help of Sara and on occasions Lisa, it was fun, it was thrilling, and he loved it. There was just the small fact that he felt guilty, like he was erasing the memory of The Flash. The city still remembers their hero and they question where he went. Some people think he died and others think he just left, Len wished they knew the truth. Their hero is still alive, still strong and courageous, only he doesn’t believe in that part of himself anymore. They may have saved Barry Allen, brought him back from the brink, but the hero was lost, crushed by cruel hands and scattered on the wind.

Barry doesn’t see himself the way Len does, he doesn’t believe the hero is still beating bright beneath his skin, he just needs a spark to bring The Flash back to life. He won’t force it, though, if Barry can’t ever be The Flash again then that is okay, he’ll always be Len’s hero, his Scarlet Speedster. He and Sara will protect the city in the cover of night, at day he’ll be a dad, a partner and he’ll continue to prove to the world, to himself, that he can be a better person.

XxX

His body is tense, quivering, fear tightening around his lungs every time the splash of water hits the porcelain sink. Nails dig painfully into soft palms, and teeth clench as he forces himself to stay seated on the edge of the bathtub, the urge to run, to flee only grows stronger. After another minute he can’t take it any longer, shaking hands cover his ears, and he doubles over, breathing deeply, trembling. Strong hands rest on his shoulders, moving up to gently pry away the hands that clutch at his ears. There is no dripping water; all he can hear is the roaring in his of heart.

Collapsing forward, Len catches him, arms surrounding him in a comforting embrace, he doesn’t let go until Barry’s breathing has returned to normal. He helps him to his feet, and they walk hand and hand out of the bathroom, back to their room where they’ll stay until for the anxiety has subsided. Len lays Barry down, sitting at his side, smoothing out the mess he made of his hair.

They’ve been doing this for three weeks now; they started the week after the anniversary and each time it gets a little easier, not by much, though.

He hates how such a simple little thing has this much control over him, it can’t possibly hurt him
and yet it unnerves him, sends him right back that dark, empty room. This is only one of many fears, triggers, how long will he be able to endure this? Or will he snap? Turn right back into the mess he was at the start? He won’t believe that, if things get worse they will stop, they will always stop, and they will find another way to get through this. And he will get through this, Len and Sara will help him, they are still his guiding lights.

Already the panic is ebbing, body relaxing under Len’s touch. He deflates, long sigh expelling fear from lungs, Len’s shoulders drop, hands stilling, resting warm and safe over his own. He laces their fingers together; he loves how perfectly their hands fit, like two puzzle pieces. They aren’t perfect, their edges are jagged and rusted, but that doesn’t tarnish the beauty of their love. The fell in love in the cold, dark winter days, now the warm, bright summer days are here, and they can stand in the light.

“Are you with me, Scarlet?”

“Yeah” Barry sat up, shaking off the wisps of fear “I hate going through this. I know it’s important, I just wish it didn’t affect me so much.”

“I know, love” Len moved closer “you are doing really well, though. You made it five minutes today.”

“Really” it had felt like hours, each drip sending shockwaves of panic throughout his body.

“You’re calming down a lot faster too” Len praised “so you should be very proud of yourself.”

Barry smiled, letting the last stray threads of fear float away. He’d love to stay with Len for the rest of the day, curl up on the couch and watch a movie, but he’s meeting his father at Jitters for coffee, and after that, he and Lisa are going to inspect a house. A few days after the anniversary Barry started to think it was time for him and Len to get a place of their own. It was a big step. Nevertheless, their situation wasn’t going to be suitable for much longer.

They went back and forth from the apartment to the West house, and though both felt like home and they always would, it was time for them to have a place of their own. Nora needed her own room; they needed space to be a couple, a safe place to escape from the world. The apartment was too small, it was only two bedrooms, and Sara and Lisa deserved some privacy and space. The West house was too full, and Barry felt awkward being intimate with Len around his family, even if it were just kissing and cuddling.

He wanted to give them a home, a place to make new memories, to be a family. For the last four weeks, he had been searching for the perfect house, something that fits their jagged edges and scarred hearts just right. The other day he was sure he found the right one, he just wanted to get Lisa’s approval first. Len didn’t know that he was planning on getting them a house, a home. He wanted it to be a surprise, which is why he’d asked Lisa to inspect each property with him.

His excitement for today has him forgetting all about the trauma he’d just been put through. Jumping up he starts packing Nora’s things into her baby bag, she’ll be waking from her nap any moment now, and he’ll have enough time to give her bottle before they leave. Right on cue, she wakes, bright hazel eyes blinking open and pink mouth opening wide in a yawn. Len picks her up, she babbles happily, tiny little hands waving in the air. He’ll never get tired of seeing them together.

Len’s face lights up, blue eyes glistening with devotion, smile warm and proud. This is the reason Barry fights, why he faces his triggers, it’s what pulls him back from the dark, anchors him to the world. When his world came crashing down all those months ago, he never thought he’d find
happiness again, not pure and brilliant like this. He’ll always hate Zoom, what he did to him was unforgivable, it will always affect him in some way, but at least it put him on the path to this, to Len, to Sara, to Nora. There is no denying or forgetting, there is only moving forwards, and he has so many reasons to keep going.

XxX

Jitters is thankfully quiet when he arrives to meet his dad. He doesn’t often go out without Len or Sara but today he wanted to tell Henry about his plans, and he couldn’t do that with Len at his side. He’d made some terrible excuse about his father wanting some quality time with him and Nora, which he is sure Len didn’t buy. He was too good at reading people, especial him; Len always sensed when he was upset or anxious. He knew when to step in and offer comfort and when to leave Barry alone to sort out his head. It wasn’t just him Len could read extremely well, it was Nora too.

They had taken Nora to the park the other week; they were sitting by the pond watching the swans and ducks swim lazily about when Nora started to fuss. Barry tried to soothe her, offering her a bottle which she stuck her tiny button nose up at. Len handed her the little red plush fox, and the fussing stopped, she murmured happily around the red fuzzy ear she sucked on. Barry looked over at Len with amazement, unable to contain the smile, even if he felt a little disappointed that he didn’t recognise what she wanted.

“How’d you know what she wanted?”

“I speak baby,” he said promptly, smirking. He was lying stretched out over the patterned rug, haloed in the golden sunlight. “I’m an ex-criminal, love; I am excellent at observing behaviour and analysing what different sounds and gestures mean. She wasn’t crying, just being very vocal about what she wanted.”

“I carried her for eight months; shouldn’t I be able to know the difference?”

“I’ve had practice, Scarlet,” he said, patting Barry’s leg in soothingly “you’re a wonderful father and the fact you didn’t know she wanted her fox doesn’t change that. You are in tuned with her; you probably just don’t notice it, but I do.”

Barry smiled, looking down at Nora who had abandoned her fox and was now trying to figure out the concept of rolling over. Laughing he helped her roll onto her stomach, she cooed merrily, legs flailing in the air. Caitlin had noticed she was quite strong for such a young age; her theory was it had something to do with the speed force, which thankfully she didn’t have access to yet. Her speed would appear one day, hopefully when she was older, at least old enough to understand how important it was to keep it a secret. For now, she is just a normal, happy and healthy baby and to the people strolling by, they are just an ordinary family enjoying a quiet afternoon at the park.

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Barry makes his way upstairs, finding his father in a corner table by the window, mid-morning sun filtering in. When he gets closer, Henry stands, taking the baby bag from his shoulder and hanging it over the back of the chair before giving Barry a one armed hug. They exchange small talk before a waitress brings their coffees and a highchair for Nora to sit in. Once Barry has her safely secure he sits back down, returning his attention to his father, who is telling him about all the medical knowledge he needs to catch up on before he can get is licence reinstated.

A month ago he moved back to Central City; he lives in a small studio apartment a block from the doctor’s clinic he works reception at. Like Barry, he too is getting his life back. They have been
getting along better since Nora’s birth; he’s truly accepted her as his granddaughter, spoiling her and even babysitting her when Len and Barry were in dire need of rest. Barry’s glad they worked things out, all he ever wanted was to have his father back in his life, to have his support and protection.

“How’s the exposure therapy going?”

“It’s going alright,” he said, stirring three sugars into his coffee. He never divulged much of his treatments to others. They knew what he was doing and how he was going, but the therapy was something kept between him, Len and Sara. It’s how it had always been, and it’s how it would always stay. They were a team, and they worked best alone, no matter how good his family and friends intentions were. He still couldn’t find it in himself to burden them with every little detail.

He may have told Joe about the cruel things done to him, but even then he held his tongue, chose his words carefully and he still didn’t allow him a peek into what Len and Sara were helping him through. He’d keep them from the dark, sheltering them from the storm the best he could, even if that meant not allowing them fully into the recovery. He could show them the progress, the man who had risen from the ashes, shaken off the rust and once more embraced life.

“That’s good,” Henry said, not pushing the subject further, “Anything else happening?”

Barry perked up, “Actually, yes. I’ve meant to tell you this for a while now, but Len was around” his father’s eyes took on a curious glint “I’m going to buy a house for us. I’ve been keeping it a secret, so I can surprise Len. After we finish here Lisa and I going to inspect this place” he retrieved his cell from his pocket, handing it over to Henry so he could see the modest craftsman’s house “What do you think?”

“It looks nice, son.”

“I sense a ‘but’ coming,” Barry said, feeling a flurry in his stomach, the tell-tale sign of anxiety.

“Do you think you’re ready for this?” he asked softly “You and Len haven’t been together very long, and this is a big step, a big commitment.”

“It doesn’t feel like that to me” he confessed “Len, and I have been living together for ten months now, and we’ve official been together for six so after all we’ve been through it seems like the right step to take now. We’re a family; he’s as much Nora’s father as I am and I want to have a home. Can’t you just be happy for me?”

“I am happy for, son” he assured, reaching out to touch his arm, pacifyingly “I’m just looking out for you. I know Len is important to you, but you are my son, so I get to put you first, okay?”

Barry nodded, for the first time in his life he understood where Henry was coming from. He’d always put Nora first, above himself, above Len, that’s just what parents did. “Yeah, okay” he looked back to his dad, letting the sizzle of anger ebb. “I understand, I do, but can you understand I am one hundred percent sure about this? I’m not rushing ahead of myself. I have thought about this, and it’s what I want. I’m ready to take this step with Len, with Nora. So please trust me when I say it’s going to be fine, I am going to be fine.”

“I do trust you, and I am so proud of you” Henry smiled fondly, “I will support you in this decision anyway I can.”

Barry sat back in his chair, breathing out the anxiety that had stirred awake “Thank you, dad, it means a lot to me.”
“Always, Barr” he too leant back, taking a long sip of his coffee before asking “Where are you getting the money, though? House prices are insane these days.”

“Oh, I had Len rob a bank” he quipped, smirk playing on his lips.

“Don’t tell me the details, I don’t want to be an accessory to robbery” he joked, then his face took on a serious look “you are joking right?”

“Yes, I’m joking” Barry reassured, laughing “though you can’t blame a millennial if they did choose to rob a bank.”

“No, you honestly couldn’t” his father sighed into his coffee.

“When Eobard Thawne was killed he left me everything,” he explained, “and I figured he'd taken enough from me, so it’s about time I got something back” he kept his gaze down, fiddling with an empty packet of sugar. “I sold his house, and that gave me enough money to do this.”

“I think it’s about damn time we got something back from them too” Henry declared. “They’ve taken so much from you, from all of us, so why not try to make something good out of what is left. I mean, look at Star Labs, you, Cisco and Caitlin have turned it into a beacon of hope. The people on the outside may not know it, but I do. Thawne took your mother from us, he took our home, so the damn least you can do is get it back the only way you can.”

Barry looked up, eyes glimmering with tears of gratitude; he was worried Henry wouldn’t understand his reasoning behind this decision. It had taken him some time to decide whether he would use what he’d been given; at first, it felt tainted, tarnished by the evil who’d owned it. At the end of the day, it was just a house, and most of what Thawne had owned had belonged to the real Harrison Wells. The man he idolised, who taught him so much about science, that man was someone to be proud of. In the end, he made his choice, and he hoped everyone was as understanding as his father was.

“You’re doing the right thing, Barry” his father added, “take something for yourself for a change, you deserve it.”

Barry smiled, warmth spreading through his chest, he reached across the table and took his father’s hand, squeezing it in a silent thank you.

XxX

Barry follows Lisa out the front door; he lets her take the lead and talk with the real estate agent. He used to have no trouble dealing with strangers, he might have always been a little awkward, but at least he could communicate. It bothers him that something this simple has become troublesome, it’s just another part of his life, of himself that he has to resemble. Until then Lisa has been making the phone calls and asking all the questions, she’s good at it too and has the realtor wrapped around her finger in a matter of minutes.

Barry waits patiently on the porch as the realtor fumbles with the keys before finally succeeding in locking the red door; he’s been taken by Lisa’s charm. Throughout the tour, he followed her every step, eager to please and willing to answer every question. Barry didn’t pay much attention to what they were talking about; he’d get the details later, at the moment he was taken by the beauty of the house. It reminded him a lot of the home he used to live in before a monster came in, spilling blood and shattering his once innocent life.

This house would be different; already he could see them living here, starting a new life, away
from the monsters and the madness. He hadn’t even ventured upstairs, and yet he knew this place was meant for them. It was spacious enough for the three of them, and there was even room for more. The thought surprises him; there is a brief moment of uncertainty, thought held in his mind, presenting to him the true meaning behind it. Is there a future where he and Len have grown even stronger, a time when he has recovered enough to want, to give them a second child? He lets the thought drift away; it sits comfortable and warm in the back his mind, where it will stay until he is ready to spend more than a fleeting second on it.

They finish the house tour twenty minutes later, Nora has started to get tired and grumpy as they make their way back to the car. Barry straps her into her car seat, kissing her rosy round cheeks before getting into the front with Lisa. She turns towards him as the engine starts, bright, loving smile gracing her face. He’s so grateful for her; she’s accompanied him to every property, spoke to every realtor and kept this secret from Len for the past month. She’s not just amazing for those reasons alone; she’s helped him a lot over the last few months, using the knowledge she has to help guide him through the recovery.

She has supported Sara through her grief, encouraged her to go to art school, she’s made her so happy, and he can’t thank her enough for that. She has been the perfect aunt to Nora, spoiling her and showering her with love. She was nearly in tears the other day when Barry handed Nora to Len, saying ‘Look, there’s daddy” without even thinking about it. The words sprung free like he was always meant to say them. Lisa’s eyes swelled with glittering tears. Blink and they were gone, replaced with a brilliant light that said more than any combination of twenty-six letters could.

She kissed all three of them on the cheek then left the room with a spring in her step. Len looked at Barry with the same emotional light burning in his gaze; Barry leant forward capturing Len’s lips in a tender kiss, letting the world fade away for those few precious heartbeats. It didn’t matter where he lived or where life took him, Len was his home, his safe heaven, his anchor. They’d walked through the fire and the smoke, they’d come so far, and they would continue to brave the storm, the game of life, for the rest of their days.

Licking his lips, he swears he can still taste Len’s kiss, feel the warmth of his touch lingering on his body. Once his skin held the memory of violent hands, now they have re-learnt the feel of gentle caresses. The flicker of haunting touches are almost gone, soon they will be lost to the past, the darkest hours before the dawn. Time will erase the phantom fingers with their blunt nails seeking blood and bringing pain, Len’s warm, strong hands will touch the places they violated. Always these hands will stop if he asks, they will not go where they are not allowed, they will only ever love, cherish the body they hold.

Len’s love isn’t enough to erase the past; he knows that there will always be memories of the things Zoom did to him. There will always be broken pieces that can never be found or replaced. Len’s love can’t undo what has been done, and that’s fine, he doesn’t want it to be undone, no matter how awful it was. Their future together is bright; it’s going to blossom in a beautiful craftsman’s house that reminds him so much of the home he lost long ago. Their love will get him through; it’s the foundation on which he will build a better life on, Len’s love has set him free and brought him home.

XxX

It’s a quiet evening at the apartment; rain falls steadily outside, a thunderstorm is building, turning the streets below into a deserted, eerie place to stay. The wind rattles the glass sliding doors, knocking over one of Lisa’s pot plants, the soil spills free over the balcony table. Len goes out to rescue it, placing it safely on the ground before coming back, shutting out the roaring wind. Hearing Nora’s cry drifting down the hallway he makes his way to their room, finding Barry curled
up on the rocking chair, Nora cradled in his arms, singing her a lullaby.

He didn’t know Barry could sing until he first heard him a few weeks after Nora was born. It was some time before dawn that he had woken. There was a coldness to the bed, the cobwebs hadn’t even cleared from his mind and yet he sensed something was wrong, he felt Barry’s absence. He got up and headed downstairs, floorboards creaking beneath feet. The first thing he heard when he arrived on the landing was a soft, gentle murmured song; he followed the melody the way a sailor follows a siren’s call.

Barry was in the kitchen, feeding Nora and singing her a familiar lullaby, Len paused, hidden in the shadows, just listening. When it grew silent, he stepped into the light, offering Barry a silent applause. He caught sight of a pale shade pink colouring his partners’ cheeks, he shuffled awkwardly towards him, biting back a smile. Len felt so in love, so grateful; he had found the most precious treasure in all the world. Most people don’t get to find what they have, hell he didn’t even believe in such a thing not so long ago. Yet here he was, standing in a dimly lit kitchen, with the man he loved and their beautiful daughter. Barry finally allowed the smile to grace his face, cheeks still a rosy pink.

“I used to sing in a few of the school musicals,” he revealed. “Iris always told me I should pursue a music career, but I always loved science so much more, also I fell off the stage in the middle of play once, it was the end of my musical days.”

Len stifled a laugh, oh his dear sweet, awkward Barry. He briefly wonders what it would have been like to get to know Barry before Zoom took him. He was aware that a significant part of him had been taken, destroyed by Zoom, but how much remained? Barry was still a selfless, compassionate person, a little bit awkward in fleeting moments but the confidence he used to radiate, the sass and quick wit were dimmed by the darkness. The person he first met would never be seen again, Barry had been through too much to ever be the same, not that it mattered.

The person before Len was just as amazing, just as strong and passionate as the Scarlet Speedster. Len fell in love with the jagged edges, the man who fought like hell, who crawled out of the dark and back into the light. He fell in love with the man who survived the worst possible pain, who found a way to love a child that was forced on him. And with that love, he made Len a better person too, turned him into a man, one who was capable of love and trust, who was brave and kind and Barry did all this while still rebuilding.

Maybe on some other earth, Len had the chance to date The Flash, and they are probably happy, or maybe they fell apart because their love wasn’t forged in the heart of darkness. It didn’t matter how many earths they met and fell in love on, all that mattered was this one. All that mattered was this precious moment on this earth. There wasn’t an end to this love, no downfall; their lives were entwined from here to the end of their time. As the sun rose they headed back to bed, after that night Barry sung in front of Len instead of hiding in the shadows.

When the lullaby is over Len’s mind returns to the present, they sneak out of the room, leaving the door ajar in case she wakes. They make their way to the kitchen; Len had been in the middle of preparing dinner when he went to rescue the fallen plant. Outside the storm rages on, the lights flicker, threatening to surround them in darkness. Len collects two flashlights from under the kitchen sink just in case then resumes dicing up the mushrooms and peppers; it’s just the two of them tonight, so he is making Barry Spaghetti Bolognese.

Barry sits at the breakfast bar, watching him through heavy lids; one day soon he swears they will wake up refreshed, for now, coffee is a life saver. They listen to the sound of the rain; the roaring thunder seems to make the earth shudder and shake. He keeps a close eye on Barry; Nora isn’t the
only one who can become upset in storms. He’s handling it well tonight; there is no tension in his shoulders, no arms winding tightly around his body to shield himself. Like most things, he’s gotten better at handling storms; he doesn’t even flinch when the thunder claps.

Len keeps an eye on him just the same, studying him carefully for any flicker of change, a sharp intake of breath or a tremble of a hand. Len knows his tells all too well by now, it’s why he knows Barry is keeping something from him. He isn’t overly concerned, whatever it is he will eventually speak to him about it. He doesn’t believe it’s anything to worry about; Barry’s moods have been pretty steady lately, apart from the anxiety around the times of the exposure therapy, he has been quite happy, content.

In the past Len’s first thought would have been to suspect something sinister was afoot, he’d demand to know what the hell was going on and usually, that’s when everything went up in flames. He trusted Barry, he didn’t even have a flicker of doubt that something terrible was unfolding; it only goes to show how much he had changed and grown over the past year. Whatever little thing was being held secret would be revealed in time, and Len had no problem with waiting, no doubts forcing an icy heart to lash out and ruin things. He wasn’t the person with trust issues anymore; he wasn’t ice cold, frozen to the bone. Barry had thawed his heart; he’d taught him to trust not only others but himself as well.

There is a loud crash, lights flickering before going out, suspending them in the dark. Nora’s startled cry cuts into the moment of silence that followed the explosion of sound. Dinner abandoned they navigate their way through the dark with only torch lights to guide them. Barry lifts Nora into his arms, quietening her with whispered words and soothing kisses. Len sits down in the chair, watching his partner pace around the room, rocking their daughter in his arms to pacify her. Nora’s tired little cries subside, outside the rain steadies to soft pitter-patter against the glass.

Barry sits down on Len’s lap, a weary sigh escaping into the dark and body sagging in exhaustion. Len wraps an arm around his slim waist, holding them close, keeping them safe. In the dim light he can’t make out Nora’s features, but he can see the shine of her pupils, she stares up at them with big glistening eyes. God, he loves them both so much. He never thought he’d end up here; he never believed he was deserving of such a life, of such love. For so long the towering walls stood around his heart, pain hidden behind snark, buried deep beneath cruelty and distracted by shiny objects and destruction.

There was no cruelty left in these bones, this beating heart. He’d seen the aftermath of the worst kind of cruelty; he’d seen the devastation that a dark heart leaves behind. Never again did he want to cause pain and suffering to others. He couldn’t promise to always be good; if anyone ever tried to harm his family he wouldn’t hesitate to kill them, he’d carry the blood on his hands, so no one else had too. He’d never be the perfect hero, hell, he wasn’t sure he deserved that title. Regardless, he would protect this city, his home; his family no matter the cost.

XxX

One Month later

Len can’t believe he’s gotten himself into this situation again. This was supposed to be an easy takedown, in and out without even breaking a sweat. Of course, it all went wrong, nothing in life was ever that simple; he should have seen this coming. What kind of idiot robs a jewellery store in the middle of the day, even if they have some big fancy gun? He and Sara are caught off guard when Scudder and Dillon appear from the glistening glass windows. There isn’t time to react, Dillon has him toppling to the ground like a broken doll, the world warps and bends before a boot collides with the side of his face and everything goes dark.
Now he’s woken to find himself in a musty basement, tied to a chair with Sara struggling beside him. They aren’t bound by rope; metal cuffs dig uncomfortable into his wrist, his shoulders ache already and his temple throbs. He can taste copper on his tongue; feel the dried blood against his skin. This is not how this mission was supposed to go at all. He really should have anticipated Scudder’s return, they couldn’t find him the following months after Nora was born and eventually, they just stopped looking.

Sara was busy with work and art, Lisa continued to studying and Barry spent his time looking after Nora and preparing for his return to work in the New Year. His love of science and passion of helping people had been enough to make him want to go back to his job. They had a lot of work to do before the New Year; there was an extensive list of triggers and fears Barry had to overcome to be suitable to take up his previous job. Barry could do it, Len knew he was strong enough, brave enough to push through the fear and set himself free.

He wouldn’t get the chance to see his partner do any of that if Scudder killed him, killed them. Len had no idea what he was planning to do with them, but if Scudder was as unstable as he was last time Len saw him, then he was deeply concerned for their safety. They had to get out of here; they had loved ones waiting for them at home.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you.”

He turned to face Sara, catching sight of the dark purple bruise blossoming along the side of her face, “Why not?”

“The more you struggle, the tighter they get” Sara replied. “I don’t know what the hell they are made from, but we’re not getting out of them in a hurry.

Already the cuffs were digging in painfully if they tightened anymore then he would lose circulation to his hands, he flexed his fingers to ease the pins and needles, he felt the metal clamp down at the gentle movement of muscles. Plan B it was then. He scanned the dark basement for anything to help them; there was nothing to be found, only empty boxes and an old couch covered with a white sheet. Behind him a door’s hinges squeaked in protest, footsteps followed, descending down stairs and making their way towards them.

Scudder appeared before him, dressed neatly in a tailored suit, looking a lot saner than the last time Len had the misfortune of seeing him. At his side was Rosalind Dillon, a smug smile on her dolled-up face. He bristled at the sight of them; they had caused enough trouble already, as soon he was free of these cuffs he was going to make Scudder regret ever coming back to Central City. As much as he would like to ice them both he knew the right thing to do was to turn them over to the police, sometimes he missed the perks of being the bad guy.

“It’s good to see you again, Snart” Scudder says, arms casually folded over his chest. “I see you’ve chosen a new path” he gestures at Dillon who twirls his dark blue masks around her finger. “Citizen Cold? How the mighty have fallen.”

“Some would say I turned my life around” he retorted “being a hero isn’t so bad, no one tries to arrest you for starters.”

“But where is the fun in saving people” Dillon chimes in “you don’t get any more diamonds and you don’t get to take whatever you desire, it sounds terribly dull.”

“You’re never going to see another diamond once I get out of here” Sara vows “you put our friend through hell, and I may be one of the good guys, but I’m perfectly fine with messing up those pretty faces you’ve got there.”
“I’d listen to her if I were you” Len cautioned with a deep drawl “she is a former member of the league of assassins; she could torture you for days.”

“Damn straight” Sara winked; her usual friendly face was masked by the killer within.

“And who says you’re going to live long enough to carry through those threats?” Scudder strolled away, returning a moment later with the cold gun in hand. He pointed it at Len, lips twisting into a devilish grin “I didn’t even really come back for you. I just wanted this” he nods to the gun “there’s a job over at Keystone that requires this kind of weapon, and well, we have it now, so why do we need you” he looked to Dillon “do you think we need them hunny?”

She smirked, cold and cruel “Nah.”

“Well then” he lifts the gun, fingers hovering over the trigger “any last goodbyes?”

“If you press that trigger we’re not the only ones who’ll be saying goodbye” Len warned. “That trigger is coded to my prints and if anyone else tries to use it will explode.” He crooks his head to the side, offering them a sly grin. Only he and Barry were able to use the cold gun, anyone else tried, and it would overheat and explode. “It’s always better to be safe than sorry.”

“You’re bluffing” Scudder accused.

“Try me” he challenged.

Scudder hesitated; face twisting in rage before he dropped the gun to his side, shoulders sagging in defeat.

“Just cut off his hand then” Dillon suggested.

“Won’t work” Len shot back “it works with warmth and by the time you get to Keystone my hands going to be ice cold” he was bluffing, about this part at least, he just honestly didn’t feel like losing a hand again.

“Then he’ll just have to come with us,” Dillon said to Scudder “we get him to use the stupid thing, take the goods, put a bullet in his fucking brain then go to some tropical island where we can finally celebrate being back together.” She’d moved towards to Scudder, body pressing close to his, a vixen casting a spell.

“Sounds like the only option we’re left with” Scudder sighed, stepping towards Len, bending down, so he was eye-level, hot breath ghosting over his face. “If you don’t do exactly what I tell you to do then I will kill Lisa, I will kill Barry, and I will kill that precious little baby of yours.”

Len’s blood turned cold, fear cutting off any smart mouth reply. He’d never allow harm to come to his family; he’d always been willing to protect Lisa with his life now that willingness extended to Sara, to Barry and their daughter. He’d die for them, he’d kill for them, and today one of those things might come to pass. He looked Scudder squarely in the eye, hiding the fear behind cold rage, hoping he was too foolish to sense the panic thrumming through his veins.

“I’ll do whatever you ask, as long as you promise to let Sara go and stay the hell away from my family.”

Scudder pretended to consider this, then finally he nodded, lips twisting into a Cheshire cat grin “Deal.”

XxX
Len and Sara have been taken, they’ve been missing for hours, and their comms have gone offline. Only a few hours ago Barry and Lisa went to collect the keys to his and Len’s new house. Today he was going to surprise Len with their home; now he fears he’ll never see him again. He wants the ground to swallow him, to save him from the fear that is coursing through his veins and taking the air from his lungs. He has to remain calm; he’s not going to be of any use to anyone if he collapses from a panic attack. He exhales the fear, breathing in the comforting words offered by his friends. Lisa, Cisco and Caitlin are with him, keeping him close while doing their best to track down Len and Sara.

They keep coming across dead ends, Cisco’s Meta Human app should be able to pick up movement, but it only works when a Meta uses their ability and sometimes it doesn’t work. It’s hard to track every Meta when their powers are so vastly different. When they grow frustrated Cisco attempts to Vibe their location, and at last, they have something to go on, even if it’s small. They are being held in what Cisco assumes is a basement, to Barry’s dismay, there isn’t much else to go on.

The search goes on for hours, it’s nine o’clock at night and Barry is sure he’s never paced so much in his life. He knows Len and Sara are more than capable of looking after themselves; they have taken on worse than two Meta’s, but this doesn’t help to reassure him. There is a pit of despair in his stomach, a terrible feeling spreading like ice under his skin. He keeps pacing, breathing, trembling with fear until he can’t hold the pieces together any longer. His strings are cut; he drops to the ground, crushed under the weight of anxiety, the swirling, maddening thoughts that fill his mind with imaginary fears.

Cisco sits beside him, arm resting lightly on his shoulders, telling him to breathe and promising to bring Len and Sara home. He wants to believe him, he does, but Cisco never brought him home, he spent four months in hell because they couldn’t find him. Rage bristles, jostling with the anxiety, he’s not mad at his friends; he’s not angry at all, just fucking terrified. All it takes is one moment, one cruel act and life can spiral apart, shatter to a million pieces. So many lives hang in the balance, the ending of this night is unwritten, but it has the power to unravel Barry all over again.

“We’re going to find them” Cisco promised for the umpteenth time. “Even if I have to search every basement in this-” his words trail off, face paling and eyes darkening, he is void of life for a few terrifying heartbeats. When he comes back to himself, he looks at Barry with glistening, sorrowful eyes, fear and guilt flickering across his face.

“What did you see?” Barry asked, voice wavering, chest turning cold in pure panic. “Cisco, tell me!”

“I saw Len at the Keystone national bank” he whispered, words shaky “I’m sorry Barry… I… I saw Mirror Master kill him.”

He’s paralysed, it’s like he’s frozen time, suspended once more from the rusty pipe, the drip, drip, drip of water driving him mad. He doesn’t want this to be happening; he just wants to close his eyes and find himself waking beside Len, Nora sleeping soundly in her cot. This nightmare needs to end, he wants to wake up, but this isn’t a dream. Len is going to die or is already dead. No; he won’t believe that. He’d know if Len was gone, he’d feel it. That means there is still time to save him; there has to be, he can’t lose him. He has to do something; he can’t get thrown back into the dark, not when he has the power to do something this time.

He just needs a spark.

“Then I have to save him” he jumps to his feet, Cisco hesitates before following.
“I caught sight of Len’s watch” he checked his own, brow furrowing “It’s already nine-ten now, and Len was shot at nine fifty-five. We’re not going to make it there in time, Barr.”

“You can’t but I can.”

“Your speed isn’t back yet.”

“Then we need to get it back” he shouted, teetering on the edge of hysteria. He was the only one who could do this. Len had saved his life; he was the man Barry loved. He wasn’t going to let him die, not when he could do something. He wasn’t afraid of his powers anymore; he wanted to feel the speed force thrumming through his veins, he wanted it so desperately, and yet he felt nothing more than the pounding of his heart. Caitlin had theorised that it was mind over matter, but they didn’t have time for his body to catch up, they had to act to now.

There was only one thing he knew from past experiences that worked: they had to electrocute him. He is the only one who can save Len, the only one strong enough, the only one fast enough. It doesn’t matter that he’s afraid, that the mere thought of being electrocuted makes him hyperventilate; he’d do anything to save Len.

“You know what we have to do” his voice trembles.

“Barry, are you sure?” Cisco asked, already knowing exactly what he was asking.

“No,” he answered honestly “but I’m the only one who can save him, and I have to do this” his voice grew strong, courage bursting to life. “I have to save him. I can’t; I won’t lose him” I can’t live without him, he added silently.

“Okay” Cisco breathed, he looked as wracked as Barry felt “I’ll be with you the whole time.”

Barry could only nod, words buried beneath the overflow of emotions. He had to be strong; he had to be brave, he had to face the trauma of his past and set his fear on fire. Nothing was going to stop him from saving the man he loved.

XxX

Len has a terrible feeling that he was going to die tonight. Once he’s gotten Scudder and Dillon into the vault they will have no use for him, all it would take was one look from Dillon to render him useless, and Scudder could withdraw his gun and put a bullet right between his eyes. He might have a chance to shoot her with the cold gun, though shooting only her left him vulnerable to be attacked by Scudder and his hands were still bound. They’d have to take the cuffs for him to use the gun; there would be plenty of opportunities to escape, to fight back.

He doesn’t know if it will be worth a damn, though. He has that feeling settling in his gut, the one that alerts him to danger, to brewing tragedy. They are getting closer to the vault; each step feels like it might be his last, there is fear he hasn’t felt before strumming in his veins. Maybe it’s because for the first time he is scared of dying. He’s never feared death in the past; he’s danced around it for years, never afraid to stare down the barrel of a gun or walk right up to Death himself and look him in the eye.

He never felt worthy of living until he met Barry, he was never suicidal, he’d never do that do Lisa but life had been just a joy ride and it when it was over, it was over. Now it’s so much more; there are so many things to live for. Nora’s first word, her first steps, Barry’s bright smile, gentle kisses and the first time they make love. There is a whole future stretching out before him, a chance to keep growing, to have the life he only now realised he deserved. If Scudder tries to take his life
tonight, then he is going to have one hell of a fight on his hands, because if he is going down, then he is going down fighting.

They’ve reached the vault; they’ve managed to sneak out of the bathroom and past the security system. They’d run into a guard, but Dillon had him stumbling around like a drunk sailor before he could call for backup. Scudder knocked the guy out, and they continued to make their way to this very room. The plan was to ice the vault, the steel would become unstable, and a few strong hits would cause it to shatter, according to Scudder that was.

Len knew the gun was powerful, but he wasn’t sure it could get through this much steel, should he even try or should he turn on them the moment his hands were free? He wished Sara was here. Instead, she was left unconscious in the basement. Apparently, Scudder took her threat seriously and knocked her out before unlocking the handcuffs. If he could be grateful for anything at this moment it was that Scudder had kept to his word, Sara would mostly likely be conscious by now and out for blood. Only she had no idea where he was and even if she did she’d never get here in time.

Scudder and Dillon better disappear fast after this because Sara will make them pay, she may no longer be a cold hearted killer but she’s still furious over the trauma Scudder put Barry through, they both are. Len would love nothing more than to punch that stupid smirk right off his smug face. He’ll send him to Iron Heights with a reminder not mess with Leonard Snart or to threaten his family. That is if he makes it out alive. Scudder has the tip of the gun resting against his temple; Dillon unlocks the cuffs and holds out the cold gun.

“Try anything and-”

“-And you’ll what, blow my brains out?” he turned to face him, the barrel of the gun only inches from his left eye “you need me, remember?”

“I’m happy to put a few holes in you” he smirked, “I don’t need you in one piece.”

Pain burst to life as the gun struck him across the face, copper tainted his tongue and blood boiled with rage. He shouldn’t be in this situation; he was better than this. He’d been distracted by all the glittery, sweet things life had been offering to him of late. He knows better than to forget the monsters that lurk in the dark. His ignorance might just be the death of him, and this time there is no one here to save him from his own mistakes. These are the times Mick stood in, the proctor, though Len would always deny it.

Now he’s truly on his own, and it leaves him cold. Vision clearing and balance steadying he takes the gun from Dillon, steps towards the vault, painfully aware of the weapon pointed at his back. He can see how this ends; the curtains might as well already be closing. The moment the door is ready to shatter Scudder is going to pull the trigger; the coward can’t even face him. So he has to take a risk, Dillon is standing a little to his left, if he’s fast enough he can grab her then force Scudder to drop the gun.

It’s six paces to his left; it will take only a few seconds to close the distance between them. He only hopes Scudder has a good aim because he could easily misfire and kill him. Taking a deep breath and a great risk he lurches to the left, a single shot fires, soaring past his ear and hitting the metal, ricocheting. He takes hold of Dillon; she struggles in his iron grip. Len knows this song and dance well; he’ll make demands and threaten her life. He could easily snap her neck, and Scudder knows he isn’t bluffing when he promises to do just that.

There is still a killer hidden within the darkness of his heart; he’ll do whatever it takes to make it home. Scudder doesn’t lower the gun; it remains steady. Len presses in on Dillon’s windpipe, she gasps for air, body twisting and fingers clawing at his arm in a desperate attempt to break free.
Scudder weavers at last; Len stays still, watching him cautiously. He could have another gun hidden away, or a knife stashed in a sleeve, there are still plenty of things that could go wrong.

“What’s it going to be Scudder?” he demands when still he refuses to drop the weapon.
“Whatever’s in that vault or Rosalind’s life?”

“What choice would you make?” he asked, Len felt his skin crawl at the coldness of his tone “would you choose Barry or a vault filled with some of the sweetest treasure imaginable?”

“I’d choose Barry” he would choose his family over anything, there was no greater treasure than them, “I’d always choose Barry.”

“Shame” he sighed “I would have thought the famous Captain Cold didn’t have a heart.”

“Well, you were never the brightest, Scudder.”

“Well, I guess we’re not monsters” he lowered the gun to the floor before kicking it over to Len “We both have hearts, and they are so easily breakable.”

Len shivered, he’d just revealed his biggest weakness, his love for Barry. If he didn’t let Rosalind go than Sam would stop at nothing to until he took Barry, his heart, from him. He releases her, shoving her towards Sam ready to retrieve the gun when she rounded on him, eyes glowing yellow. The room warps and bends, balance is lost in moments, and he falls to the floor like a discarded toy, fighting back the urge to vomit. The room shifts back into focus a few dizzying minutes later. Taking deep breaths, he attempts to calm the nausea before struggling into a kneeling position.

When he has regained his senses he finds himself once more staring down the barrel of the gun; his hope fades to ashes, his gut is never wrong. Dillon is holding the cold gun, aiming it at the vault, fingers hovering over the trigger. She is playing with something she doesn’t understand; it will explode before they even have a chance to get inside. Len only installed this feature in case it ever fell into the wrong hands, that way they couldn’t harm him or Barry with it. Even before he was a legend, he wanted to keep Barry safe. He may have harmed him with the gun in the past, but he knew its limits, and he was aware of Barry’s limits as well. It also seemed like a nice thing to do after all the hell he put Barry through.

“So you were bluffing,” Scudder said as Dillon’s fingers final press on the trigger, releasing a stream of blue.

“I never bluff” he snarled “you have exactly three minutes until it starts to overheat.”

“I don’t believe you, Snart” he lifted the gun, ready to fire, to end it all.

“It’s your funeral.”

“No, I do believe it’s yours.”

This was it; he closed his eyes, holding an image of Barry in his mind, God he’s sorry. Sorry, he’ll never get to kiss him again, to worship his body, to hold him close. He’s sorry he won’t get to see Nora grow up, he’s sorry he won’t get to see Sara become a famous artist or Lisa graduate college. He’s so sorry. Death never comes. A strong gust of wind rushes over him; eyes snap open to find yellow lightning zapping around the room, when the figure comes to a stop, stopping before him he nearly collapses in relief.

Barry is standing in front of him; face hidden by a red hoodie, behind him Scudder and Dillon are unconscious. Len rises on shaky legs, Barry rushes, speeds into his arms. He is nothing more than
a blur that crashes into his chest, nearly toppling them to the floor. It reminds him of the night he killed Zoom, Barry barrelled into his arms and from that day on he always found safety in Len’s embrace. Barry trembles, tears dampening Len’s shirt, he can’t find words to offer; his own throat is choked with emotion. They can only cling to one another, breathing through the tears and the shock until finally sirens sound in the distance and they are forced to flee.

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They are home now, safe beneath the covers, tangled together and sharing fervent, desperate kisses. They need this, to be close, to feel skin on skin, to hear hearts beating. This won’t go further than kissing and hands roaming over flesh, but it’s the most intense they’ve ever kissed. Tonight Len could have died, hell, Cisco saw him die and yet here he is, living, breathing, kissing the man he loves. Barry faced one of his most profound triggers; he set fire ablaze and raced off into the darkness to save Len’s life.

Tonight had been hell for them. They were delicate right now; they could barely speak, barely process the trauma they were just put through. In the morning they’ll be better, their heart rates will have steadied, and the fear will have faded from their veins. They’ll deal with everything then; tonight they are fragile, brittle things. They will kiss each other until fatigue takes over. They’ll fall asleep in each other’s arms, Nora sleeping sound and safe in her cot and tomorrow they will face the aftermath.

They’ll deal with it together, relive the trauma then shake it off, keep marching forwards and rising up. They’ve been in the dark long enough; tonight will not send them spiralling back. They have each other to lean on; they have already been through so much, this will not keep them down. Tonight they can feel the fear, tremble with it, weep in relief, in grief, come morning light; they’ll be alright.

XxX

Barry’s sleep is plagued by nightmares, images of Len’s death flickering in his mind, waking him with a startled cry and cheeks damp with tears. Len soothes him; chasing the tears away with feather light kisses, they tangle together beneath the sheets, no space left between them. When morning breaks, warm golden sun is filling the room and scattering the shadows, Barry wakes to find two ice blue eyes staring at him. A lazy grin graces his face, for these few precious seconds, there is just the two of them, no darkness, no fears, only the serenity of the morning. A trickle of fear stirs awake, releasing the flood gates and letting wave after wave crash through a tired body, a still-rebuilding mind. It takes the air from his lungs, rips the beauty from the morning and suddenly it’s grey and cold, tarnished by the ugliness of yesterday.

There was no recollection of the fear when Cisco told him that he saw Len die. For a few heartbeats, there is just the two of them, no darkness, no fears, only the serenity of the morning. A trickle of fear stirs awake, releasing the flood gates and letting wave after wave crash through a tired body, a still-rebuilding mind. It takes the air from his lungs, rips the beauty from the morning and suddenly it’s grey and cold, tarnished by the ugliness of yesterday.

He tries not to cry, exhaling the grief and anxiety. Len is alive, he only has to stretch out his hand and fingers will find warm flesh, if he tilts his face forward he’ll meet soft lips, Len is alive, and he is here. They stay in bed longer than normal, kissing, touching, needing to remind themselves that everything is okay. They are both going to be alright, they are alive, and they have faced worse, they’ll walk this off. When Nora wakes, they are forced to get up.

They sit down in the living room, Len feeding Nora and Barry snug against his side. He’s going to be clingy for a few days, they both will be. Sara and Lisa join them, bringing with them coffee. The left side of Sara’s face is purple and blue, she doesn’t seem to be bothered by, but it makes Barry wince. He remembers all too well what bruises feel like, how they can throb or ache deeply, he’s
seen them in every colour, found them lingering on almost every inch of his skin.

Len’s face isn’t much better, his right eye is slightly swollen, and there is a cut on the bridge of his nose. He shivers every time he catches sight of the discoloured skin; he only ever saw the bruises marking his face in dust-covered windows or reflected in a pool of rotten smelling water. There is no forgetting the collage of shapes and colours that covered his body. The memories of the dark purples and blues and vibrant yellows and green that Zoom’s violent hits and cruel fingers left behind would stay forever in his mind.

There are no bruises on his skins today, soon not even his scars will remain. They don’t look any different yet, maybe tomorrow or the day after the next they will start to fade, or maybe his healing abilities can’t erase them. That’s another thing he hasn’t had time to process, he has his speed back, at full capacity. Last night he ran the fastest he’d ever gone, he’d pushed his body beyond its old limits to save Len’s life. There was no fear, only determination; it wasn’t until he had Mirror Master and The Top taken care of did the full weight of what he’d just been through crash into him.

Len had been moments away from death. He’d just electrocuted himself. Len was alive. He had his speed back. When he rushed into Len’s waiting arms he fell apart, body trembling, tears falling free. Today they had to sit down and talk about what happened. Barry had to decide what to do with his speed. Did he ask Caitlin to take it away again? Did he keep it and only use it to keep his family safe or was there still a hero buried beneath the rubble, hidden in the ash?

Yesterday he was supposed to surprise Len with their new home; he’d been so sure of their future. In the New Year, he would return to work, Len would stay home with Nora and protect the city with Sara when it was under attack. Everything was different now, the return of Barry’s speed changed things. Did it really have to, though? They would still be together; they still had a home waiting for them, the only difference is today they were a little fragile and Barry could run at incredible speeds once more.

They were alive and in a few days’ time they would feel better, the anxious energy thrumming beneath Barry’s skin will have ebbed, he’ll feel lighter, he’ll breathe easier. When his head was clear, and his heart calmed he could make a decision about his speed and what that part of his future involved. Right now he is sitting with the people he loves, and there is still a house waiting for him and Len to make a home. He’ll shelve his fears, his sorrow and give Len the surprise he was cruelly robbed of yesterday.

He turns to Len, who is looking at Nora with such warmth, such love, he must sense Barry looking at him because he lifts his gaze. Barry kisses the pale skin just below the darkening bruise, lips lingering, hoping to chase away the pain. He slowly leans back, smiling despite the swell of emotions tightening in his chest.

“I know we have to deal with what happened last night, but before we do, I have somewhere for us to go.”

Len looked at him questioningly “Are you sure you want us to go today?”

“I am” he affirmed.

“Okay” he nodded, “are you going to tell me where we are going?”

Barry’s smile grew to fruition “It’s a surprise.”

XxX
Len’s standing on a porch, there is a slight breeze grazing against his skin and the smell of freshly mowed grass hanging in the air. He can’t see anything as Barry blindfolded him the moment he got into the backseat of Lisa’s car. He is no idea where they are; just that they are outside, on a porch in a quiet place. The blindfold drops away to reveal a red door; his first thought is it’s the same colour that Barry’s suit used to be and his second thought has things clicking into place.

This is the little secret Barry has been hiding; this red door which is attached to a pale grey house is the thing Barry has been keeping secret for a month. There are no words, thoughts race around and collide, unable to process, accept what is being given to him. Barry takes his hand and leads him inside; he doesn’t register anything but the soft warmth of his partner's grasp, it’s not until they are standing in the kitchen, the heart of the home they say, that he finds his voice.

“Where are we, Scarlet?” he is sure he already knows the answer but he finds the words leaping out anyway because he just can’t quite believe.

Barry steps closer, cupping the unbruised side of his face and smiling with the warmth of a thousand suns. “We’re home.” lips meet in a tender kiss, arms encircling and bodies pressing close. When they break apart, only after their lungs scream for air, they rest with foreheads touching, faces damp with tears. “We’re home” Barry breathes “We’re home.”
Dark Runs Out

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Let your heart be bright

Let your heart be bright

Steady like the stars
Constant like the rain falls down
Folded like a flap
Hold it til the dark runs out

Amy Stroup - Dark Runs Out

The cold autumn wind whips through hair and seep through heavy layers, chilling to the bone. The city is alive down below, streets dotted with headlights and bustling with bodies, voices rise up, up, up on the air, carrying laughter and fractured conversations. Barry breaths in the city air, huddling in the safety of the blue parka in an attempt to strive off the cold, behind him footsteps approach. He turns in a lazy circle, smiling when he sees the Green Arrow, who smirks beneath the hood and offers Barry a flask.

“Thought you could use something to keep you warm,” Oliver said, voice gentle. “You could have come to my place, you know?”

“But this is poetic” he uncaps the flask, the aroma of hot cocoa wafting into the air.

“You’re unbelievable” he shakes his head, but his words are laced with laughter. “You said you needed to talk, is everything okay?”

Yes, things were good, things were great. He and Len had settled into their new home, they’d recovered from the trauma Mirror Master put them through, and life had been pretty mundane. Barry’s recovery was progressing well, he struggled for about a week after the incident with Mirror Master, but he was soon back on track, choosing to focus on organising their new home instead of giving attention to the past. Life was getting back to normal; there were only a few things still holding him in the dark, a few fraying strings that had to be plucked.

“I don’t know if I deserve to be The Flash again” he revealed, voice carried away on the wind, taking his secret with it. “After everything I’ve been through I don’t know if I am strong enough or if I can be brave enough to be what the city needs.”

“Barry, you are the bravest and strongest person I know” Oliver strolled towards him, lowering his hood and removing the mask. “Three years ago we stood on this same roof, and I told you that I believed the Lightning chose you, to this day, I stand by that.” He rests a hand on Barry’s shoulder, squeezing lightly. “You’ve always been a hero, Barry, even before you got your speed. So regardless of whether or not you become the Flash again, I want you to know you’ll always be a hero to me.”

“Thanks, Ollie.”

“I wish I could help more, but you are the only one who can make this decision. I am here for you, though, for anything that you need.”
“I know, and the same goes for me” he smiled, shivering in the cold, despite the heavy parka and hot drink “I should get home; I told Len I wouldn’t be long.”

“Okay, Barry” Oliver replaced his mask, a soft smile playing on his lips “I am so proud of you. You’ve come so far, so fast.” Oliver opened his arms; Barry stepped in and let the older man embrace him, shielding him from the cold. Everyone believed there was still a hero within him; they never doubted there wasn’t; now he just had to believe it himself, he had to find the embers of the Scarlet Speedster and set them ablaze.

***

Barry arrives home to find Len sitting on the couch, drinking hot cocoa and watching reruns of MythBusters. He shrugs off the parka before sitting down next to him, snuggling into his side, seeking the warmth. He’d mulled over Oliver’s words on the run back to the city; he never believed Oliver when he first said the Lightning chose him. It always seemed more like his powers were a result of Thawne’s evil scheming, but even he couldn’t have known that it was the lightning mixed with the chemicals from his lap that gave him the speed.

If he’d left a few moments earlier or the skies had been clear then he wouldn’t have become The Flash, he might not even be alive right now. He could have been just another casualty, another person killed in the explosion. If fate was real, if something bigger than Barry could understand wanted him alive, then they wanted him to be a speedster. Thawne and Zoom talked about the speed force like it was a living thing like it was a kind of God-like force.

He couldn’t wrap his head around it, he knew it was real, he felt it thrumming beneath his skin but to think there was someone or something that chose him for this seemed preposterous. Maybe it didn’t matter; he was tired of having his strings pulled, of being told what to do. Zoom had taken away his free will; he’d be damned if he ever let anyone else take it from him. If he became The Flash again, it would be because he believed it was the right thing to do, because helping people, saving people was the most amazing thing he’d ever done.

When he was held captive by Zoom all he wanted was a hero, to be rescued from the nightmare, only no one came. If there was someone out there – anywhere – who was in that situation, who was being violated and broken then he wanted to save them. Sometimes you get to be your own hero, other times you need one and Barry has the power to save someone from the worst imaginal pain. So regardless of fate or Gods, he can do something to make a difference, and that’s why he became The Flash in the first place.

“I’ll be right back,” he tells Len before speeding off, coming to a stop a beneath a wilting tree.

It felt like only yesterday that he stood here, digging up the cold soil under the glittering stars and bright moon. He’d been so broken, so lost and burying his past seemed like the only way to move forward. There is fear when he thinks about becoming a Speedster again; it puts him in the line of danger, in the eyes of monsters. There are plenty of men like Zoom, not all of them have powers, but that doesn’t change anything, they can cause more harm than any Meta could.

Being taken again is and will always be his biggest fear. His speed may offer protection, a fighting a chance and a speedy getaway, but it doesn’t make him invincible to those with wicked hearts. He couldn’t survive being taken again; he barely made it out alive the first time. He’s letting fear carry him away; he is stronger now. He has Len and Sara to protect him, to save him when he can’t do it himself. There are people out there, who don’t have powers or friends to rescue them, all they have are their bitter tears and broken pleas going unheard.

Digging into the cold soil he retrieves the emblem, it’s rusted around the edges, and the lightning
bolt has become a tarnished brown. It’s still a symbol of hope, a reminder that he once faced his fears and saved innocent lives, saved his friends. He might not be ready to rush out tomorrow and stop a bank robbery or break up a brawl, but he feels close, so close to being whole again. He pockets the emblem and races home, retaking his place at Len’s side once more.

“Everything okay, Scarlet?” Len asked, bundling him in a blanket to chase away the chill.

“Yes, it is,” he said, passing him the rusty insignia. “I think I’m almost ready.”

Len turned it over in his hand, examining it with a proud glint in his eyes, and then because he knows Barry so well, he turns to face him with a gentle smile and asks, “What’s still holding you back?”

“I’m afraid of being taken again” he admitted, voice small.

“That’s perfectly understandable, but I’d never let that happen.”

“I know you’ll always do everything you can to protect me, but we know sometimes it’s not enough” Barry took Len’s hand into his own, brushing his lips over scarred knuckles. “I am stronger, and I am faster, but the monsters are meaner.”

“Then I’ll be meaner” Len vowed. “I know I can’t promise to keep you from harm, but I swear I will never let anyone hurt you the way Zoom did.”

Barry sighed, crawling onto Len’s lap and winding his arms around his neck, “And I swear I will always protect you as much as I possibly can.”

“Deal” Len smiled, leaning in to kiss Barry.

Barry loved it when Len initiated a kiss; it took a few months for Len to learn he could have a kiss whenever he desired. It was just another reason why Barry loved him so much. They still only kissed, sex was another thing he had to work up to, but he was starting to get desires back. It was just the fear and surge of memories that made him pull away, feeling frustrated and disappointed in himself; despite knowing he shouldn’t be. It was another milestone to reach, just like stepping back into the scarlet suit. It would take time, patience and a lot of work but he believed in himself. One day soon he’d be The Flash again and perhaps someday after that he could finally share all of himself with Len.

XxX

Len’s not sure what is going on, but he and Sara have been called into Star Labs. Cisco is pacing before them, and Caitlin is standing behind him, face a mask of distress and fingers twisting nervously. Doctor Wells and his daughter linger in the background, saying nothing. It’s nine-thirty in the morning and Len would much rather be at home with Barry and Nora but apparently, this was an emergency, and he had to come immediately. He wished they’d hurry up and say something; it was clear by now that whatever was going on wasn’t life threatening.

“Okay, seriously what is going on?” Sara demanded. “Lisa and I were having a perfectly good time until you interrupted us.”

“Things I didn’t need to hear” Len muttered, Sara sent him an apologetic look.

“This isn’t easy to just say” Cisco exclaimed, continuing his frantic pacing.

“What isn’t easy” Sara walked over to him, grabbed him by the shoulders and forced him to face
her. “Cisco, tell us.”

“We reopened the breach to earth two” he confessed in one rushed, shaky breath.

“You what?” Sara stepped back, head snapping in Len’s direction.

“You mean to say, that after all this time, you’ve only now figured out how to reopen the breach?” Len didn’t care that his tone was cold. How could they have not been able to open it before, when Barry needed them to? Now they somehow reopened it when it was a too little too late. He wouldn’t hold his tongue; the anger bristling in his bloodstream had to be released. “You let Barry suffer for months and yet somehow now you’ve finally got the door open?”

“Leonard, hey, calm down” Sara ordered. “We don’t know the first things about breaches; so we can’t stand here and judge them for not being able to do this sooner.”

“No, we deserve that” Harrison Wells spoke up, stepping out of the shadows. “We failed Barry, and he suffered unimaginably for it, so your rage is warranted. We haven’t told Iris or Joe yet because we, I am ashamed that we couldn’t save our friend. I know the science goes over your head but we are brilliant and yet we were not enough to save Barry. You two did that; you saved the friend we failed to save. What happened to him will always weigh on us. I created that monster, I brought him here, so blame me, rage at me, but Cisco and Caitlin don’t deserve all the blame.”

“We are all to blame” Caitlin added, eyes glistening and voice choked with emotion “and right now we feel horrible, but it’s done, the breach is open, and we did that far too late, I know, but we can’t undo the past. The only thing we can do is go forward.”

“Why did you open it anyway?” Len inquired, he’d softened at Caitlin’s words.

“We’re still trying to get home” Harrison answered.

“We never stopped trying” Cisco sad, wiping away a stray tear. “I promise you both; we never stopped trying to get to Barry.”

“We know, Cisco” Sara reassured, offering him a hug.

Len didn’t doubt their words; they would have tried, they would have worked nonstop to get to Barry. If Zoom never brought Barry back to Central City then perhaps they would be running off to rescue him now. What would be left if they arrived now? Would they be able to save him or would he have finally ended it all? What about Nora? He doesn’t want to think about the pain they would have suffered, the cruelty might have broken Barry beyond repair if he hadn’t escaped all those months ago.

It didn’t matter that the breach was open, Barry had come home, he had escaped, and he had survived the aftermath. Getting angry wasn’t going to help; it wouldn’t unravel time and take him back to the very moment Zoom took Barry. Like Rip said, this was unchangeable; time would not be rewritten, and as horrible as Barry’s suffering had been it had led to something beautiful. It was easier to survive, to carry on when there was a reason to, a purpose. Nora was that purpose, the happy ending at the end of this tale; their love was the reason, the silver lining. To most people, it would seem silly to believe that anything good could have come from the pain Barry went through but if they didn’t find the beauty, the light, then he might as well have stayed in the dark.

“I take it you would like us to tell Barry about this?” Sara asked, bringing Len out of his thoughts.

“We thought it would be best coming from you two” Caitlin admitted.
“You’ll probably right” Sara agreed.

“There is one more thing, though” Caitlin added timidly.

“What?” Len asked, temper flaring again.

“Barry is the only one who can take Jesse and me home” Harrison answered, gesturing to his daughter who was still lurking in the background.

“You want him to return to earth two?” Sara exclaimed. “Do you have any idea how difficult that could be for him?”

“No, I don’t, I won’t ever know what it feels like to be in Barry’s shoes,” Harrison said in his usual low, gruff tone, “and I am not saying he has to do it, we’d never make him, but this isn’t our home.”

“And what if he can’t?” Len stepped in, glaring down the previous members of Team Flash.

“Then we could always find another way” Cisco proposed “possibly. Though, personally, I think we shouldn’t be putting this on Barry, not now. I don’t even want to go back, and I only Vibed the things he went through.”

“Well, I suggest you find that other way” Len snarled “because if Scarlet isn’t up to it, you’re going to be out of luck.”

“Len’s right, we’ll tell him about the breach today, but that’s it,” Sara pinned Harrison with a piercing blue stare. “Until then, I am sorry that you can’t get home. I know how awful it is to be away from the people you love, but I will not risk Barry’s mental health for you. I’ll contact the Legends and see if they can help you out, who knows, the Wave Rider might even be able to get you back.”

“It’s possible” Caitlin shrugged “either way, we don’t want to upset Barry in any way, he is our friend, and we care deeply for him. We just wanted you to know everything that was going on. We don’t hide things from each other.”

Len didn’t hear what Sara said; he’d already started heading down the twisting corridors, head a mess of whirling thoughts. He tried not to let his rage get the better of him; he understood that this was probably best coming from them. They were more equipped to deal with Barry’s reaction. It still felt a little cowardly, though, not that he had any right to judge. He wasn’t here when Barry was taken, he was off on the Wave Rider, flirting with Sara and stealing trinkets from different time periods. Look at him now, heading home to his partner and their daughter, how time changes everything.

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Len arrives home to find Barry folding laundry; it feels too mundane for the conversation they are about to have. He and Sara are about to tell him that his friends reopened a breach to another world while standing inside their ordinary home, while their daughter plays with blocks on the living room rug. The science and the Meta’s belong on the outside; this was their safe heaven, the place where they didn’t have to be any more than normal parents raising a child.

It didn’t feel right to do this in the living room where they cuddled and binge-watched shows on Netflix. Then again, this was their home, and it was the safest place for Barry to be when they told him this. These walls would protect him; they’d hold his tears or rage-filled screams secret. Whatever reaction this news brought would stay within these walls. Len gently ushered him over to
the couch, sitting down beside him while Sara sat on the ground before them with Nora, who was attempting to build a tower with her blocks.

“What’s going on?” Barry asked, looking between them both with uncertainty.

Len could sense the anxiety stir awake beneath his skin; he laced their fingers together, offering as much emotional support as he could. The words felt heavy on his tongue, tasting like ash, it shouldn’t be this difficult to speak; he knew Barry was resilient enough to handle this. He didn’t want to see the hurt play out in his partner’s eyes, though; there had been enough pain in them for a thousand lifetimes.

“Cisco and Caitlin have reopened the breach to earth two” Sara answered, voice gentle.

Len waited for a reaction, Barry’s eyes took on a glassy, faraway gleam. Len could only imagine what kind of thoughts would be tearing through his mind. A moment later he came back to himself, blinking the emptiness away.

“Oh, okay,” he breathed “that’s… that’s okay.”

“It doesn’t have to be okay; love” Len felt uneasy about Barry’s reaction. He wasn’t sure how this would make him feel, but he’d completely understand if Barry was angry or upset.

“I’ve forgiven them for not being able to save me. I know they tried and that’s what counts.” Barry rises to his feet, moving towards the laundry he’d left half folded. “I’m home now, I made it back without their help, and I can’t be angry.” Trembling hands start folding clothes, Len hangs back, waiting for the right moment to offer Barry comfort.

“It’s good they’ve got the breach open, Doctor Wells and Jesse will be able to go home now.” He stops folding; one of Nora’s many blouses slipping through his fingers “They need me to get them home.” It’s not a question; he doesn’t need to have a single thing explained, he knows exactly how a breach works. He takes a few unsteady steps back, Len sense the exact moment Barry folds in on himself, slamming up a protective barrier “I need a minute.”

Len watches him disappear in a blur of yellow; he would have worried that he’d taken off to somewhere he couldn’t reach him if it weren’t for the footsteps upstairs and loud thud of a door slamming closed. He turns to Sara for help; he isn’t sure what just happened. It seemed a little like shock and Barry had desperately tried downplayed, either to reassure them that he was fine or himself, it was probably the latter. As much as Len wanted to go upstairs and wrap Barry in his arms, he knew from past experiences to give him some time to process. This was sadly a dance they knew the steps off all too well; at least he knew the outcome. Barry would be sad or angry for a little awhile, but in the end, he would come out strong.

XxX

Barry can’t figure out if he is angry or upset; he wants to scream, to cry but there is a rational part of his mind telling him to hold it together, it’s just another bad day. Untangling the thoughts, the emotions in his head feels impossible. They rattle and swirl around, each time he thinks he grasps a thought, a feeling; it slips away, replaced by something else that scurries off just as fast. It’s been so long since he felt these maddening, stomach twisting, heart-wrenching things. All of this because his friends reopened the breach, the breach that could have saved him from a world of pain if they had just opened it sooner.

But is that really true? Even if they had somehow gotten to earth two, which is challenging to do without a speedster to take you, would they have been able to defeat Zoom? He was so Goddamn
fast, and he wanted Barry so much, he’d never let them take him. Even if they marched into the Asylum with Oliver and his team they still would have been slaughtered. Without the nanobots Ray had used to slow Zoom down then he would have remand unstoppable.

There was no point being upset, he had made it home, he had survived, and in the aftermath he found love, he had a daughter who adored more than words could ever say. If they had rescued him sooner, she wouldn’t be here; Len and Sara wouldn’t be part of his life. None of this would ever change the pain, the suffering, he went through but if he had to find some goodness in this wreck, in this nightmare than it would be them. Rip had told him he was sorry he couldn’t reverse time that it was unchangeable, in his darkest hours, he would have killed to have this hell unwritten, but he’s starting to understand the reasons why it can’t be.

The pain will never be forgotten; there will always be pieces missing, an ache in his heart and a chill in his bones. There is no going back, the past is set in stone, but the future is not. Only last night he was getting ready to be The Flash again, and he will not let this bump in the road stop him. He’ll allow himself to be angry; he’ll let the tears fall, then he’ll shake it off and accept that this is how life is now. And life is much better than his shattered self envisioned. He never saw his friendship with Sara coming or his love for Len; he never foresaw the joy Nora would bring. The darkest hours had turned into the brightest days. He just needed a little time in the dark; then he could once more embrace the light.

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A few hours later Barry started to come back to himself; he’d been lying between Len and Sara for the past hour, Nora sleeping on his chest. His loud mind had finally quietened, the tangled, looping thoughts coming together. There was no anger or resentment towards his friends, they had tried their best and there was no point holding on to any remaining anger, it was over. He was home, safe, getting better day by day. There was no point being upset either; he’d shed enough tears, wasted enough time lost in grief, mourning the life he used to have.

His new life, though born in the heart of darkness, was everything to him. Sara and Len were his family; they had stood by him even when others found it difficult to do so. They had saved his life and the life rebuilt was pretty amazing. He was so in love with Len, he couldn’t imagine life without him, without their little family; even if it wasn’t perfect, it was something he never thought he’d have. He never imagined he’d get to be this happy again, there were moments where he doubted he could ever make it out of the dark, but he did, he has. He is finally better, and he will continue to get better, there will be no more lingering in the shadows.

So he’ll forgive his friends, he’ll tell them that it’s okay, he isn’t mad or upset, he loves them, and they will always be a team, a family. There is another thing that needs to be done, and he isn’t sure Len and Sara will like it, but they’d never stand in his way. He’s going to return Doctor Wells and Jesse to their earth. He knows what it’s like to long to go home, to miss the people you love so much that it psychically hurts. They deserve to go home, to return to the people they love and while Barry is there he is going to visit the asylum.

It will be terrifying and challenging, but in his heart, he knows this is the right step to make. He’s not sure what he hopes to gain from going back, it’s just something his gut, his heart, is telling him to do. Perhaps by returning he will free himself of the last strings that tether him to the past, to Zoom and that Godforsaken place. This is a chance to be his own hero, to rescue himself from the last tendrils of darkness. Stepping back into the asylum is going to cause a tidal wave of memories, a rush of wild feelings. It won’t break him; he won’t let it. He’ll carry the knowledge that he can leave at any moment, that there is a home filled with love and a bright, glittering future waiting for him to come back too.
“I’m going to do it” he whispered, so not to wake Nora. “I’m going to take Doctor Wells and Jesse home.”

“Are you sure you’re ready to go back?” Sara asked.

“I don’t think I’ll ever be ready” he answered honestly, absently stroking Nora’s fiery red curls. “But if I don’t, then a small part of me will still be afraid of Zoom, of the Asylum and I need to face everything in order to let go of the fear.”

“If that’s what you feel is best for you to move on then I’ll support you” Sara declared.

“I’ll always stand by you, love” Len vowed, “I would feel better if you’d let me come with you, though.”

Barry hesitated, he didn’t want Len to see the place he was held captive, didn’t want him to see the ruined mattress that could tell the most twisted tales. He had to face the asylum and Zoom’s ghost alone; he deserved a chance to be his own saviour. Still, he’d bring Len along to earth two as a compromise.

“I’ll take you to earth two with me,” he said to Len, offering him a gentle smile, “but I need to go to the asylum on my own. It’s important to me.”

“Of course, Scarlet” Len leant forward to kiss him. “I understand, and I’d never stop you from doing anything that is important to you or to your healing.”

“I know” Barry kissed him again, soft and lingering until Sara cleared her throat. “Sorry.”

“You two are adorable” she smiled sweetly.

Barry chuckled, the low rumble waking Nora, her big hazel eyes blinked up at him. If this beautiful, precious daughter of his, his friendship with Sara and his love for Len were the reason time couldn’t be rewritten, then he was okay with that. He never wanted to give this up; he never wanted to find himself without his daughter, without Len or Sara’s love. It was only human to find a silver lining, even in the darkest hours, so they’d be his. They would forever be the sun waiting to shine after the storm.

XxX

Len’s been to plenty of different time periods. Travelling on the Wave Rider had been thrilling, chasing an immortal tyrant through history was even better than pulling off a successful heist. It was exhilarating; it was the best high he’d ever found. The need to chase, to be thrilled still burnt bright inside him, every time he responded to a Meta attack he enjoyed it a little too much. He was more careful than he used to be, his life seemed more valuable now that he had so much to live for. It still didn’t change the fact that he was a thrill seeker and going to another earth had stirred that part awake.

Admittedly he felt guilty for being excited about this trip, this was the earth that Barry was held captive and abused on for months, but Barry seemed to find his interest in this mirror world endearing. When they were getting ready this morning Barry had spoken to him about some of the ‘cool’ things there were to see. At first, Len figured he might be trying to strive off his own fear about returning to the asylum, after a while though he realised Barry actually still liked this earth. He was fascinated with their advanced technology and classical way of dressing.

Len took him into his arms and held him tight; Barry hugged back, burying his face into the crook of Len’s neck. Only Barry could still find beauty, wonder in the place where he suffered
immensely. His heart was so big, so bright, and not even Zoom, with his violence and poisonous words, could dull that shine, break that beautiful heart. In his mind, Barry had already saved himself. He and Sara had just been the guiding hands, the binding anchors. Still, if Barry felt that he needed to do this, then Len would respect that and like always he’d stand by Barry’s side and support him no matter what.

It’s time to go; they are standing before the breach, it swirls blue and white, the air is charged, alive. Then they are speeding through it; images play out on the walls like home movies, only he shouldn’t look, shouldn’t pay attention to them. They are glimpses into other worlds, into possible futures and it’s tempting to see what the future holds, what secrets the multiverse has to offer. His curiosity gets the better of him before they burst out of the breach and land safely on another world. Len catches sight of Barry; he’s lying in bed, hair mattered and looking at something in the distance with tear filled eyes.

It’s strange watching himself appear; he doesn’t look any different, only there is a glint of silver on his ring finger. The other version of himself is nursing two tiny babies, one of which he passes to Barry, who is smiling through tears of joy. It’s only at the last minute that Len catches the same silver glint on Barry’s finger then it’s gone, he stumbles to his feet, trying to wrap his mind around what he just saw. Was it a possible future or another world?

He doesn’t have time to think any more of it; Barry is standing before him, staring at him with eyes that dance with a thousand emotions. The world drops away, it’s just the two of them, and his partner needs to borrow some strength before he can leave. He holds Barry close, offering him words of encouragement, giving him all of his strength. They share a shaky kiss before Barry races off, Len watches the lightning disappear, lips still tinglingly and images of a possible future playing in his mind.

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“How far away is the asylum?”

Len asked Wells, who had invited him to wait for Barry’s return in his office. It had been half an hour already, each minute seemed to drag by at an agonisingly slow pace, and though he was trying not to worry he couldn’t hold back the trickle of fear. He was usually a patient man, but he was never good at this kind of waiting. He felt uneasy, nerves frayed and wrecked, a selfish part wished Barry had taken him to the asylum, so that he didn’t have to sit here anxiously awaiting Barry’s return.

“It’s about an hour to the asylum” Harrison replied, “and it takes Barry half an hour to run that length of time so he should be getting there now.”

Len nodded, trying to picture what the asylum looked like, all his mind conjured up were images from old horror movies. It probably wasn’t far off; Barry had told them how it felt haunted. How sometimes he swore, he felt eyes on him, hands reaching out from the shadows to drag him deeper into the darkness. Len didn’t believe in ghosts, but if someplace was home to enough violence then surely it could leave an echo, a print to be seen and felt by all. Was there an echo of the person Barry used to be haunting those halls? Had the part Zoom stolen, broken, remand trapped in the dark even though Barry had escaped?

He shakes the troubling image from his mind; it’s a disturbing thought that makes him shiver and feel uneasy. He doesn’t want any part of Barry lingering in that Godforsaken place, be it him, a ghost or an echo. Hopefully by returning Barry can lay that ghost to rest, untangle himself from the old, haunted asylum. He’s come so far, the nightmares and panic attacks had stopped, he still had trouble with triggers and crowded place, and maybe those things would never change, and that was
okay. Everyone had fears, even Len; it was only human.

“Here, this might help.”

Len looked at the glass of amber liquid that Harrison placed on the table. He downed it in one swig, letting it take the edge of his nerves. “That’s not bad.”

“It’s a lot better then what you have back on your earth.”

“What else is different here?”

“Why don’t you find out for yourself” he handed him an iPad, only here they were called a pPad.

“P doesn’t have the same ring to it,” Len said, bringing up google chrome, glad that at least that was the same.

“Well, you’ll have to take that up with Ray Palmer.”

“Still a nerd I see” he mused, putting his name in the tab. Googling himself was better than sitting here anxious and tense until Barry returned. At least he might find something interesting to tell Lisa. Right away it brought up an image of himself dressed impressively in a navy blue suit, below the picture was the headline ‘Snart Celebrates Second Year as Mayor’. Out of all the things he’d thought he’d find this was not it. “What insane person let me run this city?”

“I voted for you,” Harrison said, taking a seat opposite him. “You’re a good man, Snart, here and on your earth. I hope you know that.”

“You barely know me” he pointed out.

“I don’t need to know you” he shrugged, swirling the amber liquid around his glass. “I have watched Barry come back to life, and that was because of your help, your compassion. You stayed with Barry through the darkest time of his life, so there is no doubt in my mind that you are anything but a good man. You may not be a Mayor on your earth, but I believe you are destined for great things.”

The image of a gleaming ring flickers in his mind, the memory of him handing Barry a tiny baby following. He wants to know if Harrison saw it too, he wants to know if that’s his future waiting to unfold. He decides to remain silent; Harrison probably means he is supposed to be more than just a common thief. He’d never thought about careers or jobs; it was probably time to start. He had a family to look after, and if what he saw was his future, it would be getting bigger.

What kind of thing could he even do? It’s not like he had any degrees and he finished school in jail so his resume would be less than impressive. At least his criminal records had been erased so he wouldn’t have that preventing him from getting work. The question still remand, what the hell did he do? He’d never dreamt of becoming a surgeon or a firefighter or whatever eight-years-olds are supposed to dream off. He’d been taught to steal, take what he wanted, so he never had to worry about working a day in his life. He’d been a criminal mastermind so how does he apply that to a suitable career?

Who better to ask then himself? A little investigating would tell him all about this shiner version of himself. Reaching into his jacket pocket he retrieves his notepad and pen, Mick always made fun of him for carrying it around, but it always worked a charm when he handed it to potential dates. Having a written number was more appealing than just putting it into someone’s phone, even if Mick called him a sappy old school romantic for doing it.
It’s only when he places them on the table that he realise something is wrong, something is missing. Inside the same pocket is where he always keeps Mick’s lighter and it wasn’t there. A quick check of his other pockets leaves him with a twisting stomach. It’s gone, the lighter is gone and there is only one person fast enough to take it without him noticing.

XxX

It feels surreal to be standing here again, there is a moment where he can’t move, can’t breathe and he teeters dangerously on the edge like he did thirteen months ago when he’d been so ready to end it all. The memories crash into him with the force of a hurricane, for a few terrifying moments he remembers, he feels every little thing Zoom did to him. Four months of hell unfold in his mind all at once, a horror show like no other. The memories hurt, it brings him to his knees, he lets the hurricane do it's worse. When it's over, he takes in a deep, shaky breath and rises to his feet; they carry him forward into the mouth of hell.

The locked off ward he isn’t far from the opening, he can still hear the sound of the waterfall, it used to lull him to sleep. Everywhere he looks a memory; the air still smells like sex, blood and fear. He gags at the sight of the mattress, rotten, stained and reeking of Zoom. The shackles that left his wrist mangled are still attached to the bed; they have rusted even more in his absence. He turns away from the cot, strolling towards the wall that Zoom fucked him against.

Looking up at the window he almost expects to see the little moth with its fluttering wings; there are only cobwebs and hungry spiders to be seen. There is blood on the concert floor, on the faded patterned wallpaper that is peeling off to reveal moss covered walls. Feeling sick he turns away, not that it matters, everywhere his eyes go they find a place in which Zoom broke him. This place is bloodstained and haunted; it holds the most painful memories, the darkest days and all he wants to do is burn it to the ground.

He wants to set free the spirits that have become trapped here, set free the ghost of the man who had his suit torn away and body violated. The Asylum would not burn easily, the brick and stone made sure of that. It was impossible to release all the broken, trapped souls that linger here but at least he could free himself. Before he does, he has to face a few more memories, let them tear through him so he can break away from their hold at long last.

The first stop is the dank, mould ridden bathroom that smells even worse than he remembers. Hovering in the doorway, looking in at the mould covered tiles and smelling the pungent air his mind projects an image of himself huddled by the toilet, crying hysterically through bouts of nausea. The early days of pregnancy had been hell on his frail body and fragile mind; he wanted nothing more than to purge himself of the vile, evil thing growing within. Standing here now he feels nothing but love for his daughter; she is his light. If only he could whisper into the past, tell the crying mess huddled on the floor that it would all be okay. They survived. There will be no whispering into the past; he has to turn away and leave his ghost sobbing on the floor.

The next stop has his heart racing, stomach twisting as legs tremble and threaten to buckle. He does not falter; feet don’t fail him; they carry him to the dark, dark room with the rusted pipe and drip, drip, drip of water. He doesn’t allow himself to think, to pause, he steps into the darkness and lets the memories wash over him. The tears finally fall, broken, guttered sobs climbing up his throat and escaping into the empty, hollowed out space. It feels like being gutted, like being raped, beaten and electrocuted all at once.

He falls to the floor, a broken doll. It takes some time to gather himself; it could have been minutes or hours, there is no presence of time in the darkness. There is no need to stay here any longer; he’s faced the memories, walked these haunted halls, now it’s time to set himself free. Walking back
towards the ward he feels eyes on him, ravenous, monstrous. He could leave, disappear in a flash of lightning but not before he releases the piece of himself that was lost to this ugly place.

He’s rounding the corner when he sees him. The air is ripped from his lungs, blood turning to ice, freezing him in place. Zoom stands, menacing and demonic at the end of the hall, hungry eyes drinking him in. The world rushes away; there is just him and Zoom; the monster that ruined him and loved every minute of it. He needs to run; only his legs won’t work, the scream won’t break free, and his hands can’t move. Zoom stalks towards him, and he thinks this is it; it’s going to happen all over again. Then he hears Len’s voice, telling him to be brave, to fight, to move, so he does, only he doesn’t run away, he rushes straight at Zoom.

He speeds towards him then comes to a sudden stop, staring right into Zoom’s soulless black eyes. He holds his ground, breathing deeply, trembling; choking back the screams, the rage and fear. Zoom does not move; he stands motionless, he is not real. He is just a ghost, an echo. Barry reaches up and tears the mask from his face, revealing the man underneath. That’s all he ever was, just a man, a coward, a broken, twisted soul. The monster was just a suit, a skin in which he slipped into. He wouldn’t be afraid of a costume anymore; he wouldn’t be afraid of the vile man wearing it any longer, either.

“I’m not scared of you anymore” he declared, voice rising and steady “you can’t hurt me anymore!”

And just like that, the illusion fades to ash than to nothing. The monster was gone, Zoom was gone. He couldn’t hurt anyone ever again. He couldn’t hurt Barry ever again. Taking a deep, shaky breath, he continued back to the ward. On his way towards the cot, a flicker of something shimmering catches the corner of his eye; feet carry him towards it by their own accord. Hidden behind a broken wheelchair and a mound of blankets turned grey by dust and filth is his emblem. It’s laced with cobwebs, and the golden lightning bolt has dulled and rusted, but it feels like hope in his hands. Here in his open palm is another piece that he thought was lost, it’s a small faded memory of the man who once stood where he stands now. With tears gathering and chest tightening, he pockets the emblem, before finally walking back to the cot. The sight of it makes his stomach roll; it’s covered in blood and cum, echoing with screams and pleads that went unheard.

Quivering hands pour a small bottle of lighting fluid onto the mattress then he pulls out the lighter he took from Len’s pocket. He sets the bed ablaze, stepping back to avoid the hungry flames. He watches it burn until the smell and smoke are too strong. He races off, stopping at the edge, breathing in the fresh air, breathing out the memories, shaking off the blood and rust. It’s time to go home, to return to his new life. A smile graces his faces; the strings come loose and fly away on the wind, the memories will always stay with him, the scars will remain even after they have disappeared but he’s finally found himself again.

He’s not the person he used to be, and that’s okay. He’s someone new, someone, stronger than ever. The dark has run out; it’s finally released him from its oily tendrils, its murky depths. He’s found the light, and it’s in Len’s love, it’s in Sara’s smile and Nora’s eyes. It’s surrounding his heart, helping him, protecting him. He knows the future is uncertain; the darkness could sweep back in with a vengeance on any day, anytime. Life is a dangerous, messy thing, after all, but for now, the dark has run out, and at last he can let his heart beat bright.

XxX

Len’s glad to be home, to have Barry safe in his arms. When Barry returned from the asylum he was met with a new person; there was strength burning bright in his eyes, he stood a little taller, walked a bit more confidently. As much he wished to pull him into his arms, to hold him tight and
reassure himself that he was here, *that he safe*, he held back, letting Barry come to him. Barry always fitted perfectly in his arms, their jagged edges fitting together just right. This hug was no different, Barry folded himself into Len’s embrace, pressing as close as humanly possible, when he stepped back, he looked up at Len with eyes a gleaming bright.

Whatever he had done at the asylum had shifted something, reignited a thousand sparks and brought another missing piece back to life. Looking at him now, with this newfound strength radiating off him it felt like this was the end. Their long journey was at a close. The darkness had lifted from his shoulder’s, receded from his eyes and if they were lucky it would never return but life was messy and full of terror, triggers and the things Zoom had done to him wouldn’t disappear in the flames and ash of the asylum. They’d always stay, they were just further away, and Len would celebrate this victory with Barry.

And it was a win, Barry been so brave; he’d walked right into his past and set it ablaze. It wasn’t until they were back home that Len asked about the lighter, he imagined Barry burning the whole Goddamn place to the ground, and he’d be right to do so. It was impossible, though, as the place was made of grey stones, bricks, metals and concretes, it would forever remain a haunted, hollowed-out space. When they are sitting on the couch, limbs tangled together, Barry told Len he’d set the bed where he was repeatedly raped on fire. It felt like the only way he could release the part of himself that had remained trapped there.

They talked for hours, letting the fear, the joy and the tears escape. By nightfall, they were both exhausted and collapsed into bed at eight o’clock, snug in each other’s arms. Through all the talking Len had neglected to mention what he’d seen in the breach. Well, it wasn’t so much neglect there had been more important things to discuss and making sure Barry was in a safe headspace was a top propriety. Len had been terrified when he found Mick’s lighter missing, he feared Barry would somehow get trapped in the burning carnage of the asylum, but he quickly shut down the thought.

Barry was going to be okay. He wasn’t Mick; he wouldn’t stay to watch the flames dance and destroy, transfixed by the beauty of the destruction they brought. Fire was purifying, and if Barry had to burn the place to the ground to break free of its hold, then Len would let him. He trusted him to make safe decisions, and when he returned, unharmed and smiling a little brighter, he knew that staying back had been the right thing to do. Barry did need this opportunity to be his own hero and when he handed Len the other emblem that had been lost to this world; he knew Barry had found that chance.

The dark had run out, at least for now, that’s the trouble with life; it’s unpredictable and full of monsters and wicked men. Len will cherish this moment; he’ll do whatever it takes to protect Barry from the evil hearts and hungry beasts. At least, for now, they are safe and sound inside their home, and it’s time to tell Barry about what he saw in the breach. It might not be their future, it could easily be a glimpse into another world, but Len’s instincts told him otherwise, and he knows better than to ignore his gut.

With eyelids heavily and voice rough with fatigue he opens his mouth and says “I saw something in the breach today.”

“What did you see?” Barry opens his eyes, Len can’t make out his features in the dark, but he knows what his partners gaze feels like against his skin.

“You were in the med bay at Star Labs, and I walked over to you and in my arms were two babies, twins” he revealed. “I think you’d just given birth, you looked so tired but when I handed you one of the babies you smiled so bright” reaching out in the dark he traced a finger over Barry’s lips.
“You, we were so happy.”

Barry smiled against the touch of his finger “do you think that’s our future?”

“It felt like it” he confessed.

“When I first looked through the house I imagined us having more kids” he revealed “it was a fleeting thought, but I liked how it felt. I like the idea of extending our family. When Nora is older, and you know, I can actually have sex.”

Len’s cupped the side of Barry’s face, stroking his cheek with a calloused thumb. “I’m in no rush, love.”

“I know” Barry sighed, lacing his fingers through Len’s. “Even though we’re not there yet, I’d like to give Nora a sibling one day, or two apparently” he chuckled, the sound warming Len’s heart.

“I’d like that as well, love.”

“It’s a good thing this place has the right amount of bedrooms” he mused. “Guess it’s a sure sign it is our future.”

“I’d like to think so,” Len said smiling into the dark, hesitating before adding “There was another thing.” For the first time, he felt unsure whether or not he should tell Barry about the glinting silver rings. There have never been any secrets between them, and Barry surprising him with a house didn't count. Keeping things hidden until they were ready to come out also didn't count. Their relationship was built on trust and if Barry had been the one to have this glimpse into their future than he would have told him about this. It was just nervous that made him bite his tongue, hesitate but in the end, he said: “We’re married.”

Barry takes a moment to react, Len still can’t see his face in the dark but he can feel the smile again, and it makes his pounding heart settle. “Do you want to marry me Leonard Snart?” His voice is playful, but underneath it is warmth, love and a hint of excitement.

The answer is yes, of course, yes, but he's not ready, they’re not ready, but someday they will be, and he plans on being the one to ask. “I’d like to marry you someday; Scarlet” he confirmed, “Would you like to marry me?”

“I only ever want you” he vowed, closing the distance between them so he could kiss Len deeply, pouring all his love into the touch of their lips and brush off their tongues. “So yes I'll marry you, someday,” he whispers, breath tingling Len’s wet, reddened lips “when we're ready.”

“Good” Len kissed him back, tender and burning with devotion, “but I'm the one who gets to ask, okay?”

Barry laughed, kissing him again, drinking him in “Okay.”

After one more kiss, they lay their weary heads to rest, drifting to sleep with limbs tangled together, fingers laced and hearts beating bright.

Chapter End Notes

This was meant to be a short chapter, but it ended up being about seven pages. Also, I
am not too sure how the breaches work on The Flash, I thought for awhile you needed to be a speedster to go through one but then Cisco can travel through them, so I am not sure. I feel like they once said on the show you had to be a speedster to travel through one, I am not sure, sometimes I swear they change their mind whenever the plot calls for it. Either way, I'll say you need to be a speedster or have powers like Cisco to travel through one and how the breaches work probably aren't that important to the story, so if it's wrong, I apologise. Hope you enjoyed the chapter!
I just wanted to say thank you to everyone for waiting for this chapter, it's been a busy week, and I only found the time to fix up and post the chapter. It's nice and long to make up for it :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

*Follow me and I'll take you somewhere lighter*
*Then you've been*
*Come with me I won't let you fall apart*
*Never again*
*And it's been so long*
*Just barely holding on*
*We're coming out strong*

Ana Johnsson - Coming Out Strong

The chilly winter air bites into skin, the first snow of the season has started to fall; the sky is grey as the day is sombre. Inside the heater has chased away the bitter cold, yet Barry stays standing on the back porch, watching the snowflakes dance in the air. The blue parka barely protects him from the chill; it would be best to go inside, sit before the roaring fire or stand under the hot spray of water. Still, he stays, lost in thought. A few days after he returned from earth two he walked into Star Labs and announced that he was ready to be The Flash again.

He’d received nothing but love and support from his friends and family. Cisco had been thrilled to make him a new suit; it was mostly a replica of the old one with a few subtle changes. A new team was born, he worked alongside Sara and Len now, and he was grateful to have them there the night he first stepped out again. It wasn’t anything big, just some guy trying to rob a liquor store, Barry had him handcuffed and dropped off at the CPD without even breaking a sweat.

He’d forgotten how good it felt to put away the bad guys, to save a life, it re-awoke the hero within. After that he took every opportunity to help someone, to protect the city and he thought they’d be happy to have him back. But they weren’t, not everyone anyway. It didn’t take long for him to start overhearing snippets of conversations, people whispering that they didn’t need The Flash anymore; they had The White Canary and Citizen Cold, they didn’t need the hero who’d abandoned them. There were even articles in the papers and online discussing the cities dislike of their so called hero.

He’d braved through hell to get this far, he’d believed that this was the right step to take, believed he was meant to protect this city, save the innocent, but they didn’t want him. Would they feel any differently if they knew? Would the feeling of abandonment go away if they knew he had been taken, locked away on another earth, tortured and raped for months while they sat safely in their homes? Would they only see a fallen hero if the truth was revealed or would the truth inspire them? Bring hope to others that suffered his fate.
There was no way Barry Allen could share this tale; there would be too many questions, too many holes that couldn’t be filled. The Flash could tell the true story, only if he were to do so, his enemies would use it against him. It was a terrifying thought, to have the Meta Humans who were out for his blood holding it over him, taunting him with it, but imagine how many people it could help. It could give hope to anyone who’d ever been hurt, raped and show them that they could still carry on. Rise up out of the darkness, stronger and braver than ever.

The Flash had a better chance to get that message across, to be heard by thousands. If the story was told by Barry Allen sooner or later someone would notice the missing parts, they’d find no evidence or proof of his kidnapping, for there was none to be found. The Flash could reveal the truths that would otherwise make people go digging; there didn’t have to be a paper trail leading back to him. Everyone would assume the hidden details were to keep his identity safe.

Regardless of whether this would get the city back on his side, it was something Barry felt strongly about. He was now at a place where he could reveal the four months of capture without fear holding him back, and there was only one person he trusted to write this story. Iris had asked him repeatedly about what he’d gone through; now he’d give her the chance to see into the darkness. He wouldn’t disclose every sordid detail, Iris and the city didn’t need to know everything, but he’d finally tell his tale.

He hoped Len would understand why he needed to do this, he could imagine his boyfriend would be concerned about the Meta’s throwing it in his face, but he was strong enough to handle it. He was always aware it might give future enemies some very unwanted ideas, but it was a risk worth taking. Right now if someone, somewhere, anywhere, was or had gone through what he’d been through he wanted to help them, to be an inspiration to them. The risks would be worth it, and he believed Len when he said he’d never let anyone hurt him the way Zoom did.

It was decided, he’d go over to Iris and together they’d tell the city where their hero went.

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Stepping back into the warmth, Barry finds Len playing with Nora on the living room floor. Nora looks up when she notices Barry’s present; gets to her feet and wobbles her way over to him. He bends down and scoops her into his arms, peppering her with kisses. She took her first step only two days ago, Henry had offered to babysit so they could get some time for themselves and a casual lunch out on a chilly winter day had been just what they needed.

When they arrived home, they found Henry and Nora playing in the nursery; she looked up at her father with her bright hazel eyes and shot to her feet, taking two wobbling steps before racing towards them. Barry’s heart exploded in joy, eyes welling with tears, even Len was misty eyed. It was a sweet moment, perfect, warm and bright. There needed to be more moments like this in their life, glittery and happy flashes that made their hearts soar. They deserved this after all the darkness and the trauma, they were owed shiny, bright and better days.

After the first steps she started walking almost everywhere, she was only nine months old and though it was usual for babies to start walking at this time Nora walked far more confidently than others of her age. It was the speed force that gave her extra strength, it also protected her from colds and flu, she hadn’t been sick once, and neither had Barry since getting his speed back. Len, on the other hand, was fighting off a cold, he didn’t often get sick, but they’d spent four hours in the freezing cold the other night chasing down a Meta who was terrorising the city.

Eventually, they captured him, and he was taken to Iron Heights, the next day Len woke with ill, and Barry had been taking care of him ever since. It was kind of nice to be the one looking after Len for a change; he’d done so much for him, taken care of Barry during his worse days, so it felt
good to give Len the attention he deserved. Even if he was stubborn and insisted he could take care of himself, despite the fact he was deathly pale and shivering violently for the first two days.

They were an normal couple; raising a daughter and having silly little play fights over who should do the washing up. Inside these walls, they got to be perfectly mundane, mostly anyway. Barry tended to speed his way through the household chores. They were happy and in love and Barry was preparing to take things further. His desires were finally starting to come back to life; the make-out session had become heated, fervent kisses and exploring hands leaving them both hard.

Barry felt ready to allow Len’s hands to go to new places and he was eager to let his hands wander, to bring about pleasure. When their kisses had first taken a new turn, Len was the first to get hard. Barry had felt his length against his inner thigh, hundreds of memories slammed into, making him recoil, shiver. Len felt terrible, apologising profusely while Barry tried to reassure him that it was okay, he was fine, it was just a bad memory. He knew he was safe, knew Len would never hurt him; it was just a trigger, he’d work through it. By the time they had talked it through Len’s erection was gone and the moment over.

The next time it happened Barry didn’t panic; there was no surge of memories or warning bells sounding, telling him to brace himself for blood and agony. As much as Barry wanted to touch Len, to bring pleasure, at the time he hadn’t been ready. So Len would untangle himself from Barry’s arms and head to the bathroom. One day, maybe the fifth time it happened, he told Len to stay, Barry’s face grew heated, averting his gaze and pink colouring his cheeks, repeating ‘stay, I want to watch.’

Len asked him if he was sure and after firmly assuring him that yes, he was, Len freed himself from his jeans. Barry kept his gaze looked on Len’s face at first, lowering his head to kiss him greedily, enjoying the way Len moaned into his mouth. He felt safe, in control and he knew Len would not ask for any more than he could give. Watching Len’s eyes fill with pleasure reminded him that sex was supposed to feel good; it wasn’t painful, bloody and violent. There was still a sense of unease when he thought of letting Len touch him, and even the breathy moans and sight of Len’s fingers wrapped around his cock didn’t stir an erection from Barry.

He thought about touching Len, stroking him in time with the thrusts of his hips but he never found the courage. He watched, enjoying the intimacy and tenderness of the moment. The next day Barry woke with his first erection in fourteen months. He knew Len would love nothing more than to give him pleasure, but he wasn’t ready for someone, even if it was Len, to touch him just yet. He climbed into the shower and let his mind lose itself to the pleasure, let his body relearn what it meant to feel bliss.

Now he found himself in a frustrating place, he was okay with masturbating, and he wanted desperately to feel Len’s touch, but there was still fear arising when he thought about it. He figured it was time to have another conversation with Sara; she would know where he was coming from and would be able to help him understand his feelings better. One thing at a time, though, first he’d talk to Len about his decision to tell the city about what had happened to him.

“Len” Barry sat down next to him, Nora wiggled in his arms until he let go, she crawled onto the rug and continued playing with her crayons. “How would you feel if I, as The Flash, let Iris publish an article about what happened to me?”

Len turned to face him, nose red and eyes glassy; he didn’t answer right away. Barry could see he was analysing every detail, weighing up the pros and cons. “Is this about what people are saying? Because, stuff them, Scarlet. You are a hero, you saved this city, and they don’t get to complain because you disappeared for a while.”
“It’s not just about them” he confessed, reaching out to take Len’s hand. “I want my story to help people, to show others that have been through what I’ve been through that there is a way back, that it does get better. I had Sara as living proof that just because I was raped, it didn’t mean that I wasn’t strong or that I was tainted. I had you to love me when I couldn’t even love myself, I was so lucky, and others might not be. I want to be that to someone, even if it’s from afar.”

“And what about Barry Allen? Len asked, bringing Barry’s hand up to kiss “The Flash is just your alias, you were the one who was hurt, doesn’t he get to tell his story too?”

Barry sighs; he knows where Len is coming from. Having a secret identity gets a little confusing at times, but at the end of the day, they were both the same person. If The Flash told the story, then he couldn’t tell it again. Only one identity got to speak of the horrors, and that was okay. The people he loved knew the truth; they knew the hero and the man were one in and the same, so he was always free to talk to them about his past. Again, it’s complicated when to the world you are someone else, but to others, you are both. Either way, he knows The Flash will be able to carry his story further, inspire and help far more people than Barry Allen ever could.

“Barry Allen has told his story” he replied “to you, to Sara. I don’t need for the city to know; I would just be another name, another incident. The Flash’s story will be heard, and that’s what I want, to help people, to protect people who have been hurt like me.”

“Then I will stand by you, love, as always” Len confirmed, “but if anyone ever tries to hurt you with this I will kill them.”

Barry didn’t doubt it. Len had changed, he was kinder and softer, but there would always be a killer inside, and for once Barry was okay with that. Because, even though he’s never killed and hopes he never has to, if someone ever tried to rape him again he would do anything to protect, to defend himself. He would never let someone destroy him the way Zoom did. Funny, in the end, Zoom had crafted a killer, just not in the way he had envisioned. Shaking the dark thoughts from his mind, he leans forward to kiss Len.

“I know,” he says against his lips “and thank you. I understand that you have concerns about people knowing this, but we’ll be okay.” He turned to look at Nora, who was scribbling in a Disney colouring book. He wouldn’t reveal any information about Nora. That is one secret he’d never tell. To the rest of the world, Nora Scarlet Allen was the daughter of Barry Allen and Leonard Snart. It wasn’t hard to pass off either; she’d taken on some of Len’s mannerisms which Barry found adorable. One day he would tell her the truth of her parentage, once she was old enough to understand that just because Zoom helped conceive her that it didn’t mean he was her father.

Len sighed, resting his forehead against Barry’s; his skin was cold and clammy. “I trust you, and I can see this is important to you, so I won’t stop you. Just know that putting this out there gives it has a chance of hurting you, and that’s the last thing I want to see happen.”

“It also has the opportunity to help others,” he said, “and to me, that’s worth the risk.”

“Okay,” Len brushed his cold nose against Barry’s.

“I love you” he whispered, hands rising up to lace a crown around Len’s neck.

“I love you too, Scarlet.”

“You should get some rest” even Len’s neck felt chilled and damp under his palms, when he pulled back he noticed how tired and pale he looked. “I’ll make us some chicken noodle soup.”
“Sounds perfect to me” Len sighed wearily, slowly getting up, with help from Barry.

“We’re going to be okay” Barry promised, holding tight to Len’s hand.

“Of course, we are” Len smiled, squeezing Barry’s hand, “We’ve got Sara on our side.”

“Who can torture people for days” Barry laughed, stepping closer to give Len one last kiss, “but we’ve also got each other.”

“And we always will, love.”

XxX

Barry hesitates in front of Iris’s apartment door, feeling nerves stir awake in his gut, sparking in his bloodstream. He isn’t second guessing his decision, telling this story is something he feels strongly about, the anxiety isn’t about that. It’s about the fact he’s about to let Iris take a peek behind the curtains he’s kept firmly sealed. She is the only person who can write this, and he trusts her to do right by him but hearing this twisted tale is going to hurt her. That’s what has his hand hovering over the doorbell, he might no longer be in love with Iris, but he still wanted to protect her. It’s why he’d never spoken to her about his trauma, never revealed one glimpse into the hell that had been his life.

Now he’s going to unleash the horrors, draw the blood-stained curtains and allow her to finally see the horror show. He wouldn’t mention the blood, the finger-shaped bruises and sharp, raised scars that still marked his inner thighs. He’d keep some of the darkness at bay, divulging only what he needed to. Finally, he pressed the bell, unconsciously holding Nora closer in self-comfort. Len needed time to rest and as this visit to Iris’s was such short notice he didn’t have the chance to find someone to babysit her. Iris would only be too happy to see her niece, though.

The door opened to reveal Linda Parka; he’d completely forgot that she might be here; Iris was her new roommate after all. Her face lit up at the sight of him; he hadn’t seen her since the incident with Zoom and Doctor Light a year ago. He hopes this isn’t going to be awkward, they’d only dated briefly but showing up at an ex’s with a baby is bound to be slightly uncomfortable. She invites him in, calling out to Iris, as she leads them to the living room. It’s a small room, fitting only a three seated couch, a coffee table, a bookshelf and TV; he sits down and turns his attention to Nora, who is ogling the new place with big, curious eyes.

“So, ah, this is Nora, right?” Linda asked, perching on the edge of the cherry red wooden coffee table.

“Yeah, this is Nora” he answered, “Can you say, Hi, Linda.”

Nora looked at Linda, smiling and made a few noises that didn’t sound anything like Linda or hi. She was too young to talk, but it didn’t stop Barry from encouraging her. He loved nothing more than to spend his time teaching her things. He kissed her chubby cheeks, making her giggle and kick her limbs excitedly.

“She’s adorable” Linda cooed, “Iris told me you had a baby, I didn’t believe it at first.”

“It’s still pretty surreal to me too” he confessed “but it’s amazing. She’s so perfect. Though, I am biased.”

“She is perfect” Iris appeared in the living room, all smiles. “What brings you here, Barr?”

“I actually have some stuff I need to talk to you about.”
“Sure, give me that adorable baby to cuddle, and I will be all ears.”

“I’ll give you two some space,” Linda said, jumping to her feet. “I’m going to get some things for dinner; it was nice seeing you, Barry.”

“You too Linda” Barry offered her a wave goodbye, waiting until he heard the front door shut before getting up and handing Nora to Iris. She happily clung to Iris, smiling and babbling and giggling as Iris peppered her with kisses. “How much does Linda know about where I went and Nora?”

“For the first month you were missing she was on holidays, but when she came back, I decided not to tell her the truth” Iris replied. “When you were gone I hide in my work, I buried myself in it. I didn’t want to face the horrors I knew you were going through. I was utterly helpless to rescue you, Barry, and I hated it. I hated knowing what Zoom was doing to you so I tried to save the people I could help. I got myself into some pretty scary situations while you were gone.”

“Iris” Barry doesn’t need to say any more; her name is loaded. He is mad at her for being reckless, for putting herself in harm’s way, but he understands. She didn’t know what else to do, so she did the only thing she could do. Work, write stories that saved innocent people, inspired the broken-hearted and forced people to acknowledge the unjustness in the world.

“I know, I know. It’s not happening anymore” Iris promised.

“Good because I don’t want you getting hurt.”

“I will do my best” she saluted, smiling fondly. “Also, to finish answering your question, I told Linda that Nora was Len’s, that’s what we’re doing right?”

“Yeah, I mean, she is, well, you know what I’m saying.”

“I’m glad you have Len, Barry, seeing you happy again is all I wanted.”

“Thank you, Iris.”

“So, before we get too sappy, what is it that brings you here?”

“I have a favour to ask of you.”

“Anything for you, Barr.”

He took a deep breath, studying her carefully. She looked up at him with bright eyes, lips quirked into an easy smile, arms wound tight around Nora. This would be difficult for them; it would wreck them both, stir awake forgotten emotions and reopen old wounds. They were both strong enough; they would survive the small amount of pain this would bring so it could deliver hope to the city. At last the words sprang free. “I want you to write about what happened to The Flash at the asylum.”

Iris took a step back, eyes filling with surprise, a flicker of uncertainty. “Are you sure Barr? I can see you’re coming from a good place with this, but I’m worried about what kind of repercussions this could have.”

“I know, it sounds insane” he confessed “and trust me, I have thought about the risks. I’ve also thought about what this kind of story could mean to other survives like me. I had Len and Sara, who have both had first-hand experiences with abuse, to guide me through. Some people out there don’t have that; I want a chance to be that, to help someone fight their way out of the dark.”
Iris sighed, walked over to the couch and taking a seat, levelling Barry with an intense stare. “What did Len say?”

“He said he’d stand by me.” Iris’s gaze turned to Nora’s, eyes softening at the sight of her niece, Barry ventured over, sitting down next to her. “Iris, I’ll be okay.”

She looked back at him, eyes glistening with tears, “I couldn’t stand it if you went missing again, Barry. I couldn’t take it if someone hurt you the way he hurt you.”

“No one’s going to take me again, Iris” gentle fingers swept away a falling tear.

He couldn’t promise Iris that he’d never be hurt again, that he wouldn’t make enemies who’d bruise his flesh and thirst for his blood. He knew the risks of being a hero; he wore the reminders on his skin, held the memories in his mind. There would be no cowering in fear; Zoom didn’t get to take the hero from him. The enemies he had yet to learn the names of didn’t get to stop him from inspiring others, from saving lives. They could throw their stones, taunt him with his past, but they wouldn’t take him, they wouldn’t hurt him. Len and Sara would protect him, and if they couldn’t then, he’d protect himself. He was faster, stronger, wiser and a little more dangerous now.

“No one’s going to rape me, again” he continued, catching sight of the slight hitch in Iris’s breath at the mention of his rape, “and no one – former enemy or future enemy – is going to stop me from telling my story. I’m not afraid anymore, Iris.”

Iris blinked the glittering tears from her eyes, took a deep breath and squared her shoulders, “Okay, I trust that you know what is best for you.” Slender fingers lace around his wrist, soft skin grazing against fading scars. “I’ll do this for you Barry; I’ll tell the city where their hero went.”

XxX

Len’s finally feeling better, the damn cold took longer to shake than he would have liked, but at last, he’s back to full health. It’s a grey, cold Sunday morning. Outside the small amount of snow that fell a few days ago has turned to slush or puddles to step in. He’s perfectly content staying in bed; Barry is sitting beside him, drinking coffee and reading the article Iris wrote for him. Len is waiting nervously for this to go wrong. He knew this had been important to Barry and he understands the message he’s sending across is a powerful one, he just wished it wasn’t so damn dangerous.

Logically he knows that here, in their home, they are safe. No one knows who The Flash is so there will be no media storming their front lawn, strangers knocking on the door asking for the gory details or Meta Humans beating down the door to get to them. Barry wouldn’t be impacted by this, but the next time he stepped out as The Flash things were going to be different. He just couldn’t tell if they’d be good or bad yet. Finally, Barry hands him the iPad, snuggling into his side while Len reads.

It’s written beautifully; Iris has revealed ugly truths without divulging the gritty details. It mostly speaks about The Flash’s desire to help other survivors and victims of assault; it captures how he went from broken to hero reborn flawlessly. It does state very clearly that he was tortured and raped, there is no mention of earth two, which is understandable, that is a bit much for the average person to swallow. Iris has eloquently written about his will to stay alive in the asylum, the strength and courage it took to make it through the aftermath. It paints a gut-wrenching, heartbreaking, bittersweet picture, which is exactly what this journey has felt like.

Setting aside the iPad he turns his attention to his partner, who is looking at him through thick lashes. Len leans forward and kisses him, deeply, a little hungry and needy. Iris’s story has awoken
some old wounds, and he needs to reassure himself that Barry is here, that the dark days are truly
gone. Desire swells in his belly, pours through his veins, he’d love nothing more than to lie Barry
down and worship his body, kiss every scar until they disappeared beneath his tongue.

He has to pull back, breathing heavily to calm the ever growing desire. Barry must sense the charge
in his skin, see the lust in his eyes. Len is always afraid that he’ll find fear in Barry’s gaze when his
own fill with hidden yearnings. Barry’s lips curl into a sly grin, without missing a beat he climbs
onto Len’s lap, straddling his thighs and arms lacing around his neck. Barry closes the space
between them, kissing Len. There is a change in the way Barry is kissing, it’s fervent, as charged as
a summer storm and for a moment he thinks Barry might be ready for something a little more than
kissing, but then the wet heat of his mouth is gone.

Len opens his eyes; Barry is still straddling his thighs, eyes dark with desire. His tongue flicks out,
licking the dampness from his lip, the sight sets Len’s skin ablaze. He’s completely hard; he hopes
the sensation doesn’t trigger Barry again. He remains calm, pressing feather light kisses against
Len’s neck, hands roaming the expanse of his back then rising up to scrap blunt nails through his
short hair. Len wants to make this about Barry; he wants to pleasure him, to draw breathy moans
through a partly opened mouth.

If this is what Barry needs, though, then he’d allow him to kiss, to explore and touch all he liked.
Barry needed to feel control, to be in control and Len had never allowed anyone to make him come
undone before, but he trusted Barry with all his heart. Suddenly the kissing has stopped, coming
out of his lust fuelled haze he can hear heavy breathing, feel the difference in the fingers that now
cling to his shirt. Opening his eyes he finds Barry taking deep lungful’s of air, eyes closed and head
bowed.

“Are you alright, love?” carefully, he rests one hand on the small of Barry’s back.

“Yeah” he panted. “Sorry, it’s not you, it’s just’ he looks up, eyes grey and helpless.

“You don’t have to explain it to me; Scarlet” Len started to rub soothing circles on his lower back.
“IT’s alright; you’re safe.”

“You must be so frustrated” Barry groaned. “I get you all wound up then I freak out.”

“I’m not frustrated” he reassured. “Yes, I am hard, but I am perfectly capable of taking care of that
myself. You don’t have to do anything – every – that you are not ready for or you’re not
comfortable with. So, please don’t be hard on yourself, love. You just have to be patient, we’re
getting closer each time, and it doesn’t matter when or even if we get there. I love you, and I want
you to feel safe and ready.”

Barry smiled, darkness leaving his eyes. “I like watching you” his cheeks grew pink, eyes
sparkling.

“And I enjoy you watching” Len smirked, the memory made heat pool in his stomach, he could
himself pressing into Barry’s arse, longing to be freed. “Would you like to watch me now?”

Barry nodded, shifted off his lap so Len could shove his pants down and free his throbbing cock.
He wouldn’t last long, which he would usually find embarrassing but after a year celibate, he was
entitled to arrive a little early. Also Barry’s piercing gaze and soft, barely there kisses were enough
to drive him over the edge. Surprisingly he lasted longer than he thought he would, he came hot
and heavy into his hand, filling Barry’s mouth with a breathy moan.

Sedated, he sagging against the bed, basking in the afterglow, Barry settled next to him, nimble
fingers running the length of his stomach, grazing over his hips and skimming across his pubic bone. He was happy to let Barry explore, to find where he could touch without fear or triggers. His touch was tantalising, fingers feeling like fire against heated skin. Perhaps Barry’s hands might have dipped lower, maybe curious fingers would have sought out new skin to feel, to familiarise with, but Nora’s soft coos are coming out through the baby monitor and Barry is getting up to attend to her needs.

Len untangles himself from his sweat pants and makes his way to the en-suite to shower. He knows that one day Barry will find the courage to have sex, he has seen their future, and those two precious babies aren’t going to magically appear in the world by themselves. The day Len can pleasure him, can chase away the ghost of Zoom’s touch and worship him will arrive, until then he has no problem waiting. He is fine with just kissing, and he is fine having Barry watch. He’d wait a thousand lifetimes and a thousand more, and when the day comes, he will show Barry just how devoted he is to him.

XxX

There was a time when Sara thought she’d never find a way out of the dark. She thought it had gone too deep, poisoned her blood, filled her lungs and escaped with every breath that she took. For a time she let the killer run wild, let the feelings slip away and locked her emotions in a glass case, to be seen and not felt. Then there was a shift, a crack in the glass that spiralled and spiralled until the things left unfelt burst out, free at last, her heart started to beat bright.

The darkness had run out; it had blown away on cold winter winds and sunk to the bottom of a frozen lake on rounded pebbles. Lisa’s kisses, her warm embraces and pure love had chased away the dark, igniting embers into flames. A new girl rose from the ashes, a better, stronger, wiser girl than the one who came before. Laurel would be happy; she’d throw her arms around Sara and hug her tight, whispering how proud she was in her ear.

She wasn’t the naïve girl that went down with the Gambit; she wasn’t the cold-hearted killer who came to life in the aftermath of her rape, she wasn’t the sad, broken soul who’d lost her sister. She was new, shinier, happier, alive. Life blossomed around her, at her fingertips art came to life, bold, colourful and inspiring. Love set her heart free, her relationship with Lisa was the best she’d ever had, their troubled pasts aligning their jagged edges just right.

Dawn had arrived, bright and glittering with a thousand possibilities, and she embraced them all with open arms and an open mind. She had become everything Laurel envisioned for her, happy, brave, strong and most importantly a hero. She was The White Canary, the city hero, a proud member of Team Flash. She knew that it was dangerous to be a hero, enemies would eventually slither out of the shadows, but they wouldn’t take her happiness, her light. She’d fought too damn hard for it. She would protect herself, the ones she loved, and in return, her team would look after her, together they were a force to be reckoned with.

After Iris had released the article about what Barry’s capture, Sara had been prepared for Meta’s to show up and use it against him. Thankfully, in the week since the article came out the city had been oddly quiet. If there was trouble brewing, then she’d do whatever it took to protect Barry. She and Len had agreed a long time ago that if anyone ever tried to harm Barry again, then they would hesitate to kill them. It was the only time they would allow themselves to delve back into the darkness, but for Barry, it was worth it.

They already had blood on their hands, and even though they had changed, the stains would remain, and better her or Len kill then they let Barry open that darkness inside himself. They would
keep him safe no matter the cost. Sara didn’t doubt that a day would come when someone tried to harm their scarlet speedster, as bright and beautiful as life had become, she always knew the darkness could sweep back in. When it dared she wouldn’t allow it to swallow, to devour her, she had found the light, and there would be no letting go.

The doorbell ringing brought her back to the moment, getting up from the couch, much to her cat’s dismay. On the way to the front door Phoenix followed in her steps, she and Lisa had adopted her a few weeks ago from the local shelter. She was a beautiful green-eyed, fluffy tailed, graceful black cat who had been abandoned at only three months old. They had both fallen instantly in love with her, and by that afternoon they had the paperwork filled and were ready to bring her into her forever home.

Opening the door, she finds Barry standing there, wearing Len’s parka and holding two cups of coffee. They had to the living room and sit down on the sofa, Phoenix jumps up onto Barry’s lap and makes herself comfortable while he strokes her silky fur. They exchange small talk. Barry tells her that Nora is ‘cruising’ everywhere and they’ve been baby proofing things like crazy because she is intrigued by everything. He shows her adorable videos and photos, asks Sara about her art classes and how work is going and has she heard back from the art school she applied too.

When they run out of things to catch up on Barry starts to get a little nervous. Sara studies him carefully, searching for the cause of the distress. He is happy, eyes light and posture mostly relaxed, apart from the fidgeting fingers. She might as well ask him what’s on his mind; it’s always been easier for him to speak if someone asks a question first, it saves Barry having to fumble the words out. She can read him well enough to know that whatever is bothering him is something deeply personal and she might have an inkling as to what that is.

“What’s up, Care Barr?” She asked, using her nickname for him.

“I’ve… Len and I have been” his cheek turn pink.

Sara has to bite back a laugh. It’s not funny, but it is kind of cute how he gets flustered talking about sex, it’s better than him being fearful for, though. She is happy to see the rosy cheeks and red tipped ears, it’s better than seeing the fear darken his eyes. “Having sex?”

“Not quiet” he replied, running his fingers through his hair. “Is this weird? You are dating his sister and Len is your friend.”

“It’s okay Barry” she reassured. “If you need to talk to me about sex or whatever you and Len are doing I am here to listen and support you. It’s a big deal for people like us. It’s a huge step and seeing that you are a little uncomfortable about it, but not scared shows me you’ve come a long way. So, please, don’t feel embarrassed, say whatever you need to say.”

Barry nodded, licking his lips; fingers now busy stroking Phoenix’s ears. “So we haven’t had sex, and I haven’t done or let Len do anything sexual to me, though I want to. I really do.” He paused, averting his gaze “I’ve… I watch him masturbate” he muttered the last few words, turning impossible even redder. “I like it. I’d like to help or have Len touch me, but I get this swell of anxiety and I can’t do it.” He looked up, embarrassment turning to frustration. “I am to think about it when I am alone, and I can touch myself, and I think about Len touching me and its fine, but when I am with him, I just freeze. I know he won’t hurt me, that’ll he be gentle and stop if I need him to. Why can’t I get past this middle ground?”

“Because it’s difficult to be intimate for the first time” Sara reasoned. “I think, what might be going are either two things. Option A: is the simple fact that you might not be ready, and that is okay, you will be one day and probably sooner than you think. Or maybe it’s option B: You are just nervous
because of your anxiety, and it can manifest nerves as panic. My advice to you is to sit with your thoughts, let them flow through you, face the fear and the nervous and whatever else you might feel, surround yourself with it then let it go. You’ll be able to understand what is holding you back after.”

“Thank you, Sara, I didn’t really think of it like that,” he said. “I got stuck in the frustration and couldn’t move through it.”

“That’s okay” she smiled, “I will always be here to offer you advice, and while we are on the subject, I suggest you have a talk with Len. Tell him exactly what is going on. And if you are comfortable after you’ve processed your thoughts and feelings, maybe let him try doing something to you. Even just have him there while you think about it and if it scares you or you find you are absolutely not ready then don’t go through with it. If it’s just a flutter of nerves and there are no triggers or alarm bells sounding then give it a go. Just keep talking through it, tell him what’s off bounds and beware it might not be the greatest experience, but it will be a start.”

“Is that how it worked for you and Nyssa” he enquired “you don’t have to answer if you’re not comfortable.”

“It’s fine, and yes. We talked about what was okay and what was off limits” she revealed. “I’m going to be upfront and say leave penetration to the very last. I had a lot of fear and anxiety around that.”

“Yeah, I feel the same” he agreed. “It’s frustrating, I liked the feeling, and now all I can remember is pain so intense it felt like I was being ripped apart and the blood.” He shakes his head as if to clear the memory. “I also don’t think I’ll be okay giving head anytime soon, I” he swallows, Sara can see the fear flicker in his eyes, haunting memories stirring awake and forcing panic to rise. “It didn’t hurt as much, but I can’t find a way past the swell of panic. I couldn’t breathe and” he shook his head again, eyes scrunching at the intrusive memories.

“It’s over, Barr” Sara took his hand, stroking freshly painted fingernails over his palm. “You don’t have to go through that ever again.”

Swallowing the wave of emotions, Barry opened his eyes, breathing out heavily. “I know. Thank you again, Sara. I needed to get this off my chest.”

“I’m here for you, always and forever Barr” she promised, clasping his hand. “I am so proud of you. The recovery you have made is incredible.”

“I couldn’t have done it without you” he declared “or Len.”

“Pretty soon – if not right now – you’ll be helping someone find their way back to the light. Releasing that article was very brave and selfless of you. I know it will help other survivors.” Would her tale help the way Barry’s did? If she never told anyone else would that mean it would forever hold a piece of her captive? She isn’t sure, the thought of telling her father breaks her heart; he’s suffered enough without knowing that his daughter was raped. It would remain hidden, Len, Lisa and Barry knew, and the others probably had their suspicions, but they’d never outright asked her.

Maybe one day she would find the courage to tell her story and maybe she never would. It didn’t matter; she had found her way out of the dark, embraced the light through art and love. They had braved their way through the woods, fought their demons and came out victorious. From the very start they were destined to meet, fates entwined long before the fabric of time had settled and together they would always make it through the storms. They were coming out strong, and nothing
could hold them back from the brighter, better days any longer.

XxX

A few days after Barry’s visit with Sara he finds himself perched on Jitters rooftop, the sun sinking low in the sky and the winter night air chilling to the bone. He breaths in and out, letting thoughts consume. Surrendering to the swirling thoughts, desires, fears and memories, he finds a glimmer of peace, a moment of clarity. He is filled with strength, with courage burning bright, true feelings revealing themselves. He isn’t afraid of being touched by Len; he’d like very much to allow Len to pleasure him, to let his hands or mouth find his most sensitive parts.

Len’s touch would be gentle, never leaving bruised flesh or causing pain. Zoom’s touch had been violent, hands taking and breaking in the pursuit of pleasure, in the desire to cause pain and suffering. Those hands would never bruise, claim and tarnish his body again; those hands belonged to the past, to the ghost of the monster he laid to rest. Zoom wouldn’t take pleasure or intimacy from Barry any longer, he’d burnt that mattress and with it, all the horrors forced upon him. In his home, in Len’s arms, new memories would burst to life, passion would ignite, and Len’s hands would chase away the echo of Zoom’s.

He wasn’t afraid anymore; he was free, he was ready. Not to go all the way, that was something he would have to build up to and spend more time working on, but he was willing to allow Len the chance to pleasure him. As he ran home he felt butterflies stir in his stomach; it wasn’t fear, it was just nerves. He still suffered anxiety at times, not as strongly as in the past but it did flare up at times. He had learnt to stop, pause and identify what had triggered the anxiety and it made it easier to overcome it. He wasn’t anxious about being intimate with Len, just a little nervous, and that was to be expected.

He knew he was ready to let Len explore new his body. It wasn’t until they were settling in for the night, Nora asleep and the house quiet, did Barry find the opportunity to have this intimate conversation with Len. They sat together in bed, bathed in the golden glow of the lamps, voicing hidden fears and desires. Barry spoke of his visit with Sara, explaining how he’s found clarity tonight while basking in the setting sun. He tells Len is ready to be touched, to be explored. He sets the boundaries which he knows without a doubt, without fault, that Len will respect.

When all is said, Barry asks Len if now would be an okay time to give it a try. Len replies with a kiss, eager and full of love and promises to be gentle, to give and give and give. Straddling Len, Barry kiss’s him eagerly, heat rushes through him, sparking to life long, lost desires. Curious, seeking hands roam over Barry’s skin to unexplored destinations. He shivers at the touch, deepening the kiss as hands hurriedly shed clothing. For the first time, he lets Len undress him. Whenever they shower together, Barry always removes his clothing, having been fearful of the memories it could awaken.

Tonight he isn’t afraid; there is no fear as Len lovingly removes his clothes, exposing his naked, scarred flesh to the bitterly cold night air. The scars have faded to white lines, his speed will eventually erase them all together, but they are such extensive injuries that it will take time. He doesn’t loathe them anymore; they don’t make him feel sad or ill or fearful, they are just reminders that he survived. When Len look’s up at him, eyes blown wide with lust, he asks for permission to kiss them. Barry says yes, feeling a beautiful swell of emotions spread through his chest.

Len’s lips ghost over the raised lines, an attempt to erase the pain that had been felt. Barry watches through hooded eyes, breathy moans escaping through reddened lips, lust burning to life and pooling between his legs. Len doesn’t leave one mark untouched, showering his inner thighs with love and devotion before sliding back up the bed to kiss Barry. The air is charged, skin hot and flesh
yearning to be felt, explored. Barry is ready for more; he is ready to come undone at Len’s touch.

He gives Len permission to choose what he’d like to do. He trusts Len completely; he is willing and eager to place his body in his loving hands. With one last kiss, Len descends, catching Barry’s heated gaze in a questioning look as his mouth hovers over his aching cock, warm breath sending tremors up his spine. He manages to say ‘yes, this is okay, this is what I want’ between laboured breaths, then Len is taking the tip of cock into his mouth, and Barry stops thinking straight.

Eyes flutter shut as a breathy moan frees itself, head tilting back as forgotten feelings explode back to life. All the pain, the violence had made him forget the pleasure, and as Len takes him deeper, he finds tears welling in his eyes. It’s ecstasy, it’s heavenly, and he’s coming undone in the best possible way. He doesn’t last long, the raging emotions and pleasure are too much, he gives Len warning, but one look into Len’s dark eyes shows he is happy to stay until the end. With that one look and a sweep of Len's tongue, he is coming, loud cry shattering the silence of the night.

Breathless, spent, he lays gasping for air and blinking back tears. Len reappears at his side, a gentle finger sweeping away a glistening tear. Barry smiles at him to show that he is okay, it’s just an overload of emotions, but he is okay, that was wonderful. Len strokes his hair, staying close to his side until he has regained control of the sea of emotions crashing through him. He is happy; he is so in love, so blessed to have found Len, to have him for now and ever.

Coming back to himself, he reaches out a steady hand and takes Len’s leaking, hard dick into his palm, stroking him lazily, enjoying the sight of pleasure on Len’s face. He feels strong, he feels brave, and it’s a strange time feel those things, but there is something so powerful about this, about everything they just did. In the golden glow of the lamp and the cold night air new strength awakens, restoring another broken piece to his jagged soul. In their intimacy, he has found courage, found liberation; similar to what he found when he set that Godforsaken mattress on fire.

He has freed himself once more, broken the chains and dusted off the rust, the ash. When Len cums, hot and sticky into his hand he feels no spark of fear or trickle of nausea, he feels good, he feels great. When their limbs tangling together, bodies’ sweaty and sticky and hearts beating in time, Barry starts to weep. Not in sadness or despair, but in happiness, in a swell of joy. He can’t stop the glittering tears from breaking free. He thought he’d never get to this moment, he once believed the darkness would swallow him whole, and he’d wallow in sorrow until the end of time.

The dark ran out, and he travelled rivers and roads and braved the fire and the smoke to get here, and he is so proud of himself. In the end, he had saved himself, he’d had guiding lights and encouraging hands to help him along the way, but it was only ever him that could be the saviour. He had saved himself day by day, piece by piece and now he was no longer the hollowed out mess that teetered dangerously on a ledge. He was now more than he ever had been; he was a partner, a friend, a father, a hero and a survivor.

December

It wasn’t supposed to go this way. They had taken on more powerful foe than some wannabe Wolverine on steroids Meta. Between the two of them, they should have outsmarted him. Len should have been watching Barry more carefully. But he is so damn fast, and one moment he was at his side, standing tall and strong, brushing off the Meta’s comment about him being a broken thing with a witty comeback. Then the Meta lurched at them, and he was fast, faster than Len had anticipated.

For a heartbeat he thought this was it, those claws would tear him to pieces before he even had a chance to raise the cold gun. The pain never comes. Barry is standing before him, and those long claws are embedded in his chest. Len is frozen for a moment; he can still hear the horrid sound the
fleshing tearing. He is reaching for the cold gun the moment Barry uses a phasing hand to sever the claws, as the Meta roars, face contorting in agony Barry brings back his arm and super speeds a punch to his face.

The Meta drops to the ground the same moment Barry’s legs buckle, Len catches him, sweeping him into his arms. Everything seemed to blur after that; there is a memory of stealing a car and speeding back to Star Labs then he is holding Barry down on the narrow bed. Barry’s trembling hand gripping his tight, followed by a muffled scream that breaks Len’s heart. It’s only after Barry has passed out does everything come back into focus, world ceasing to swirl and twirl madly around him. He drops down onto the chair next to the bed, holding Barry’s limp hand while Caitlin patches up the wound.

When Caitlin has finished, wound hidden by white gauze and already healing, Barry stirs awake. Blinking he looks from Caitlin to Len, confusion turning into a wince. There is no point offering him painkillers; he’s going to have to suffer while his broken clavicle heals and his skin knits itself back together. Len’s heart breaks all over again; Barry has spent too many days in agony. The only comfort he can take is the knowledge that within a few hours it would be over, not even a scar to remind Len of his failure.

“We got the Meta right?” Barry croaked, looking at Caitlin for confirmation.

“Yes, we did” she smiled, patting his hand. “The CPD have him, and he’ll be on his way to Iron Heights where he can’t hurt anyone else.”

“Okay, good.”

“I’m going to leave you two alone, let me know if you need anything, okay?”

“Thanks, Caitlin,” Len said, sparing her a quick glance as she walked out the door before turning his attention back to Barry. “Are you okay, love?”

“Sore” he admitted “I’ll be alright, though. Are you okay?”

He sighed; bringing Barry’s hand to his lips “I’m sorry, you shouldn’t have gotten hurt.”

“Len, it’s not your fault” he declared. “We both know the risks, and in case you’ve forgotten, I heal fast, so it’s better me than you.”

“It’s not better” Len shook his head “You don’t deserve to be hurt, Barry.”

“I appreciate the sentiment behind that, I do, but I am alive, so I am going to feel pain and get hurt, and that’s okay.” He tightened his hold on Len’s hand “you can’t blame yourself every time I get hurt, Len. It’s going to happen; especially now I’m The Flash again.”

Len sighed again, letting go of the guilt weighing heavily in his chest. Barry was right, being hero’s meant they would find themselves in situations where they were bound to get hurt, where they would bruise and bleed. They were alive, and life came with pain and suffering. Len would try to keep Barry from feeling those things but at the end of the day pain and suffering would always sneak back in. They had to take the good with the bad, the pain with the pleasure. Guilt leaving his lungs, he crawled onto the bed next to Barry, being careful not to jostle him as he took him into his arms.

“You were pretty badass tonight, Scarlet” Len said with a hint of a smirk.

“Yeah, I was” Barry agreed. “He probably thought he was the first Meta to throw what happened to
me in my face.”

“I hate it when they do that” Len growled, “It’s a low blow, even for people like them.”

“It’s okay; I can take it. They are just angry and trying to hurt me any way they can, but I’ve got thick skin.”

“You are so brave, Barry” Len whispered against his skin.

“I try to be” he replied, snuggling closer, feeling fatigue creeping in “but when I can’t be, I know you’ll be brave for me.”

“Always, love” Len promised, sealing his words with a kiss “Always.”

XxX

It’s been awhile since Barry felt this nervous; he’s been in a good headspace, lately. Most days he’s happy, handling life, his relationship with Len and parenthood as well as he can. The anxiety tends to seep into his b when he is heading out as The Flash. Which is understandable, he’s putting himself in danger, and every time he steps out there is a trickle of fear, a whispering voice sending chills through his bloodstream. Time keeps turning, he keeps getting stronger, stepping further away from the fear each day, but there is always the echo.

The whispering voice say ‘you might get taken, Len might get taken, is being a hero worth the risk, worth the fall?’ He tells the voice that yes, being a hero, saving people is worth the risk of capture, of suffering pain because there is no greater feeling than saving a life or protecting an innocent from suffering a terrible fate. The city had embraced their hero once more, his story reaching far, inspiring and giving hope to survivors. It’s the reason he is so nervous today; there is a survivor’s of sexual assault event taking place in the city and he, The Flash, is invited.

He’s not sure what they want from him, if he is to make a speech or talk about his ordeal, maybe they just simply wanted him there. Either way, he is nervous, teetering on anxious. Taking a deep breath, he gives himself a once over; the suit had been repaired since his fight with the Meta last week. He has Cisco to thank for that, who is currently standing behind him, nodding his approval at their reflection’s in the glass. Turning around, he removes the cowl and lets out a deep breath, feeling panic rising in his chest.

“You doing okay, buddy?” Cisco placed the back of his hand against Barry’s forehead.

“Just a little nervous” he confessed, “I’ve never been to one of these things, so I am kinda freaking out.”

“It’s going to be okay, Barr” he reassured. “Just don’t trip over or anything, cause that will be awkward.”

Barry laughed, glad for distraction “I think I can manage.”

“Good, but seriously, you know we are so proud of you, right?” Cisco said, resting a comforting on hand on his shoulder. “You’re so brave, Barry. After everything Zoom put you through you still came out strong. I’m… I’m just super proud of you.”

“Thank you, Cisco” he opened his arms for a hug; Cisco closed the space between, embracing him tightly. “I also wanted to let you know that I feel so lucky to have you, all of you. I missed everyone so much and being a team again, being The Flash again, it makes it seem like it almost never happened.”
“But it did” Cisco murmured into his neck, “and it was our fault.”

“No, it wasn’t” he affirmed “it wasn’t anyone’s fault. It just happened. It was horrible, and I’ll never be without the memories, but I am okay now. I made it, Cisco. *I survived.*

Cisco held him tighter before stepping back, holding him at arm’s length “Yeah you did, and I am so glad because I really missed my best friend.”

“I missed you too” he smiled. “I’m not going anywhere; I’m home, *I’m back.*”

“Damn right you are” Cisco smirked “though, you actually do have to go.”

“Oh, right, thanks.”

He distantly heard a ‘you’re welcome’ as he sped off, anxiety no longer poisoning his lungs, filling his head with fears and fog. He would be okay, whatever unfolded at this event he knew he could handle it, he could overcome the nervous. Fear wasn’t going to hold him back; it wouldn’t make him silent and withdrawn, he was strong enough to push it aside, to set it free so he could focus, *breathe.* When he arrived at the building he walked in confidently, head held high. They were all survivors; they had made it through the darkest hours, they had every right to walk in the light, to walk strong and to be damn proud of it.

XxX

It’s late when Len gets home, the house dark and quiet, floorboards creaking and groaning as he tiptoes his way upstairs. He’s been working night shifts at a local bar for the past month; he doesn’t like it much, though it’s a decent place with nice enough people. It’s the nights away from Barry and Nora that are unbearable. Tonight though his luck might have changed, he’d started chatting with some guy who works at a fancy security company, he was loose-lipped from one too many shots, and he was happy to tell Len all about his work.

He spent more time listening to people’s problem then he did pouring drinks, he could write several novels with the interesting, scandalise stories he’d been told. Secrets would pour out, words slurring and tumbling together as they drinks went down. He wasn’t getting paid enough for this, half the time he wanted to shake them, remind them that their mundane problems were nothing, some people had real baggage. He never did, just served up sickly sweet cocktails or lined up shots.

Tonight a middle-aged man who had two sons and an ex-wife told him about how his security company were looking for people to test their systems. Len was the perfect fit for the job; he’d disabled some of the best security tech there was. When the man stumbled off, wishing him a good night, he left his business card behind, and Len wasn’t going to waste a golden opportunity. It was better than the long nights away from his family and missing the days with them because he was exhausted.

Stripping off his clothes and crawling into bed beside Barry, he sighs contently, happy to be home and to have Barry in his arms. When he wakes the next morning, it’s quarter past one, the bed empty, space where Barry should be long gone cold. There is a sticky note on the glass of water on the nightstand; it reads ‘good morning’ with a smiley face. When he drags himself out of bed, he places the note in the drawer with the many others.

Once he has showered, he heads downstairs, lured by the smell of bacon and eggs. He finds Barry at the stove, greeting him with a warm smile. Nora is sitting in her high chair, drinking her juice from her sippy cup, the unicorn one that Lisa bought for her. She lowers her cup and says ‘dada’.
Len nearly trips over his own feet; he looks to Barry to see if he heard, he’s smiling at Len, eyes welling with tears. Regaining himself Len rushes over to her, taking her into his arms.

“She said it last night,” Barry said with a sad little smile. “I felt so terrible you weren’t here to see it. I tried to get her to say it again, but she hasn’t since just now.”

Len felt disappointed that he’d missed it the first time, but he always had a feeling it was Barry she’d call dada first, he’d just wished he’d been there to see Barry’s face. “It’s okay, love. I’m here now” he looked at Nora, who was staring up at him through big, beautiful, curious eyes. “Can you say dada, again?”

“Da” she mumbled.


“Cup,” she said, failing her sippy cup in the air.

“Aw,” Barry cooed “I’m going to put this in her baby book.”

Len felt the gust of air hit his face as Barry sped off, Nora looked at the place he’d just been with the most adorable quizzical expression. “You’ll be able to do that one day” he kissed her rosy cheek. “Just don’t start too soon.”

“Cup,” she said waving the glittery unicorn cup around.

Len chuckled, setting her back in her chair so he could eat his breakfast. When Barry came back down, he poured him a coffee before sitting down on the stool next to him, nursing Nora, who was playing with the soft fabric of his jumper.

“How was work last night?”

“Better than I expected” he retrieved the card from his pocket, placing it down on the bench for Barry to read. “I was offered a new job.”

“Max Williams Security Testing” Barry read, waving the card around so Nora couldn’t grab hold of it. “Does this mean no more long nights?”

“Yep,” he answered around a mouthful of bacon. “What do you think?”

“I think it’s great, Len” he smiled, leaning over to tuck the card back into his pocket, so it was safe from tiny hands. “We get to spend more time as a family, and I get you to myself in the evenings” his lips quirked into a sly smirk, voice lowering to a suggestive tone.

It was these little moments that reminded Len how far Barry had come. Hearing the playful quips, seeing the light dancing in his eyes and the dazzling or seductive smile filled him with pride. Barry wasn’t the scared, broken mess that barrelled into his arms. He wasn’t the silent, anxious, dejected man who screamed like a banshee as night terrors plagued his sleep. He was happier, lighter, embracing life and all it could throw at them.

He wasn’t the Barry he first met, though he was close, there would always be jagged edges, scars deep in his soul. That was okay; they would always have the echoes of their past, the scars and deeply woven memories, the fears and triggers. They weren’t held back by them anymore; they were background noise, distant memories, the bright, better days eclipsing the darkness. The battle had been won, happiness found, embers sparking to flames to chase away the darkness and the ghosts.
The journey would never end, their pain would always be felt, the past never truly forgotten but this chapter of their life was drawing to a close. A new story would unfold, and in truth it frightened Len, the darkness could rise again. It could break them, tear them apart, scatter them on ash on the wind, leaving them devastated and ruined. There was always a chance for disaster, for grief to strike, for a monster to come crawling out of the dark and take and break their hearts.

Life was a messy, dangerous thing at times, but it was also beautiful, glittery and bright with happiness, with kisses stolen in the dead of night. There was brightness ahead; there were exciting days to unfold, adventures to seek. One day this house would be home to two more lives, Len and Barry had come to an agreement that they would have more children one day, just as soon they were both ready. In the time being, Barry would continue his recovery and Len would be by his side, where he would always stay.

XxX

Christmas Eve brings a heavy snowfall; Barry watches the world outside turn from a winter wonderland into a hazardous ice-land. They were supposed to go to Joe’s for dinner, but the roads are closed, and cars snowed in. The power flickers as the house shudders and shakes, the fire crackles, illuminating the living room in an orange glow. Sighing, Barry turns away from the window, making his way to the living room where Len is sitting by the fire, holding Nora in his arms.

Barry sits down beside them, resting his weary head on Len’s shoulder. The windows rattle, wind howling like a ghost, in the distance the sound of tree falling startles them. Barry isn’t overly disappointed that their evening has turned out like this. They’ve been busy lately, protecting the city and preparing to start work in the New Year. Having a night alone, even if it’s cold and dark, is perfect. It also gives Barry an excuse to give Len is Christmas present earlier. He’s been excitedly waiting for this day for the past month, he was going to wait until tomorrow morning but this quiet, stolen moment seems perfect. Retrieving the present from under the tree, Barry sits down in front of Len, holding out the gift.

“I was going to wait until tomorrow, but I want you to have this now.”

“Thank you, Scarlet” Len accepted the gift, smiling.

Barry waits for Len to unwrap it, Nora trying to help; when the snowflake wrapping paper has been stripped away Len stares, frozen, eyes glittering in the glow of the flames. “I want you to officially be Nora’s father” Barry whispered, like speaking any louder would shatter this precious moment. Len kept staring at the adoption papers, a heartbeat later he looked up, smile brilliant and eyes shimmering with endless love.

“Barry, I don’t know what to say” he brushed away a stray tear. “I don’t think thank you is enough.”

“You don’t have to thank me” Barry took his hand, “I want this for you, for us.”

Len leant forward, kissing Barry deeply, pouring all his love and devotion into the one single gesture. “You’re my whole world, Barry Allen.”

“And you are mine.”

Barry kissed him back; he’d love nothing more than to go upstairs, shed their clothes and crawl under the sheets, kissing, exploring, and pleasuring until the break of day. Perhaps after Nora has gone to sleep, once the storm settles, and she feels safe alone in her room. Now he’s going to settle
beside the man he loves, rest his head on Len’s shoulder and lace their fingers together. Outside the storm can do it's worse, it can bring down trees and powerlines, and it can freeze the streets and seal them away in their homes. Barry doesn’t care; nothing can shatter this precious, beautiful moment and nothing, not the darkness, not the monsters, can take the light from his life, from his heart.

Chapter End Notes

So I can't believe this is it, this is almost the end. I started this fic nearly ten months ago and to be at the end feels rewarding and a little bittersweet. The epilogue will be posted next week, hopefully on Thursday/Friday; it's going to be an emotional write as it will feature Len and Barry finally having sex and I want to make it the best I can. I want to say thank you to everyone who has read, commented and kudos this fic in advanced, your kind words and time kept me inspired to continue writing. Thank for coming on this journey with me, and I look forward to sharing the last leap out of the darkness with you all next week.
Epilogue: I Get To Love You

Chapter Notes

I can't believe it's over, this story has taken so much time, effort, heart and emotion and it feels bittersweet to be ending it. I am so incredibly proud of myself for writing this, for challenging myself and I am so grateful to everyone who has read, kudos' and commented on this story. Your support and encouragement has meant the world to me and just thank you so much for coming along on this wild, emotional ride with me.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I get to love you, it's the best thing that I'll ever do.
I get to love you, it's a promise I'm making to you.
Whatever may come; your heart I will choose.
Forever I'm yours, forever I do.
I get to love you, I get to love you.

Ruelle – I Get to Love You

The sound of the chimes blowing a melody in the sea breeze and the noise of the lazy waves cresting against the shore are a beautiful thing to wake to. What’s even more beautiful are the arms slung around his waist, the warm breath ghost over his face, the ice blue eyes slowly blinking open. There is no need to rise, to hurry out of bed on this peaceful morning; he and Len have this weekend to themselves. They can stay in bed all day long, kissing, bodies pressing close, hands exploring and bringing pleasure.

They could stroll along the shore, cold sand beneath their feet and the salty sea breeze whispering against their skin. They have forty-eight hours to themselves, forty-eight hours to soak in the winter sun, the serenity of the quiet beach and to worship each other. The last three and half weeks have been hectic, Len had started his new job at the security testing company, and Barry had returned to work, it was only for two days a week, but it was a start.

It had been incredibly challenging to walk back into the precinct, memories and fears tearing through his mind, tightening around his lungs and squeezing a fist around his heart. He doesn’t want to think of work right now. He wants to stay in the moment, listen to the chimes and the waves while staring into the eyes of the man he loves. He’ll stay in the moment, not drifting or sinking into the past, into frightful memories or distressing moments. He’ll stay, held safe and loved in Len’s arms, protected and cherished in the piercing blue of his eyes.

Maybe later they will walk barefoot along the beach or head into town to get coffee from the quirky café that is owned by an elderly couple. Eventually, they will get up, untangle their limbs and crawl out from under the warm blankets. Barry is happy to bask in the morning light, to share leisurely kisses and let hands roam. Seeking, worshiping, pleasuring. It’s their anniversary tomorrow, and Barry is ready, ready to share his body completely with Len.

He is ready to undertake the final step, to place the last milestone.

He is ready to feel Len inside him.
Barry's fingers tapped nervously at his thigh, chest tightening with anxiety as the lift came to a stop on level 2, the doors rushing open to reveal the precinct. For a heartbeat he found himself staring back into the past, watching from a world away as Zoom slaughtered the innocent officers. When Joey's hand rested on his shoulder the image scattered, no bodies and beast to be found. Taking a deep breath, he forced himself to exit the elevator, unsteady legs carrying him forward. He wished Len was here, he wanted to lace their fingers together and feel the warmth of his palm against his own, anchoring, tethering himself to the man he loved.

Len couldn't be here. He could never step foot into this building, even though he had no criminal history anymore. Barry would have to be his own anchor; he'd have to swallow the rising panic, keep his head held high and walk the short distance to the Captain's office. He was going to talk to Singh about getting his job back; he's grateful that Joe had told the Captain the truth about where he'd been otherwise he was sure Singh wouldn't be interested in letting him return.

Joe had admitted he'd told Singh not long after he went missing, he'd needed an outsider to talk to, a shoulder to lean and Barry was grateful that the Captain had been that for him. Stepping into his office he expects to get the same gruff treatment he always does but Singh is polite, tone gentle and even offers him coffee. It's frustrating, makes him feel like fine china, the kind that sits on the shelf collecting dust. He bites his tongue, he shows his strength, letting Singh know that he doesn't need to be handled with care. He's not fine china anymore; the dust has been shaken off.

Everything goes well. Singh is happy for Barry to start off working two days a week and if any rape case comes across his desk, he'll give them to Julian Albert, Barry’s new work partner, to handle. On the way out Barry pauses by The Desk, he doesn't look at who it belongs to, it doesn't really matter, it's just another a reminder, another surface in which Zoom violated him on. Did they find his blood there? Did someone clean it off?

Did they wonder about it, question why there was semen mixed with it? Barry doesn't know what happened after he escaped, perhaps Singh knew what had gone down here and made sure no questions were asked. Maybe one day he'll ask Joe, this is enough for today. He leaves Joe at work, makes his to Jitters and collapses into the corner booth, deflating like a burst balloon. Len wraps a comforting arm around his narrow shoulder, the touch chasing away the anxiety strumming in his bloodstream.

Barry sighs, exhaling the fear, the nausea and the swirling memories. Late that night, when the precinct is dark and empty, Barry and Len sneak in. He walks up to the desk, shoving everything off with one single sweep of his arm, he'll tidy it up later. Turning to Len, he takes the cold gun from his hand, feeling their fingers brush. Fire would be more ideal but the desk is too cumbersome to remove, and he'd rather not burn down the building or set the fire alarms off.

Ice will be his speciality tonight.

It takes little effort to freeze the desk, when it's over Barry super speeds his fist right through the centre, splitting it in half. It hurts, he's probably broken a finger or two, but he keeps hitting it until his hands are bloody and Len is pulling him away, cradling him to his chest. The rage had burst to life without warning, fire blazing through his veins, eyes welling with bitter tears. Now it's snuffed out; he's left trembling in Len's grasp, breathing hard and fighting off the hands of the dark.

“I'm sorry” he panted, “I didn't mean to lose control.”

“It's okay, love” Len reassured, tightening his embraces. “It's perfectly fine.”
“Today woke a lot of memories,” he murmured, exhausted, numb to the pain “I guess no matter how much time and work I put in some things are still going to break me.”

“You didn’t break, Scarlet.” Len tenderly cradles Barry’s chin in the crook of his fingers, ice blue eyes meeting glistening hazel ones. “You have every right to lash out, especially considering what that desk represents. It’s been an emotional day, let’s go home, okay. Things will be better in the morning love.”

Barry nodded, knowing Len was right. They’d go home, Len would bandage his wounded hands then they’d crawl into bed, falling asleep in each other’s arm and come morning light they’d be alright.

XxX

Len’s hand’s fist at the sheets, breathy moans escaping through parted lips. It’s taking all his power not to thrust up into the wet heat of Barry’s mouth; his fingers strain against the expensive cotton, yearning to tangle in messy hair. This is the first time Barry has managed to make it this far, and Len made a silent vow to keep his hands at his sides, and hips planted firmly. Barry needs to adjust, to feel in control and even though it’s driving Len wild, he’ll never cross a line.

It’s been over a month since they started exploring each other’s bodies, learning where to kiss, to touch, to bring about pleasure. After their first time it became easier for Barry, he’d seek Len out, turn their tender kisses into something fiercely passionate. There had been failed attempts to get this far. The first time Barry tried to go down on Len he’d had a panic attack, locking himself in the bathroom until Len coaxed him to come out.

After a few tears and a long discussion, Barry admitted he’d rushed himself, wanting to pleasure Len the way he did him. It was typical of him really, always rushing in headlong; trying to give and give and give when all Len wanted was for him to be happy, to feel safe and loved. He’d told Barry to never rush himself, not for anything. They didn’t try after that, not until today. Len had asked him over a dozen times if he was sure, that he wasn’t just doing this because they were away for their one year anniversary.

Of course, now there is no doubt in his mind that Barry was ready. He’s moaning and panting Barry’s name, inching closer and closer to the edge. He gives Barry warning, just in case he isn’t ready for swallowing, and he is glad he does. Barry backs off, lips sinfully red and wet, with a few strokes Len is coming, Barry’s name on his tongue. It takes a few moments to come back down; it’s not just the blowjob but the emotional imprecations of this moment that make him feel dizzy.

Damp lips graze over his stubbled jaw, teeth nibbling ever so softly at the delicate flesh of his neck. Carefully he flips Barry onto his back, reaching down between his legs to take his leaking cock into his hand. Len doesn’t tear his gaze away from Barry’s eyes, enjoying the ecstasy flicker in them. It’s a beautiful sight; it’s a wonderful thing to finally be able to remind Barry what sex is supposed to be like. This weekend he is going to remind him as much he can, he’ll worship every inch of pale skin.

In the glow of the setting sun, in the bliss of their orgasms, they lie together, catching their breath and listening to the tide rise.

XxX

New Year’s Eve brings celebration; it brings glitter and gold, bubbly champagne and close friends together. The house is alive with music, chattering voices and the clinking of glasses as friends, old and new, gather around to reminisce about the year just gone and to embrace the one to come. Len
doesn’t feel like the outsider anymore, not like he did at the Christmas party a year ago. He’s
different now; he doesn’t feel like the tarnished silver or undeserving of the shiny happiness and
bright laughter.

At last, he feels like he belongs somewhere. Not just to one person or a place, but to this world, to
the merry people standing around him. He’s a whole new man, and this is a brave new world, one
where the lost, the hopeless, the broken, have found themselves again. They have weathered the
storm, braved the woods and marched through the fire and the smoke and now everything is
bright, is light. It won’t stay this way forever, he is not foolish enough to think every day will come
and go with ease, but he’ll enjoy tonight nevertheless.

He’ll stand among the glitter and gold, drinking bubbly champagne and enjoy the company of
close friends, old and new. And at the stroke of twelve, as the New Year burst to life, he’ll kiss the
man he loves, because life is short and he’s going to cherish every bright and happy moment.

XxX

It’s quieter upstairs. Music, cheerful laughter and conversations trickle in with the light through
the gap in the door. Barry sits in the corner, in the pale glow of the lamp, nursing Nora back to
sleep. She had woken after the loud cheers of Happy New Year and echo of fireworks. Lips still
warm from Len’s kiss, Barry sped upstairs, taking Nora into his arms and sitting down on the
rocking chair, humming softly to her. She fell asleep a few moments later; downstairs has grown
quiet, weary, drunken heads ready for rest.

Oliver appears in the doorway, smiling fondly, eyes light and unburdened for the first time in
months. Tip-toeing towards Barry, he takes a seat on the couch, smile still in place. Tonight he’d
asked Barry to be one of the groomsmen at the wedding, which could finally happen now
Prometheus was gone. He’d be honoured, they hadn’t known each other long, but their friendship
was strong, everlasting. No matter what the coming days or the coming years threw his way Barry
knew he could always count on Oliver.

They would protect each other; stand strong beside one another in battle, in war. They were
heroes’, both vastly different, with very different futures stretching out before them but at the end of
the day, at the heart of it, they had been shaped by the same darkness. It was the same darkness
that tethered him to Len and Sara; it was ugly, cruel and violent, leaving them with scars and
horrifying stories to tell. They had escaped its monstrous clutches; they had found freedom.

They had found the brighter, better days and there was so much happiness yet to come.

XxX

He knows he’s ready. He has been ready for a while now, choosing to wait for today to share his
body completely with Len. Warm hands caress his naked thighs, encouraging, loving, patient.
Slowly, gently, he sinks lower, inch by inch, until Len is fully inside him. A rush of breath that is
caught between a moan and sigh escapes through parted lips; the warm hands don’t leave his
thighs. He feels good, full. Len had taken great care to stretch him open; stopping now and then to
make sure Barry was enjoying it.

And oh God he did, it was heavenly, blissful, scattering the memories of Zoom’s forceful fingers.
Len has chased away his cruel touch, kissed, worshipped every inch of skin that he had been
bruised, claimed. In Len’s touch, his exploring hands and whispering kisses Barry reclaimed his
body. It was his, and there was nothing more magical than being able to share it with Len. Getting
to this point had been a long, sometimes awkward, frightening and epic journey.
It had taken a year; it had taken time, patience, courage and love. At long last, Len is inside of him, and the sensation feels knew again, it’s almost like it’s his first time. Only this is so much better because Len loves him so much more than Patrick from college. Slowly, carefully, he rocks his hips, steady and not enough to be thrilling or exciting but enough to make the hands on his thighs wander towards his half-hard dick. It seems to take an age until Barry picks up speed, room filling with moans and rustling sheets.

Len’s arms wrap around his neck, chests pressed together, sharing hungry kisses. He’s sitting in Len’s lap, blankets rumbled around them, air charged and settling on their sweat-soaked skin. They arrive together, cries lost in each other’s mouths. They collapse, panting, eyes glistening with tears and hearts burning bright with love and devotion. Serenity falls over them, the only sound to be heard are the laboured breaths and gentle waves lapping against the shore.

It’s perfect; it’s the end of the journey. The woods are gone, now there is nothing but open sky and endless freedom. He was safe, loved and ready to embrace whatever the future had in store for them. There could be dark days ahead, storms to weather and monsters to slay, but Barry knows he’ll, they’ll be alright. He survived what he thought would kill him; he made it to the end of his darkest days. He survived, and he would continue to do so every day for the rest his life. He would be okay, even if he stumbled or fell then he’d just get back up, shake off the dust, but if sometimes he couldn’t then there would always be hands there to catch him. If he couldn’t walk or crawl then, Len and Sara would carry him through. They would always have each other, bound for life by the friendship forged in the heart of darkness, in the dead of winter. The journey was over, the book ready to be closed and a new one eager to be opened, to be filled with stories, with a future yet to be written.

In the morning they would return to Central City, to their new lives, to the first chapter of their new adventure. A lot can unfold in a year, joy, heartache, laughter, strife, new friends, new enemies and new life, so much to seek, to learn, to experience. Barry looked forward to nothing more than spending the rest of his life with Len. If he hadn’t promised Len he’d let him propose then he might have asked him to marry right now, in the light of the setting sun, in the aftermath of their lovemaking.

Catching sight of Len’s piercing blue eyes, he sighs, lacing their fingers together and asking in a barely there whisper “What’s on your mind?”

“I’m just thinking” Len murmured

“About what?” Barry asked, lips curling into a lazy grin.

“About how lucky I am that I get to love you.”

“I love you to Leonard Snart,” Barry smiled, eyes glistening and heart bursting with endless love “my hero, my salvation.”

“You are my hero, Barry Allen.” Len mirrored his smile “You saved my life the day you visited me in jail and told me that you saw some good in me. You are my salvation, my whole world.”

“You are my whole world, too Len” Leaning forward he captured Len’s lips in a tender kiss, pouring his heart and soul into it. “So, anything else you want to say,” He asked, breathless, dizzy in the best possible way “or maybe ask me?”

Len smirked, cradling Barry’s chin in the crook of his fingers “Barry Allen, my Scarlet Speedster” he paused.
Barry’s heart pounded, air catching in the back of his throat. He wasn’t sure if Len was about to propose or if it was just wishful thinking. They might not be ready, hell they’d just had sex for the first time, it would usually be a little too soon for a marriage proposal. Then again, it wasn’t too soon at all; their paths had been destined to cross long before the fabric of time had even settled. Their hearts had been destined for each other long before the first star appeared in the sky. They were ready; they’d always been heading for this day, to this very moment.

“Will you marry me?”

There was no need to think, to hesitate. He said yes, he said it over and over, each yes followed by a kiss, a promise. This is the end, their lives have changed at this moment; they have changed even though it’s not visible. Tomorrow they will return to Central City, a little different than when they left. Tonight they will find closure in each other’s arms, in-between kisses and moans. The coming year will bring many stories, challenges, hurdles and weddings.

Tonight the world is of no importance; there isn’t anything outside this room. It’s just too star-crossed lovers, sharing, pleasuring, worshiping each other in the pale light of the moon, creating two new lives without being aware of the journey they’re beginning. The past and the future are forgotten, all that is known, *all that matters* are the two souls who have been bound together by fate. And not the darkness or the monsters that hide within it could stop from them from having their happy ending.

After all, it had been promised to them since the start of time.

**The End**

Chapter End Notes

Before I leave, I am going to take a break for awhile, but I will still be writing. I am heading over to the Riverdale random to write a similar style story, so if any of my readers ship Jarchie and want a Jughead story in this tone I am currently working on one, and it will be ready in about a month. In the meantime, I leave you with one last look into Len and Barry’s life.

In the coming year, Barry gives births to the twins, Henry and Micheal Allen. Len and Barry get married in a small ceremony in the spring. And in the far of future, Nora and her two speedster brothers protect Central City from Meta's, along with the help of Laurel aka The Golden Canary, daughter of Lisa and Sara.

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