Things I Can't and Won't Feel Sorry For

by n_a_feathers

Summary

It's easy for Barry to keep his two worlds apart.

Until it isn't.

A continuation of Things I Cannot Control and Do Not Admire.

Notes

I wasn't intending to do a sequel to Things I Cannot Control and Do Not Admire but then The New Rogues episode happened, I had ideas and suddenly there were 10000 words written.

So here it is.
Chapter 1

The morning after Barry’s reappearance in his life, Len shrugged off the lethargy that clung to him and, slipping from bed, made his way into the bathroom. He rolled the stiffness from his neck before squaring his stance and addressing the mirror.

“McCulloch.”

For about a week after the battle downtown he’d found the face floating onto his mirror’s surface disconcerting; now he’d be more worried if McCulloch didn’t show up within seconds of being called.

“Aye, boss?”

“We’ve got a job to plan. Call everyone together.”

McCulloch gave him a salute and was half turned away before Len spoke again.

“And McCulloch?” The Scotsman stilled. “Keep a regular watch over STAR Labs from now on.”

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“Hi, Barr.”

“Hey, Iris. Joe. Sorry I’m late,” Barry said as he hung his coat up at the door.

Joe poked his head out of the kitchen where he was preparing their usual weekly family dinner. “The day you’re on time is the day hell freezes over.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Barry ducked his head sheepishly, “I know.”
Iris came up and hugged him. There was a look of concern on her face when she pulled back and held him at arm’s length. “Is everything okay?”

“Yeah, everything’s fine.” He knew avoiding her eyes made it look like he was hiding something, but he couldn’t quite bring himself to match her gaze yet. He might be back home and interacting with everyone again but he couldn’t kick the shame of how he’d just cut and run after the singularity. He knew Iris truly cared about him – even if it wasn’t in the way he’d once wanted her to – and that just made him feel worse. So he looked away and said, “Just got caught up with something.”

“Flash business?” Iris asked, winding her arm through his and leading him into the dining area.

Barry scratched at the back of his head and shrugged. “Kind of. Not really.”

“Kind of? Not really?” Iris used her hold on his arm to pull him around so they were standing face to face. “Now you’ve got me curious.”

“Nothing’s going on,” Barry backtracked. “I swear.”

That was apparently the wrong thing to say. Iris treated it the same the same way she would have treated an admission of guilt. She cast a furtive glance back at the kitchen and then dragged Barry by the arm back into the living room where Joe wouldn’t be able to see them without leaving the kitchen. Barry was starting to feel a bit like a ragdoll.

She leant in conspiratorially and with a hint of excitement in her voice, asked, “Bartholomew Henry Allen, are you holding out on me? Have you been seeing someone?”

Barry just managed to stop himself from flailing backwards. He didn’t want to lie to her. They’d been best friends and more since he was in grade school. They used to share everything with each other (besides his massive crush on her, of course). At the same time, he couldn’t tell her what was going on because he didn’t fully understand it himself yet. There were secrets wrapped up in the whole story that weren’t his to tell either.

He grimaced when he couldn’t find better words to explain it than, “it’s complicated.”
Iris didn’t seem at all let down by Barry’s reluctance to elaborate. “Anyway, I’m glad. I know Henry leaving straight away was hard on you, but you seem good… happy lately.” She gave him a friendly hip bump and smile. “At least tell me her name.”

Barry’s mouth hung open dumbly for way too long for it to not look suspicious before he was saved by Joe coming out of the kitchen, loaded down with serving plates. “Dinner’s ready,” he announced. “There’s a couple more plates to bring out. Barr?”

“I’d better help,” Barry stuttered, gesturing vaguely behind him, then turned tail and made it to the safety of the kitchen as fast as he could without using his powers. He allowed himself a minute to lean against the cupboards and just breathe. Now he wished he hadn’t said anything at all. This was the worst idea ever. Iris was a reporter; ever since he’d known her she was always looking to get to the bottom of things. Barry had essentially just focussed all of her interest on his love life.

Iris’ simple request – *at least tell me her name* – had opened up a whole can of worms that Barry hadn’t even considered. It made him start to think about what non-Rogue people (because the Rogues had actually been pretty cruisy about it so far - the ones who knew at least) might think if they knew about him and Len. How would he even start to explain this to his family and friends?

The obvious place to start would be the *his name, not her name* discussion. That in itself was a nerve-racking conversation he really didn’t want to have right now. He was almost certain that no one would care but he’d seen and heard a lot over his years at CCPD and there was always the niggle feeling at the back of his thoughts that asked, “what if it all goes wrong?”

Then once he sorted out the *actually a man* thing, he of course had the ever-increasing hurdles of ‘middle-aged’, ‘criminal’, ‘double crossed us’ and ‘tied one of my friends to a bomb and beat the other one and his brother up to find out my secret identity’ to contend with. He couldn’t see how his friends and family wouldn’t take it as a betrayal.

Avoidance seemed like the easier option for now.

When he got back to the table, arms laden, he asked Iris about her latest story. It didn’t take much prodding before she was off explaining the real estate scam she was going to scope out later that night.

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“Why do you live here?”

Len flicked his gaze up from where he was reclining on the couch, one leg propped against the other to create a rest for the book he was currently reading. Barry was pottering near the kitchenette; for some reason Len couldn’t fathom, he’d been making a slow survey of the room for the last quarter of an hour. Len arched a questioning eyebrow at him.

“I mean, no offence, but this place isn’t the greatest.” He picked at a patch of peeling paint where the kitchen cupboards met the wall. Len would complain about the property destruction but Barry was right; he wasn’t above admitting that the place was a bit of a shithole. “Even my apartment before I got struck by lightning was nicer than this and I was only a couple of years out of college. You steal diamonds for a living.”

“So how should I be living, Barry?” Len asked in an amused drawl, marking his place in the book and letting it fall closed against his chest. “In a McMansion in Windsor Heights? Miles of manicured lawns and a Pollock in every other room?”

Barry approached the couch. “Do you even like Pollock? You burnt *Fire and Ice*.”

“I like how much people will pay for him,” Len answered with a smirk as he sat up straighter, letting his book slip to the floor. It wasn’t long before Barry took the obvious invitation for what it was and climbed onto the couch, straddling him, wriggling back until he was comfortably seated on Len’s thighs. “As Mick would say, people with too much money spend stupid amounts of it on dumb stuff.”

“You’re ridiculous. You’re both ridiculous. *And* you haven’t answered my question.”

Len shrugged. “Maybe I like it here.”

“But you have other places, right?” Barry prodded. “Like that house you all holed up in for the Mirror Master stuff.”

“I do,” Len eventually conceded. Since the beginning of their *fraternisation*, he and Barry had always had an unspoken agreement that they didn’t ask too many questions about each other’s superhero/supervillain doings. As far as Len was concerned it made everything more fun. Upped the challenge. Barry probably disagreed.
But it seemed like Barry was looking to test those boundaries today. Len wasn’t going to make it easy on him. The kid at least needed plausible deniability if all of this ever came to a head.

“And?”

“And what?”

Barry groaned in frustration. “Why can’t you just give a straight answer for once in your life?”

“And where would the fun be in that?” Len reached out and threaded his fingers through Barry’s. The truth of it was that he wouldn’t spend anywhere near as much time in this apartment if it wasn’t the one Barry came to when he wanted Len’s company. Sure, he’d occasionally pop up at Saints and Sinners but he stood out like a sore thumb there, obviously uncomfortable and out of place. Len sometimes wondered whether the unease was caused by being a middle class kid in a working class bar or if he just didn’t want to be seen around Len in public. Either way, if Barry showed up at Saints and Sinners, Len didn’t linger there for long.

“Enough about me.” Len pulled Barry’s hand closer and started trying to distract him from the change of topic by playing with his fingers. “What’s going on in the wonderful world of the Flash,” he started folding down fingers as he listed out nicknames, “scarlet speedster, sultan of speed, fastest man alive, monarch of motion, crimson comet?”

His attention had been so focussed on thinking up increasingly silly names that he hadn’t noticed Barry tense. When Len looked up, Barry glanced away, pulled his hand back and shrugged. “Earth-2 worries. You don’t even want to know.”

Cagey answer. Len was sure that he actually did want to know, but he’d do his own reconnaissance on the down low if Barry didn’t want to talk about it. McCulloch had mentioned seeing a new man hanging around Star Labs the past week in his report. Perhaps he was involved. Len would get to the bottom of it eventually. He had all the time in the world and a team at his disposal. For now though, from the tightness visible in Barry’s shoulders, Len could let it slide. A little levity might be more appreciated than a grilling.

“So if the Rogues were to hypothetically knock over the betting cages at the race track next week,” Len asked with an innocent smile, “you might be too otherwise occupied to attend?”
Barry’s shoulders relaxed almost imperceptibly and he let out a long suffering sigh. “I thought you liked it when I showed up? Wasn’t that our deal?”

“True, but Mardon’s been –” Len waved his hand around, looking for the right word “– belligerent lately. Thinks I’ve lost my touch. Thinks he should be in charge. Getting away scot-free with no Flash interference might put him back in his place.”

It wasn’t a complete lie. Len had known since the moment he recruited him that Mardon was always going to be a pain in his arse. Len hadn’t missed the way he’d been trying to ingratiate himself with the other members of their team lately, perhaps laying out the groundwork for a coup. If he thought Len would give up leadership of the Rogues that easily, he had another thing coming. And if he thought the other Rogues would follow him short of Len dying, he was even more deluded.

Barry made a show of thinking about it, his heat warming Len’s thighs, but eventually conceded. “Fine. But only because I prefer you to him.”

“I know you do,” Len purred playfully and leant forward to press a kiss to Barry’s frowning lips.

After, he dropped back against the arm rest. Barry scowled at him, all for show; Len could see the spasmodic uptick of his lips as he tried to suppress a happy smile. But he did dismount the couch, a little awkwardly with his long, gangly legs.

“Do you need to get back home?” Len teased, leaning over to retrieve his book from the floor. “It’s almost curfew.”

“Actually… Iris maybe suspects I have a g- I have someone in my life.”

Len looked at Barry from out of the corner of his eye. “Really.”

“I didn’t tell her anything,” Barry was quick to reassure, “but her and Joe won’t be surprised if I don’t go home.”

“So in your roundabout way you’re asking…”
Len counted it as a small victory when Barry only hesitated a moment before saying, “Can I stay the night?”

“Of course.”

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If Iris had been right and he’d had a secret girlfriend, Barry thought she would be someone like Patty Spivot.

Patty flattered him, said things that probably would have left him dumbstruck and fumbling over his own feet only a year ago. He does still stammer a bit because that’s just his natural response to new people who show a little too much interest in him. He can’t help it. He’s used to fading into the wallpaper in his daily, non-Flash life, usually as an act of self-preservation. He can’t deny though that it’s a stroke to his ego that someone cares enough to read his reports – and not just one or two but all of them.

Any other time and it would have been nice, but there was a sour feeling in his gut of complicity as he let Patty flirt a little, even flirted back a little. Logically he knew he didn’t need to feel this way, that it was irrational. Whatever Len and he were doing, it wasn’t anything normal or serious. He couldn’t tell Patty, sorry, I’ve got a… what would he even say? Boyfriend? Support nemeses? Enemy with limited benefits? They never spoke about it; did everything they could to dance around it, in fact. They covered up insecurity with jokes and they silenced questions with kisses.

Sometimes he had the strongest urge to take Len by the shoulders and just ask, “What is this? What are we?” But the longer he planned it out in his head, went over the words he would use until they were precise and concise, the more his courage dwindled and he ended up falling into the same routine of just letting it slide.

He knew it was stupid, but he just wanted a label.

There were times when he almost let himself think it could be something real. When Len absently kissed him as he walked out the door or when he whispered nothing words into Barry’s shoulder in the pre-dawn light when Barry woke from a nightmare. Those were things people in love did, weren’t they? He wouldn’t know. He’d pined for Iris for so long, he had no real experience of what a proper relationship was. Despite his best intentions, what he’d had with Linda had burnt bright to start with but fizzled out about the time of the aborted make-out session. When he eventually broke up with her after finding out Iris loved him (in another timeline, not this one. Never this one, his traitorous brain supplied), it was practically just a formality. Maybe this slow slide into domesticity
was normal after all.

Len would know.

But Len wasn’t saying.

And Barry wasn’t about to ask.

So it just was what it was.

Until it wasn’t.

Barry shook off the uncomfortable feeling that thought gave him and followed Patty towards the crime scene.
Chapter 2

“Shark attack!”

That and the sound of the door opening was all the warning he got before he was being tackled from behind by sixty-odd kilos of gold sequins and leather.

Barry shouldn’t have been surprised by the sneak attack – it certainly wasn’t the first time Lisa had successfully caught him unawares – but he always felt a little surge of panic when she saw him out of costume before he remembered that she was in on the secret now. Barry put in a token effort of trying to get her off him but gave up pretty quickly. “Geez, how do you even know about that?”

Lisa continued to hang off his neck, grinning. “Youtube, duh. Someone caught you on camera. It was hilarious. We all watched it… Multiple times.”

Hartley trailed into Len’s apartment after her at a more sedate pace, carrying a shopping bag which he thrust in Len’s direction. “Suit up. It’s Halloween. We’re going out.”

“We?” Len questioned, one eyebrow cocked, as he rose from his sprawl on the couch to take the bag.

“All four of us. Golden Glider, Pied Piper, Captain Cold and –” she pinched Barry’s cheek “– the Flash. No one will even know we’re the real deal. It’ll be fun, Lenny.”

“Yeah, Lenny,” Hartley parroted.

Now that Barry took a proper look, he could tell that Lisa and Hartley were wearing costumes. He was so used to people dressing a little weird that it hadn’t clicked at first. Lisa had on what looked to be a golden skater’s costume underneath her usual leather jacket and Hartley had donned a cape and a weird hat and had brought his flute along for some reason.

Suddenly it clicked and Barry felt stupid for not getting it sooner. The Golden Glider and the Pied Piper. Which meant…
Lisa gave a surprised squawk and almost fell over when Barry phased out of her embrace and zipped over to the bag Len was now holding. He was excited for all of a few seconds until he dug into the bag and found –

“Is this… spandex?”

It was bright red and a one-piece to boot.

Len let the shopping bag drift to the floor and irritably brandished his package in Lisa and Hartley’s direction. “I don’t dress like this.”

Barry zipped around to have a look. The package was labelled *Cool Supervillain Costume* and it resembled Len’s usual outfit as much as a chair resembled an otter. It was a very bright and vile shade of blue for one, topped with a cheap faux fur cape type thing.

Barry’s own was labelled *Super-Fast Man Costume*.

As bad as Len’s was, Barry would probably still be willing to swap with him.

“We found the cheapest ones we could,” Hartley said with more than a little glee.

“Why do you two get cool homemade costumes?” Barry complained, even as he was pulling the red monstrosity out of its packaging and sizing it up against his own body.

“Because they don’t make costumes of us.” Lisa flipped her hair. “Sucks to be popular.”

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Len had caved eventually. He couldn’t say no to his kid sister for long.

He and Barry took turns using Len’s bedroom to get changed while Hartley and Lisa amused
themselves by pre-gaming the beer in his fridge. Without asking, he might add. When Len emerged
from his room, Hartley was handing a flask to Barry.

“What’s that?” he asked, eying it warily.

Barry fiddled idly with the container. “Caitlin once tried to make me something that would slow
down my metabolism so I could get drunk with them. Hers worked – but only for a few seconds.
Hartley knew a guy and asked him to help out.”

This was the first Len was hearing of a pre-established plan to get the Flash drunk and
of Hart
having those sort of contacts. It grated a little. “A chemist?”

“A guy I met on grindr… I’m kidding!” He was quick to add when he saw the murderous look on
Len’s face. “Just someone I know from Oakland who’s into superheroics too. He knows some
people who fixed it up. It’s legit.” Hartley’s explanation wasn’t satisfactory as far as Len was
concerned but Barry seemed happy enough to accept the offering, so Len supposed he had no right
to say otherwise. He wasn’t his keeper.

The flask went into Lisa’s handbag when it became apparent there was absolutely nowhere to
conceal it in Barry’s skin-tight costume and then they were out the door.

With some assistance from McCulloch, they crossed the river and made it into Central’s city centre in
seconds. They wandered around aimlessly for a while soaking up the ambiance of Halloween night
and Lisa had been right: no one gave them a second look. It didn’t stop Len feeling like a complete
idiot in his ridiculous costume. Its only saving grace was that at least it wasn’t skin-tight bright red
spandex. Poor Barry. He took it like a champ though.

They weren’t the only superheroes and villains out. They passed a few versions of the Flash, a Cold
in a more accurate costume than Len was currently wearing and an assortment of others including
some Star City personalities. Len had never thought this whole thing would get as big as it had. He
could still remember the day Lisa had brought him home a Captain Cold figure. They’d all had a
good laugh about that.

They ended up in a club downtown, closer to University Town, somewhere trendy but as far
removed in tone from Saints and Sinners as you could get. It was packed with the music turned up so
loud it felt like his heart was beating along with the drum beats, the bass line pumping the blood
through his veins. One round of shots turned into several, Barry tipping a little of that flask into his
own each time. Lisa disappeared at some point after letting out an ear-splitting shriek of “Shawna!”
but the two of them together were more than capable of looking after themselves so Len didn’t worry
when she didn’t come back immediately.

He liked Shawna. He just wished she was a little more open to teaming up with them. McCulloch was handy in the transportation area but having a plan B was never a bad idea.

When Len had a pleasant buzz going, Barry and Hartley dragged him out onto the dancefloor and they just kind of jumped around for a while, shouting things to each other that got caught up and lost in the decimetres between them.

Len hadn’t done this in years. Probably not since Barry and Hartley were in primary school.

It was fun but it also made him feel his age.

It was worth it to see Barry and Hartley so carefree though. They bounced around, hanging off each other and sliding in close to yell into each other’s ear. It was nice to see the weight of the world lifted from Barry’s shoulders for a night. Too often he seemed like he took every injustice personally, like he was responsible for every bad thing that happened in the world. Len knew someone was targeting Barry, a speedster from another earth who called himself Zoom and who was throwing meta doppelgangers at Barry like they were going out of style. Not that Barry had told him that. Knowing Barry, he’d probably even try to sideline Team Flash and fight Zoom completely alone if he thought it would keep his friends and family safe. No, his information had come from McCulloch who had taken to spying and surveillance like a duck to water. Len knew everything that happened in that lab.

He was glad he’d put this idea into Lisa’s mind though, just a night to blow off some steam, pretend all this powers craziness had never happened. He hadn’t counted on the costumes but sometimes sacrifices needed to be made. The alcohol actually working on Barry certainly helped. It loosened his limbs and lowered his inhibitions. He danced like a maniac and didn’t hesitate to hold out a grasping hand to pull Len into the madness with him. Tomorrow he would go back to stressing about everything but tonight he could relax.

At one point as the night dragged on, Hartley buried his face in Barry’s neck, under his ear, and said something that Len couldn’t make out. The next moment Barry was doubled over in laughter and in the middle of it he looked up at Len and there was so much fondness in his eyes, Len had to look away.

He needed a drink.
He left Barry and Hartley to their writhing and headed back to the bar.

The bartender was only just returning with his beer when Barry slipped out of the crowd and pressed up against his back.

“Hey.”

“Hey,” Len replied, turning. Barry didn’t budge so by the time they were face to face, Barry was still close and practically bracketed between his legs.

“Why’d you go?”

“I needed a drink.” The way Barry had slotted against him and was breathing hot and wet against his jaw was distracting. “And I thought I’d leave you young ones to it.”

Barry didn’t reply. His arms made their way over Len’s shoulders, clung to his neck and then Len was being drawn into a messy kiss. He tasted the sweetness of whatever Barry had been drinking in his mouth but there was also a hint of something else. Len didn’t know how to describe it because it was like nothing he’d ever tasted before. A touch metallic, a touch elemental. Whatever had been in that flask, he guessed.

They were eventually broken apart by a wolf whistle.

“I would tell you to get a room,” Hartley said, “but I haven’t gotten laid in forever. So, you know,” he waved them on, “keep going. I could use the titillation.”

Then Barry was laughing so hard that Len had to help to keep him standing upright. They didn’t keep going but they didn’t go back onto the dancefloor either. At some point, Lisa reappeared dragging Shawna Baez behind her. Introductions were made.

(“Don’t I know you from somewhere?” Shawna asked Barry.

Lisa just cackled.

A few hours past midnight they all somehow made their way to Saints and Sinners. McCulloch appeared in a storefront just before they had crossed over into Leawood and walked with them some of the way, extolling the virtues of his home city as he often did and telling bawdy stories in his thick brogue that seemed absolutely hilarious at the time. He begged off actually going into Saints and Sinners saying he had some business to attend to, instead making use of the bar’s window to get wherever he was headed next.

Mick was there when they went inside, playing pool with someone Len didn’t recognise. He lit up when he saw them walk through the door and proclaimed, “About time!” with arms thrown wide. His game of pool was forgotten and he joined them in cramming into a booth not really big enough for six adults. The girls squished into the middle while Mick and Len sat on one side and Hartley and Barry on the other.

“What are you?” Barry asked Mick curiously.

“The Fireman,” Len answered before Mick could get a chance to. He was rewarded with Mick’s usual slightly feral grin for getting it. Len had seen a copy of the book at one of their rendezvous locations just last week. It wasn’t hard to make the leap even though the only difference between what Mick was wearing now and what he usually wore on jobs was the bright red fireman’s helmet and halligan.

“Bought a Captain America and Tony the Tiger mask even, but these two –” a meaty thumb was stabbed in Hartley and Lisa’s direction “– wouldn’t play along.”

Lisa slouched down in her seat so that she could kick out at Mick under the table. “I was not shaving my head just to match your costume, Mick! I haven’t even read the stupid book.”

“Woulda been awesome,” Mick sulked.

With that settled they ordered more drinks, some of them of the flaming variety to appease Mick.

Across the table, Hartley was manipulating Barry’s hands to spell out the alphabet with varying success. Hartley didn’t seem like a kid who ever had a lot of friends in his life so Len was glad he got along well with Barry. People didn’t generally stick around long enough or put in enough effort
to break through a prickly exterior like Hartley had. Their loss. The kid was brilliant.

Mick watched them for a while, hyper-focussed in that way that people only got after several drinks, when the smallest feats of skill seemed like magic. From his vantage point Len could see him mimicking the hand actions under the table where no one else would notice. Mick would never ask for special help, but he took opportunities when he saw them. Getting people to underestimate him had always been one of his greatest strengths.

He understood when Len asked, “Mardon?”

“Left early,” Mick answered, “with a girl.”

Lisa and Shawna were keeping to themselves, huddled together and exchanging words too quiet to hear in the general hubbub of the bar. Probably plotting world domination.

Len was content to just kick back, pick at the fries that had been delivered and enjoy watching the dynamics of the little group of people he’d helped bring together. It was nice.

When their cups ran low, Barry offered to shout a round of drinks which earned him a round of applause from the group.

“Not for me,” Shawna said, sliding out of the booth after him. “I actually need to get up in the morning.”

She poofed away after a chorus of goodbyes. Show off. All the metas were. Must be a prerequisite to having powers. Not that Len could really talk.

Hartley trailed after Barry to help bring the drinks back which left only Mick, Lisa and himself at the table.

“Y’know, your boy’s gonna get ideas.”

Len looked over at his partner of decades. “What ideas would those be, Mick?”
“He’s gonna notice your little crush on the Flash, buddy. ‘s gonna get jealous. Don’t ya think it’s a little *kinky* dressing him up like that?” Lisa spat out a little of her drink as she tried to hold back tipsy laughter. “Gonna do some roleplaying later?”

Len still didn’t know if Mick had figured out Barry was the Flash and was just yanking his chain, or if he really had no clue at all. Either way, this conversation led nowhere good.

“It was Lisa’s idea, not mine,” Len informed him, looking to nip it in the bud. “Blame her.”

“Whatever you say, buddy.” Mick let it drop though which was appreciated because Barry and Hartley returned only a few seconds later.

“Lisa. Lisa! Show me the video of m–” Barry faltered and his eyes darted towards Mick and around the strangers seated near them for a second. Len was surprised he still had enough wits about him to remember his (barely) secret identity “– of the Flash you were talking about. You know, with the shark?”

Lisa was quick to pull it up on her phone and the rest of them crowded in close to watch. Len excused himself on the pretence of needing to talk to the bartender. His hand clenched spasmodically around his glass as he heard laughter come from their table. He’d seen the video once when his team had first found it but couldn’t bring himself to watch it again. Even though Barry was here with him now – safe and sound – the video brought a sour taste to his mouth.

By the time Len made his way back to their booth, Lisa’s phone had been put away and they’d moved onto other topics.

“Y’know,” Mick began, “I lived on a farm when I was little.”

“Mick the farmer,” mused Lisa, “that’s something I’d like to see.”

“About the middle of the year, we’d be just starting to cut hay. I’d go out in the paddock and I was only little so the grass’d be over my head. The week before cutting, the pollen’d get up the back of your throat and just coat it. Weird feeling. I wish I’d seen it all burn.” His eyes went distant, looking back on something from the past. “Woulda been something.”
The windows were shuttered promptly at 2am and the door locked from inside but last call wasn’t announced until a few hours later. Len could see Barry’s brow furrow as he puzzled it out and then the raised eyebrows of understanding. He didn’t say anything, just gave Len an excited knowing look. Nevertheless, Len started winding down from beer to water to minimise the damage tomorrow. Barry kept going strong, the novelty of drinking obviously too tempting a lure.

After last call, Lisa said her goodbyes and headed off in the direction of her closest apartment, and Mick went his own way as well. The sun was just thinking about making itself known when Len, Barry and Hartley let themselves out of Saints and Sinners and began heading back towards the city centre. Len suggested they flag down a taxi near the university but Barry insisted he wanted to cross Van Buren Bridge on his own two feet. When Hartley backed him up, Len just gave in.

They walked mostly in silence. At this hour of the morning – especially in this district – there was little to no traffic and the streets were quiet. Their route took them past STAR Labs just before they reached the Central City end of the bridge.

“I own that,” Barry informed them with no small amount of awe colouring his voice.

Once on the bridge, they hung over the guardrails and watched the sluggish flow of the Missouri River beneath them. The curve of the river swept away into the distance. Beyond where Len could see, it joined up with the Mississippi and kept heading south until it found the sea. He’d had ideas as a kid of stealing a boat and heading downriver like in the Adventures of Huckleburry Finn. A life on the river with Lisa – and later on Mick had been added to his whimsical plans – had seemed favourable in comparison to their life with Lewis.

Hartley pulled out his flute from under his cape and, after some quick adjustments, began to play. Len didn’t recognise the tune. It started out slow and sped up. If Len had known anything about music, he would have probably been able to explain what property of the notes caused a shiver down his spine and goose bumps along his arms. As it was, he just felt it and wondered why.

The song changed and Barry groaned. Len just had time to recognise the tune as Rick Astley before Barry made a show of punching Hart on the arm until he stopped, laughing too hard to continue playing.

When they were back on dry land in Keystone, they hailed a cab out to Len’s apartment. Hartley took the couch without even a single complaint – a testament to his exhaustion. Len was starting to feel it too. He remembered this whole staying out until morning thing being a hell of a lot easier when he was in his twenties. Barry trailed after Len as he went into his bedroom.
Len pulled the blinds closed against the oncoming day as Barry sat on the bed, shucking off his shoes and stripping out of his costume. Len had a pleasant buzz going still, just starting to coast towards sober, but Barry was wobbly like a newborn foal. Even sitting, he soon had his arms tangled up in the sleeves of his costume; Len took pity and went over to help him out of it.

The thanks he got for doing so was being enveloped in the arms and legs he’d freed as Barry did a very convincing impersonation of a clingy octopus.

“Tonight was fun,” he mumbled into Len’s midsection.

“Yeah.”

“This is ridiculous though,” Barry said, pulling on the furry capelet of Len’s costume. His eyes were goofy, something in them Len hadn’t seen so blatantly before and which he didn’t appreciate at the moment. “You should take it off.”

“Barry,” Len warned.

Barry took no heed. He was trying to pull Len down to his sitting height; his lips mouthing at Len’s throat and his hands skirting down his back.

“Kiss me,” he demanded.

“Barry. Hartley’s out there on the couch.”

“Doesn’t matter.”

Barry was looking at him so pathetically that Len couldn’t deny him completely. He kissed him. Just a chaste kiss, a movement of lips against lips, and he pulled back as soon as Barry tried to deepen it.

“Go to sleep, Barry. You’re going to regret this whole night in the morning.”

“No, I won’t.”
“You’ve been the Flash too long. You’ve forgotten what a hangover feels like.”

Barry waved him off. “I’ll be fine.”

“Come on. Lie down. Let’s go to sleep.”

Barry continued to frown at him but he complied, burrowing under the covers while Len went to get changed into something a little more comfortable.

When he pulled back the covers and slid underneath, Barry was quick to curl around him, tangling their feet together.

Len was just drifting off when Barry began to talk.

“I miss bruises.”

“Yeah?” He asked groggily, not opening his eyes.

“I miss… peeling sunburnt skin and picking off scabs.”

“That’s disgusting.”

Barry shrugged. "Everything just... goes now."

“Go to sleep, Barry.”
“Why didn’t you stop me?” Barry accused, eyes squinty, burrowing under the blankets to get away from the sunlight coming in through the window Len had just uncovered.

“You’ve only got yourself to blame,” Len said, pulling the covers back and giving Barry a nudge. “C’mon, time to get up. Hartley’s already awake and making breakfast.”

Chapter End Notes

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Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Back when this whole thing had started, Barry had asked Len how he reconciled them being enemies in their Flash and Captain Cold personas with them also being friendly-ish and hanging out in their downtime. Len’s answer was that he was good at compartmentalising.

Barry was starting to understand that. It was like he had two lives and he did everything in his power to keep them from interacting in any way. He’d never been so social in his life. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d just spent a night on the couch alone watching Netflix. The whole Zoom thing was a part of it, but also having two friend groups who didn’t interact and balancing both was new and novel. It wasn’t that he was ashamed of either one or anything, just that Team Flash would probably think he’d gone crazy and stage an intervention if they knew about the Rogues. No, it was just easier them not knowing.

The only overlap was Cisco.

If any of the Rogues were brought up in conversation, Barry felt a guilty weight in the pit of his stomach. A voice in his head would whisper, this is it. This is when it all comes out. It hadn’t yet though. Every now and again Cisco would give Barry a funny look from across the cortex, but he never said anything and for that Barry was forever thankful. Barry felt bad about it, but for a while he even avoided being alone in the same room with Cisco. That is until he realised Cisco was as reluctant to bring it up as he was.

After Harry outed him as a meta though, Cisco pulled Barry aside and apologised. “You know I would have told you eventually, man. I was just getting my own head around it.”

Barry was quick to assure him, “Hey, no, I understand. It’s a lot to take in.”

“But –”

“Sometimes you’ve just gotta figure things out for yourself before announcing it to the world. I get it.”

Cisco nodded. Barry realised belatedly that his comment might apply to things aside from the emergence of Cisco’s meta powers and maybe he’d just given Cisco an invitation to bring up the
elephant in the room.

“I haven’t told anybody, but if you ever want to…” Cisco trailed off and Barry belatedly realised he’d started shaking his head as soon as Cisco began talking without even noticing it. Cisco just nodded again.

Then he was grinning and slinging an arm around Barry’s shoulders. “You’ve got to help me pick a really cool superhero name. Something that says, I’m a cool dude but I will not hesitate to kick your ass.”

***

“I’m heading out of town for a bit,” Barry said from the other room.

“Is that so?” Len responded, watching carefully in the mirror as he shaved. Not that it mattered if Barry went out of town. He could be on the other side of the world and be back in Central City in hours if he had to. There was no long distance where Barry was involved. “Anything I should be worried about?”

Barry came into the bathroom and plastered himself against Len’s back, still sleep-rumpled. “I don’t know,” he managed to get out around a yawn. “Maybe. I’ll let you know.”

“Much appreciated.”

Barry’s weight against him grew heavier the longer Len stood going over his morning toilet. When he finished, he had to shake him awake to get him to move away a little.

“Breakfast?”

Barry managed a grunted reply that Len took as being in the affirmative. Extricating himself from Barry’s ridiculously long limbs was another hurdle he had to jump before he could get to the kitchen and pull the eggs and the frozen vegetables out.

Barry trailed behind him out of the bedroom and then curled up on the couch.
“Will you be away long?” asked Len, cracking eggs straight into the pan.

“Hopefully not.”

Len stirred the vegetables into the eggs as they cooked. “Where are you going?”

“Starling. Star. West coast.”

Len hummed as he plated the scrambled eggs (an extra large serving for Barry) and sat in the space Barry vacated for him on the couch.

“There’s a crazy vigilant out that way. Be careful. Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.” To be honest, there wasn’t much he wouldn’t do.

Barry seemed to have the same thought because he jostled him with a shoulder and smiled through a mouthful of scrambled egg.

***

Run.

The heat was at his back as Barry rocketed down familiar city streets.

Everything slowed down the faster he got. Stupidly – as he raced to keep one foot ahead of death – his mind flashed back to last year, to when they were searching for Ronnie. Cisco told him about Hartley’s escape and showed him the shadow on the wall. Bakudan no kage, Hartley had called it apparently. Cisco had had to look it up and his mouth had tripped over the unfamiliar words. Bakudan no kage. The bomb’s shadow. The silhouettes that were all that was left of those closest to the epicentres of Hiroshima and Nagasaki after the atomic bombs hit.

There weren’t even going to be shadows left when Savage was done.
The power radiating out from Jurgen’s Industrial was indescribable and unstoppable. He didn’t need to look behind him to know the destruction it was leaving in its wake. Before he’d turned tail and ran he’d seen what it did to Oliver. Kendra, Carter, Laurel, Thea and Diggle would have met the same fate. There was no fighting that. It would be like trying to fight against an act of god.

He ran and ran and as he ran, with the decompressed version of time the Speedforce allowed him, he calculated what he was losing with each mile he put behind him. The CCPD was already gone, Patty with it. The farmhouse was out of town but it wasn’t that far out of town. By the time he’d passed STAR Labs and hit the bridge, all his friends and family were dead. The heat still scorched his back as he raced through Keystone. It wasn’t stopping. It wasn’t slowing.

His legs burned and every superheated breath he took made it feel like his lungs were shrivelling up and collapsing inside him. As he passed the familiar brick building on 24th, the last shred of hope inside of him burnt along with it. He should have told Len to get out of town. But he hadn’t thought it would get this bad. Len had asked if he should be worried and Barry had answered “I don’t know. Maybe.” Maybe! Now he was dead.

Barry screamed. He took every last bit of energy he had left and he let it out in a torrent of grief. He wanted to stop running. Then maybe he could be together with his friends, family, Len. But he couldn’t. Something pulled him along, an invisible lure. Faster and faster.

A touch on his face.

Something beyond his grasp but almost there.

A little faster.

His mind seemed to clear.

It was just in front of him and –

And suddenly the heat was gone. The pain was gone. It was only experience and muscle memory that allowed him to skid to a stop and not trip over his own feet and fall.
“Thanks for coming,” said Oliver. He was standing next to Malcolm Merlin. “Although this is more than a little crazy.”

Barry looked around him, bewildered. He’d done this already. This was 24 hours ago.

He’d time jumped.

He had a second chance.

***

Oliver was just dismounting his motorbike when Barry skidded to a halt in front of him. The run out of Central had given him a little alone time to process things but his head still felt like it was crammed full of more information than would fit in it.

Oliver started making his way towards the house with confident measured strides. “We need to brief the team. Come up with some kind of counterattack.”

“It’s not going to work,” Barry muttered.

“What?”

A frustrated groan escaped him unbidden. He couldn’t dump all this on Oliver. Not yet at least. He could think of a way to fix everything. They could still win. “Nothing. It’s just, Savage has given us 24 hours. This place –” he gestured at the farmhouse and its buildings around them “– all this made sense when we were hiding, but after everything I’ve seen, I think if Savage wanted to find us, he could. Let’s go back to Central and STAR Labs.”

“Barry, do you really think that’s the best –”

“Yes.” If Barry was going to die, if he couldn’t make the changes that would get them all through this alive, he’d prefer to spend his last day in the heart of Central where he’d always lived, not in
some farmhouse in the middle of nowhere that meant nothing to him. He wanted to be with Joe and Iris. He wanted to work out of STAR Labs with Caitlin and Cisco. He wanted to see Len one last time.

Before it all burned.

“Okay,” Oliver conceded, the doubt on his face obvious but trusting Barry’s judgement anyway, “it’s your call. I’ll let everyone know and we’ll leave as soon as we can.”

Barry didn’t realise how tensed up he’d been, ready to fight Oliver on this if he hadn’t agreed, until it all bled away at those words.

“Thank you.”

***

Barry’s first words after he phased through the front door of the apartment and came to hover behind Len were, “I think you should take the Rogues and get out of Central City for a while.”

Len didn’t look up from where he was cooking dinner in the kitchenette. “Hello to you, too, Barry.”

“I’m serious, Len.”

“The fact you want me gone is all the more reason to stay. I’m contrary like that.”

Len felt the heat of him at his back as Barry inched closer but didn’t initiate contact. “Please.”

“Barry.” He turned to find the speedster with his eyes trained stubbornly on the ground. “Look at me. The answer is no.”

“But –”
Barry dropped his head to rest on Len’s shoulder. When Len brought a hand up to rub circles into his shoulder blades, he felt the bunched tension in the muscles there and wondered, not for the first time, how it must feel to carry the weight of the world’s problems on your back. “Why do you have to be this way?” Barry moaned.

Len smiled fondly to himself. “It’s in my nature.”

Barry groaned in frustration and with one last look at Len’s face, ran back through the door without a goodbye.

***

Barry didn’t like the look Oliver was giving him. Or Joe. Any of them really. Except Cisco.

“Barry, do you remember how that ended last time?” Joe was using his dad voice. The patronising I know better than you do voice. The voice that was quite often justified – but not this time. Barry knew what he was doing this time – what he had to do to stop it happening again. “You can’t trust those criminals.”

“Joe, you don’t understand. They can help us. It won’t be like Ferris Air.” Joe was the biggest sceptic. If he got Joe on his side, everyone else would follow suit. The Star City group were hanging back, obviously sensing there was some history to this argument they weren’t privy to.

“You can’t know that, Barr.”

“Actually,” Cisco spoke up, “he can.”

Silence blanketed the room and they all turned to look at Cisco as one. He seemed to shrink a little under the attention but held his ground with only a wary flick of his eyes in Barry’s direction. That look unnerved Barry.

“Some… stuff happened at the start of the year that we never really told you guys about.”
“Cisco,” Barry said warningly but he was drowned out by Iris.

“Stuff? What kind of stuff?”

“Do you mean with the Rogues?” asked Caitlin.

“Are you talking about that fight Barry had against the Rogues before Flash Day?” Joe asked. “The one that tore up downtown?”

“Yeah. Except it wasn’t really against the Rogues. There was this whole thing with the government covering up super-secret army business but forget about all that.” He waved it away. “Just suffice it to say, the Rogues were on Barry’s side the entire time. They’re not like they used to be. Well… mostly not. Hartley’s still a dick, but I’m pretty sure he’d work with us if we asked him to.”

Joe seemed to at least give it some thought. “Okay, say we do trust Snart and his crew. I’m talking hypothetically here because I still think this is a terrible idea that will blow up in our faces. Who has he even got? The guys down at the station get pretty trigger happy calling any metahuman criminals Rogues.”

Barry didn’t know if he should be giving this information away but if it meant that Joe and the rest of them might agree to his plan – the only plan he knew that had any chance of working – then he’d do it. The bright flash of Savage’s attack still felt burnt into his retinas. He wasn’t going to go through that again. And if he could avoid ever telling any of them that it had happened, all the better.

“There’s Captain Cold, Heatwave, Golden Glider, Weather Wizard, Trickster –”

“Jesse or Axel?” Joe interrupted.

“Axel, Pied Piper and Mirror Master.” As an afterthought, he added, “Peek-a-Boo hangs out with them but I don’t think she gets involved with the criminal stuff anymore.”

“Why have we never heard of this…” Joe visibly cringed at having to use the name, “Mirror Master before?”
“He’s…” Barry floundered, “a little hard to pin down.”

“So what does he do?” asked Iris. “What’s his power? Does he add 10 pounds, make people’s butts look bigger in jeans?”

Barry grimaced. He could already tell this wasn’t going to go down well. “He can access this mirror dimension that lets him see and travel to anywhere there’s a reflection?”

Joe’s eyebrows shot up. “So he could be watching us right now?” he asked, gesturing to the many windows in the cortex.

“Yes?” Barry knew for a fact that he almost certainly was. He’d admitted as much the last time Barry had seen him. He was probably relaying this whole conversation to Len right now in real time.

“Why didn’t you tell us about this meta sooner? That’s a dangerous power to be in the hands of a criminal.”

“I know! I just… he hadn’t been spotted since the army fight and I thought he might have just left.” Team Flash didn’t need to know he’d gone out drinking with the whole lot of them just last month. He’d known he probably needed to mention Mirror Master to the rest of the group at some point but if they started pulling on that loose thread, they’d untangled the whole sweater. If he started explaining McCulloch, he’d have a hard time separating Len from his story. And even if he didn’t go into details, he had this fear that they’d see something on his face or hear something in his words that would give him away.

“Barry…” There was that tone again.

“No. I’m not backing down on this, Joe. We need the Rogues. It’s the only way we can win.”

“You don’t know that.”

“I do! I can’t explain it, but I do.”
Iris stepped into the middle of the circle that had formed as they’d argued. “It’s been a long day. Why don’t we go home, get some rest and talk about this first thing tomorrow?”

“I think that’s a good idea,” opined Joe and Barry could just tell he wasn’t ready to give in yet. They’d be rehashing this argument in the morning.

Barry felt exhausted.

“I need to clear my head. Joe, Iris, I’ll see you back at the house later.”

Oliver was a familiar and comforting presence at Barry’s back as he navigated the winding corridors of STAR Labs on the way to the exit. Barry had noticed his conspicuous lack among the many dissenting voices in the cortex.

“I won’t pretend to understand the relationship you have with your… Rogues.” Barry could sense the full body cringe that title produced in Oliver without looking at him. “But I know these things aren’t always black and white and more importantly, I trust you. So if you say they’ll help us, I’ll work with them.”

“Thanks, Oliver.” Barry stopped walking and turned to face Oliver. “You don’t know what that means to me. Now, I know you’re not much of a hugger, but I really could use one right now so suck it up.”

Oliver huffed out a dry laugh but opened his arms up invitingly as Barry wrapped him up in a bear hug and squeezed.

“Are you going to be okay?”

“Yeah,” and for once Barry believed it, “I just need some time to think. Don’t ask me how I know but we need the Rogues’ help on this or we all die. I just wish Joe could see that.”

“He will. I’ll talk to him, okay? We’ll get through this.” Oliver stared long and hard at him. “Barry, what aren’t you telling me?”
“It doesn’t matter.” As an afterthought, Barry added, “Send Thea home. Just in case.”

Oliver nodded slowly. “Okay. Like I said, I trust you.”

“Thanks. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Get some rest, Barry.”

As Oliver started back towards the cortex, Barry continued on his way out of STAR Labs. He wasn’t at all surprised to find Len waiting for him in the shadows of the entrance when he emerged into the night, a cigarette glowing at his fingertips. He went to lean against the wall beside him.

Barry was lucky. He was blessed with a good brain for patterns and remembering. The death of his mother might have driven him to a career in forensics but he wouldn't have done half as well as he had if not for his natural gifts. He noticed things other people didn’t see and extrapolated from there. Things, once seen, stuck in his head and could be pulled out later and applied to similar situations. He saw the patterns in blood splatter, in broken glass and could pull back time to find the cause. A kind of precursor to the literal running back in time he could do now.

So his brain had seen Oliver burn. And from that it could show him exactly how Len would have burnt too. Instead of cigarette smoke curling down Len’s throat and being blown back out in artful puffs, he could see the fire following the same path, lighting him up from the inside, bones superimposed for a moment like a grotesque parody of an x-ray until they too burned.

He shook off the image and the smell of burning flesh that had lingered in his nose since he ran back, despite doing everything he could to make it go away.

Barry eventually broke the silence, knowing it was only a matter of time before someone else went home for the night and caught them here. “How much has McCulloch told you?”

“Everything.”

“We need your help. I need your help.”
“They won’t work with us again.”

“They will. I’m working on convincing them. I know I can. I want you there with us.” He knew it was petulant but that didn’t stop his next words. “You said you’d help.”

“I said we’d help you. Those people in there? They don’t trust us, Barry, and they shouldn’t. We’re bad people.”

“I can make this work, Len.”

“You’re naïve. We’re nobody’s heroes.” He pushed off the wall, threw his cigarette butt to the ground and stomped it out. He was starting to walk away. Barry couldn’t let him just leave like that. Of everyone, he had to make Len understand the most.

“They all died, Len,” Barry yelled at his retreating back. “You died.”

Len stopped, but he didn’t turn around.

“You weren’t there and Vandal Savage was too strong. Everything went right when we tried to stop him and we still couldn’t. He killed everyone. He destroyed the entire city and everyone in it.” Barry took a few steps towards Len but then pulled himself up. “Maybe the Rogues being there won’t make any difference,” Barry continued, “maybe we’ll all still die. But if I have to die, I’d rather it be fighting by your side.”

They stayed where they were, unmoving, for a few tense moments.

“Tell McCulloch when and where you want us. We’ll be there.”

Then he walked away.

***

“We’re helping the Flash and his team.”
Len couldn’t say he was surprised when the room erupted into angry shouting. Nor was it unexpected that Mardon was the loudest opposition.

“The Flash’s detective buddy put two bullets in my brother’s chest! He locked us up like dogs!” he yelled, stalking up to Len and getting in his face. “I’m not working with him.”

“What are we getting out of it?” Axel demanded, not having the balls to be as confrontational as Mardon but instead nipping at his heels like a lap dog. “He wiped your records last time, right? Well, what are we getting this time?”

“Nothing.”

The temperature in the room dropped instantly as Mardon’s face screwed up in disgust and Axel threw something to smash against the wall in petulant, impotent rage. Len didn’t let it sway him.

“Lisa?” He looked to his sister for her opinion.

Her brow was crinkled and there was something of sadness in her look as she answered, “I don’t know, Lenny. What could they possibly need us for? You’ve seen what they can do and you know what we did to them last time. I just don’t see how it could work out.”

“Mick?”

“You don’t get to play on the side of the angels, buddy. That’s not you.”

That comment got under Len’s skin for some reason. Lisa and Mick might be opposed to the idea but they’d still follow him. He grit his teeth and continued. “McCulloch, you want to add your voice to this?”

“You’ll hear nae grumbling from me, boss. I know the stakes.”

Hartley remained silent in his seat, slightly removed from everyone else, but Len could see his
impressive mind at work. He wouldn’t need convincing. He’d prove to himself that Len was right if he was indeed right. And if he wasn’t, Hartley would tell him exactly how to fix things.

Five firmly behind him and two hold outs who could be bullied or cajoled into acquiescing. He felt sure in his position. Which is why he allowed himself to rub salt into Mardon’s wounds by announcing, “This isn’t a democracy. We’re doing it.”

Mardon got back up in his face and Len could feel the hum of power pent up in his body, barely contained. So much like Barry’s own, except full with the promise of pain and destruction. "You know, I really don’t like you, Snart."

"You don't have to like me, Mark, you just have to do what I say." He turned to the group at large to impart the full gravity of their situation, now that he’d tested the extent of their loyalty. “The Flash saw the future. We do this or we all die. It’s a simple as that. So we’re doing it. End of story.”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to all those who comment and kudo, and to those who still enjoyed it but don’t.

I can be found on tumblr and welcome questions, suggestions and concrit.
“He’s saying we can come through now.”

“After you then.” Len gestured towards the full length mirror in front of them. After McCulloch had joined the Rogues, they’d installed similar ones at every safe house they had. Not that McCulloch couldn’t make a hasty getaway scrambling through a window barely large enough for him to fit through if the situation called for it, but Len had always believed that a touch of class never went astray.

McCulloch led the way. Len watched as the mirror rippled only slightly where McCulloch entered it and then flattened back once he was through, like an Olympic diver disappearing under the water with only the smallest disturbance. Len wondered if the mirror would splash out as if they’d done a belly flop when the rest of the Rogues followed him.

A brief, disorientating step through nothingness with only McCulloch’s silhouette as guide and then they were emerging into STAR Labs’ cortex through one of the many banks of reflective glass that lined the room.

Cisco and Dr Snow caught his eye first. They were standing behind the circular computer desk in the middle of the room, as if that small barrier between them and the Rogues would act as some kind of protection if things went south. Joe West stood out in the open, scowling, shoulders squared and arms crossed in front of him, jacket off and gun holster conspicuously visible. A few people he didn’t recognise and a couple he did began trickling into the cortex after they’d arrived.

He didn’t have time to pay them much care as his attention was quickly drawn to the two costumed men standing in front of them all. One was Barry, his cowl on to protect his identity, and the other must have been Star City’s Green Arrow judging by the quiver and arrows on his back.

Green Arrow took the lead.

“Thank you for agreeing to help us.” Len recognised the friendly smile the archer gave him as the practised kind celebrities gave to paparazzi when they’d really rather be anywhere else in the world with anyone else. The feeling was mutual. Len was doing this for Barry; he owed the Green Arrow nothing.
That was why Len began to circle around the Green Arrow slowly, making it obvious he was sizing him up and finding him wanting as he replied, “I couldn’t say no to the Scarlet Speedster.”

Green Arrow let the façade of congeniality slip and instead levelled a glare at him. It settled more comfortably over his features – his default expression if Len had to guess – and he preferred him that way.

Detective West used the lull in conversation to push past the two superheroes and draw up closer to the Rogues. “Listen, Snart, we all know you’re not here out of the goodness of your heart. Barry’s not saying what he promised you this time but you better not doublecross us again. I’ll be keeping my eye on you. I trust you about as far as I could throw you.”

Len put on the most shit-eating smirk he could muster. “I can assure you the feeling’s mutual, Detective.”

Detective West’s eyebrows shot up, like he couldn’t believe Len’s gall even after all these years they’d spent playing cat and mouse. “You betray us again, it won’t be Iron Heights you’ll end up at. How does a stay in Belle Reve sound?”

Len pretended to mull the idea over, drawing the moment out and watching as Detective West’s exasperation escalated. Finally, he responded, “The heat down there doesn’t really agree with me.”

“One good reason, Snart,” Detective West threatened just as Barry was moving to get between them again. “Just give me one good reason.”

“Can we at least try to be civil?” begged the speedster.

Detective West threw his hands up and backed away, acting innocent, as if he hadn’t been the one who started this whole pissing contest to begin with. It seemed to appease Barry though, who turned back to the Rogues after shooting his foster father a behave look.

“As Ol… d Green Arrow said,” Barry began, Cisco muttering a “smooth” under his breath that went unnoticed by no one, “we’re really grateful you agreed to help. This is the Green Arrow, obviously. The rest of his team are Black Canary,” he gestured to a blonde in leather and a domino mask, “Spartan,” a man in a helmet who had only just arrived, “and Felicity,” another blonde but with no costume who waved happily at them from behind Cisco and Caitlin.
“Actually, we’ve met before,” Felicity said. “Well, not met-met but I was there with the vacuum cleaner at the train.” She faltered. “And by vacuum cleaner, I of course mean super powerful cold gun. No LED lights involved at all. Nope. I think I’ll shut up now.”

Barry gave her an understanding smile and then gestured to his people and continued, “Everyone knows the STAR Labs team already, so do you want to…?” Barry indicated Len’s own group.


“Captain Cold,” interjected Cisco. Len shot a glare at him.

“My sister, Lisa.”

“Golden Glider.”

“Hey, Cisco,” she purred at him. “You never called. You know a girl could get her feelings hurt that way.” Cisco looked like he might have liked to say something back but then he looked at the scowl Len had levelled his way and thought better of it.

“Mick Rory.”

“Heat Wave.”

“Hartley Rathaway.”

“Dick.”

“Pied Piper,” Hartley corrected. “Don’t be mad just because I named myself, Cisquito.”

With a put upon sigh, Len continued, “Mark Mardon.”
“Weather Wizard.”

“Evan McCulloch.”

Cisco faltered. “…Mirror Master?” McCulloch gave a nod to confirm the moniker.

“And Axel Walker.”

“Trickster junior.”

“I think Cisco’s names, though inane, are fairly self-explanatory.”

“Hey!” He protested.

Len stalked further into the middle of the cortex, skirting around Barry and the Green Arrow, his team following behind except for Axel who was immediately side-tracked by the first bomb-like object he saw. Mardon, on the other hand, bristled like a feral dog with its hackles up. Len took in the numerous screens installed on the walls, looking for something to jump out at him that would make sense. Mostly it was just a lot of nonsensical graphs and figures. He spun back around to face their temporary allies.

“Let’s get down to business, shall we?” he said, rubbing his hands together. “Where is this meet up?”

“Jurgens Industrial,” answered Barry promptly. He was close by, must have trailed after Len as he moved.

“I know the place,” Len acknowledged. “We have a safe house not far away that we could start from. Do you have blueprints?”

“Yeah, just give me a…” Cisco fiddled around on the console he was at. “There you go.”
The layout of the facility popped up on the display in front of them. That was more like it. Len could work with this. He approached the screen, analysing the location of exits, windows, structural weaknesses.

“Is it still operational?”

“No,” answered Dr Snow, “looks like it’s been out of business since the 90s.”

“So it’s more than likely going to be empty. Wide open space, post-apocalyptic aesthetic. Very dramatic.”

“I’m nae use then,” McCulloch cut in. “Factories are just a whole lot o’ concrete and dead space.”

“No,” Len conceded. “That is a blow to any plans relying on a stealth attack.” He thought for a moment. “McCulloch, have a peek around. See if you can find out anything useful about this Vandal Savage.”

McCulloch tipped his head in acknowledgement and then walked back out through the windows.

“And McCulloch?”

Just his upper torso emerged from the reflective surface.

“Aye, boss?”

“Keep everyone in the loop.”

Spartan pointed at where McCulloch had once again disappeared. “You all saw that, right?”

The exclamation went unremarked upon.
“The original plan we had was that Green Arrow and I would go in with Kendra and Carter, like we’re agreeing to give in to Savage’s demands,” Barry began to explain. “At the right time, Oliver frees the two of them and Black Canary and Spartan come in as back up until I’m able to grab the Staff of Horus. Cisco’s finishing up some gauntlets that will let me hold onto it and using the staff against Savage should theoretically kill him.”

Len caught the use of the word theoretically there. He’d ask Barry about that later. That seemed like a big what if to hinge their plan on.

Len mulled over everything for a minute and then began directing his people. “Hartley, Axel, join the science team. Mick, Mardon, coordinate with the distraction. Lisa and I will help with the planning. Sound good?” He pointedly looked at Barry for his answer just to enjoy the scowl the Green Arrow gave him.

“Uh, yeah. Yeah, that’s fine.”

“Okay then.” He turned to the Rogues. “You know your jobs, get to it.”

As the Rogues went to their assigned places and the three groups mingled, some splitting off to periphery rooms and some staying put to plan contingencies, Len caught Barry parsing the area for anyone watching him. When their eyes met, he held Len’s gaze for a deliberate second and then nonchalantly walked out of the cortex. Len hung back for a minute more, making sure Barry’s exit had gone unnoticed, adding his opinion in where needed as Green Arrow went further into further detail about their current plan and then followed the speedster’s example.

He was barely out of view of the entrance to the cortex before Barry was sliding in close – too close to explain away if anyone caught them.

“Hey.” Barry stepped in even closer, chests almost touching.

“Hey.” Len’s fingers itched to peel back the Flash cowl but knew that would be tempting fate just a little too much. The voices from the cortex were a constant murmur in the background.

The goofy grin Barry gave him was slightly foreign framed by the mask but no less charming. “I told you I’d make it work.”
“I’m still not convinced.” Barry kissed him. Len relented for a moment but then his eyes darted to the entrance to the cortex and he pulled away. “This isn’t very discrete.”

“Don’t care.” Barry stole another kiss. “We could be dead in a few hours.”

Len gave it some thought, just taking in Barry’s face and wondering at all the power held in his frame, before conceding, “You have a point,” and crowding Barry against the wall.

This time, Len initiated the kiss. He would freely admit that, despite knowing better, he was also the one who deepened it. Barry clung to him desperately like this might be the last time. Who knew, it might be.

That thought, fully articulated in his mind for the first time, gave Len pause. He could be dead soon. In another timeline, according to Barry, he already was. He’d walked into many situations knowing the odds were stacked against him but he’d never faced off against predestined failure and death before. Barry didn’t know for sure this new plan would work out. Would he be able to reverse it a second time if they all died again? Was there a limit to how many times you could travel back before some higher power put its foot down and said no?

Were there things that simply couldn’t be changed, no matter how hard Barry tried? Was Len meant to die in a few hours in every iteration of the timeline?

Len had always liked to think of himself as the master of his own destiny. He was the one who’d gotten out from under his father’s influence. He was the one who’d eventually helped Lisa do the same. He had made a name for himself and he had assembled a team of the best criminals around.

But what if it had had nothing to do with him? Maybe he was just acting out a part that had been written for him before he’d even popped into existence.

Just a puppet whose strings were being manipulated by some higher power.

If it wanted him dead in a few hours, there wasn’t a damn thing he could do about it.

“What’s wrong?” Barry had drawn back, must have sensed Len’s preoccupation.
The bitter taste of panic, rising up from the depths of him like bile, was easy to quash; he’d had a lot of practice. He felt it simmering away but wouldn’t let it dictate his actions.

Stay cool, he instructed himself.

“Nothing,” he said and redirected the manic energy the panic had caused in him. He slammed Barry back against the corridor’s wall, cupping his face and licking his way into his mouth. He would feel bad about being too rough but couldn’t find it in himself to regret it when Barry was moaning enthusiastically into him, thrusting forward for more friction, hard and –

Len almost brained himself against the wall when Barry was suddenly not there anymore.

He looked around dazed to find Barry five metres further down the corridor, flushed and breathing heavily.

“Sorry, it got a little too…” Barry trailed off. “Yeah.”

Len laughed. What else could he do? The situation was ridiculous. “Maybe we’d better go back and help out. So that we don’t die.”

“Yeah,” Barry conceded. “You go first. I, uh, need a minute.”

Hartley smirked at Len as he walked back in. Their exit mustn’t have been as covert as he’d thought or Hartley was just more of a busybody than he’d realised. Len watched Cisco catch Hartley’s expression and follow it back to Len just as Barry walked through the entrance to the cortex and almost ran straight into the back of him. Len would have snickered at the scandalised look on Cisco’s face if it wouldn’t have drawn more unnecessary attention.

That was the extent of the attention their re-entrance garnered though. With not a word said between them, Barry and Len split off in sync in opposite directions; Barry towards Cisco, Len towards his sister.

They had a few hours left to con destiny.
Barry had dreamt of the Speed Force the night before.

He’d returned to the West home sometime after midnight once he’d exhausted himself running the streets of Central.

Iris had been waiting for him, tucked into the armchair next to the fireplace with a book in hand. When she heard the door open, she’d looked up at him and her face had lit up in a smile. He loved Iris’ smile. Always had. It was one more sign telling him he’d made the right decision to move their operations back to Central.

“Hi, Barr.”

He’d gone and flopped down lengthwise across the sofa. “Hey, Iris.”

“Feeling better?”

“Yeah.”

She’d given him an understanding look, a look of shared history. “He’s only like that because he’s so protective of us both.”

“I know.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

Barry had sighed, world-weary. “Not really.”

Iris had let it go then and gone back to her book. She’d stayed with him for the next half hour as he unwound on the couch. The gentle sounds of her existence – the in and out of her breathing, the
rustle of the turning pages, and the creak of the armchair’s leather when she shifted – had soothed him.

She’d eventually unfolded herself from the chair and stretched. Just as she was about to go up the stairs, he’d called out to her. “Iris?”

“Yes, Barr?”

“Thanks for waiting up for me.”

She’d answered with a smile and then she was gone.

A little while later he’d made the trek up to his own bedroom and collapsed on the bed without changing. He hadn’t had the energy.

Sleep had come quickly.

He dreamt of the Speed Force. He was travelling through a tunnel of pure energy, the past, future and present flashing by him as he ran. He saw things – important things, hints about what was coming that he knew he should remember to stop the terrible things from happening – but as much as he tried to hold on to the memory of them, they slipped from his mind like water through his fingers.

He was being led. He knew that much, though he couldn’t say by who or where they were going. The presence was familiar. In the dream it had just felt right to follow it. He knew it, he’d felt it before.

But when?

He didn’t feel afraid. In fact, he felt completely safe. Optimistic, even. Like things were finally going to work out for him.

“I’m here,” a voice said from behind him.
He spun in the dream and fell to his bedroom floor in the waking world.

He’d thought of the dream throughout the day. While he was in it, he’d only had that weird dream logic to work with but now he was able to piece some things together. The presence in his dream had been the same one he’d felt on his run back to the past yesterday, he was sure of it.

It didn’t put him any closer to figuring out what that presence was though.

He’d wanted to ask Cisco but now wasn’t the right time for it.

After his rendezvous with Len, he’d gone over to the science team to check in with his best buddy and see about the gauntlets this whole plan hinged upon. Not that Barry was too worried about them; they’d worked perfectly last time. It was everything else that had gone to hell.

But Cisco knew about his previous time jumps, and his powers gave him a unique perspective on things. He needed some reassurance from someone who actually knew what they were talking about.

Barry sidled over once Cisco was slightly removed from the rest of the group and asked, “You don’t think this is a bad idea, do you?”

Cisco’s drawn out silence was telling.

“Cisco!”

“I don’t think it’s a bad idea…” he began to say but then petered off.

“You vouched for them!” Barry hissed at him.

“Yeah, because I do think we need the extra firepower.”

“Then what?”
“It’s the whole re-incarnated ancient Egyptian priestess and prince thing,” he said, voice growing in intensity as his movements became constrained, trying not to give their conversation away. “Savage has been playing his sick game for millennia and he’s always won. Kendra sure as hell doesn’t remember how they’re supposed to defeat him yet and I don’t think Carter’s much better. We’re going into a fight we don’t know how to win. That’s what I think is the bad idea.”

Barry saw his point. It seemed like their modus operandi lately was running headfirst into situations they didn’t fully understand against enemies they couldn’t hope to beat. But still. “It’s not like we have much choice.”

“No,” Cisco admitted. “And I know you know more than you’re letting on. Which is fine. I trust you, man. But it does make me think we’ve already failed this once. Am I wrong?”

Barry worried over how to answer that question but after everything they’d gone through, Cisco at least deserved the truth. “No.”

“Okay.” He deflated for a second but bounced back quickly. “Well, second time’s the charm.”

Barry laughed. “I don’t think that’s exactly how that saying goes.”

“Yeah, because whoever thought it up wasn’t as awesome as us.”

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They broke for dinner. A mountain of Big Belly Burger suddenly appeared on a medical trolley in the middle of the cortex without explanation. Len suspected Barry had something to do with it.

It was like high school all over again though, with the group breaking up into cliques. Good kids and bad kids. Len motioned for Lisa and Mick to join him in a private conversation slightly away from the rest of the Rogues once they’d gotten something to eat. Hartley came to them straight from the workbench where he’d been doing maintenance on his gloves.
“Well?” he asked, confident they’d know what he was asking without him having to say it.

“I don’t know, Lenny.” Lisa made a face. “There’s too many unknowns. We don’t have any idea what we’re going up against. We’re practically blind.”

“Your sister’s right, Snart,” Mick seconded in his usual gruff manner. “I’ve got a bad feeling about this.”

“Hartley?” When no response came, Len turned to seek out the Pied Piper. He must have stopped halfway through his walk to them. He looked like he’d seen a ghost. His eyes were fixated on a man who’d just entered the cortex and was getting dinner from the cart, older than most in the room and unknown to Len. Hartley seemed to know him though. His sonic gloves hummed as they powered up.

Barry’s head jerked up from where he was chatting with Cisco at the sound and then he zeroed in on Len. His eyes tracked from Len to Hartley’s scowl and onwards to the stranger. In a flash of light and wind that sent papers flying, he zipped over in front of Hartley, neatly blocking his view and aim. “It’s not him.”

“But it –”

“I know it looks just like him, but it’s not him,” Barry said, voice soft and head inclined towards Hartley. “He’s from another earth. He’s only here to stop Zoom.”

The scowl remained on Hartley’s face.

“Harrison Wells is dead. I promise.”

Len didn’t fully understand what was going on but after a little while Hartley seemed to calm down enough to at least let his hands drop to his sides, his gauntlets powering down to silence. He still looked angry though.

Unfortunately, their little drama had not gone unnoticed. Every eye in the cortex was focused fearfully on the Rogues. The Star City crew all had a weapon in hand, ready to be fired. Even Detective West’s hand was on the grip of his still holstered firearm. Len could feel the raw power emanating from Mardon from where he was standing, contained for the moment but ready to unleash
if attacked. His eyes were trained unwavering on the detective, just waiting for an excuse to get his revenge if Len had to guess. Axel beside him just looked kind of overwhelmed. When Barry realised there were several guns and bows aimed in the Rogues’ direction, he was quick to zip around and calm everyone down. Len did the same for his people.

Nice to know the level of trust that had been placed in Len’s team. They were going to be leaving STAR Labs in less than an hour and their so-called allies needed only the slightest incentive to pull weapons on them.

This was a mess. Barry had been wrong, this wasn’t going to work. A small part of Len had hoped things would go well, that despite what Mick had said, they would be accepted as having good intentions. That, at least this once, they could be on the side of the angels. It was stupid, but he’d wanted Barry’s faith in him to not be misplaced.

But their reaction to Hartley’s small faux pas had shown that they could not be trusted.

Len was reminded once again that they were the bad guys.

They’d never be anything else as far as other people were concerned.

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Barry watched with trepidation as it all began to unfold again.

Savage did his spiel, Oliver freed the hawks and then the van was squealing to a halt in the middle of the factory.

This time Rogues spilled out of the van, not just the rest of Team Arrow. From this point onwards, Barry no longer knew what was going to happen for certain.

Mardon was the first to act; unable to access the full extent of his powers indoors, he toyed with the atmosphere inside the factory. The temperature dropped first and Barry was glad he ran hot. Len and
Mick began icing and melting in turn, creating steam and upping the humidity. Soon a mist was forming under Mardon’s ministrations, reducing visibility as Savage was attacked by Black Canary and Spartan.

Barry could hear Laurel’s canary cry and the dull thunk of metal impacting off skin and armour even if he couldn’t see it. The mist would alternate between flashing blue and orange as Len and Mick discharged their guns in turn. Barry heard a thump of a body hitting the floor and knew it was Mardon almost immediately when the mist grew sickly and began to disappear.

As soon as he’d caught sight of where Weather Wizard had fallen, Barry flashed over to his side. His pulse beat strong under Barry’s fingers and after a quick examination, Barry couldn’t find any obvious injuries. Just knocked unconscious then. Of course Savage had targeted him first; Mardon had the most raw power available to him after Barry.

With the mist cleared, Kendra and Carter were able to provide aerial backup to the rest of the group fighting Savage. They attacked from the sky as Oliver fired arrow after arrow, trying to distract or wound Savage but he parried every one of them.

Savage brushed off their attacks like he was brushing off flies.

Just as Barry was about to make his move, run in and grab Savage’s staff as per the plan, Len took a glancing blow to the side from it. The blast threw him to the ground and sent the cold gun skittering away.

Barry watched in fear, paralysed, as Len scrambled to grab his gun and then spun around just in time to aim it at Savage as he levelled the Staff of Horus against him.

Barry felt like time stopped in that moment. Certainly all movement did as everyone halted their attack to watch.

“I believe they call this a Mexican standoff,” Len drawled. He was curled up slightly, guarding the side he’d been hit on, and he was breathing hard though he did a good job of masking it. Barry caught the quicker than usual rise and fall of his chest though.

“It doesn’t have to be.” In comparison, Savage was composed. He looked like he’d been doing nothing more strenuous than a leisurely walk through the park. “I have lived millennia, I have seen your type. You are the scorpion; it will always be in your nature to hurt and betray. Why settle for
this mutually assured destruction –” Savage gestured to the tableau they made “– when you could rule at my right hand in the world I will create?”

Len’s hand holding the cold gun was shaking almost imperceptibly but it didn’t waver from its target for a second.

“You know this is a fight you cannot win. Bow to me and I will spare your sister, your friends. Those *precious* to you. Join me and they get to live.”

“And if I don’t?” Len questioned.

“Everyone and everything burns.”

It was probably only seconds, but the ensuing moments of deathly silence seemed to drag on for hours to Barry. Len, on the floor, arm starting to sag under the weight of his gun. Savage, staff unwavering and glowing a menacing blue. Everyone else, helpless to do anything.

Len looked towards Barry and there was an apology in his eyes.

“No,” Barry whispered.

“They all live?”

Savage smiled toothily. “I give you my word.”

Len let the hand holding his cold gun drop and then he was sliding it away from him across the concrete floor. Savage raised his staff to a resting position and watched as Len rose to his feet, taking all the time in the world to dust himself off and straighten his coat. His gait was leisurely as he crossed the distance between the two of them and squared off in front of Savage.

Barry wanted to make some kind of protestation but all that he could make come out was another pathetic, “no.”
Len didn’t look back at Barry.

“You’re right.” He held out his hand to Savage. “You can’t fight nature.”

“Smart choice.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading as always. I hope you're enjoying it.
Len couldn’t look at Barry.

It was easy to picture the expression that would be on his face right now: a mixture of hurt, betrayal and self-blame. If Len saw it, he didn’t know if he’d be able to go through with this the way he’d planned. Ever since that first night – not the literal first night they’d met, but the one when this seed had been planted, when Barry had looked at him across the bar at Saints and Sinners, hurt and lonely – Len had been weak to him.

He didn’t know if he’d able to do what needed to be done with a preview of the possible fallout in his mind. All he knew was that he had to keep his people safe. Barry’s plan had seemed to make sense theoretically when they were back in the safety of the cortex but Len knew that what worked on paper didn’t always translate well into practice – as much as it pained him to admit it. The best laid plans of mice and men and all that.

Lewis Snart had been a master of plans B through Z, mostly because his plan As were never really up to scratch to begin with. When Len had set out on his own, his reputation had been staked on getting the job done right the first time. Every second was accounted for, every action planned. Get in, get out, fence the goods and lay low for six months. Rinse and repeat. That didn’t mean he hadn’t learnt from his father’s mistakes. Mick had taught him a little about going off script too, not always for reasons that were appreciated at the time. So Len always had contingency plans even if he rarely used them. Less than an hour ago they’d walked into Jurgens Industrial half blind but now that he’d seen the lay of the land, this was the plan that made the most sense. This was the only way he could see them coming out on top.

Before Savage had a chance to shake his hand, Len felt that peculiar combination of potential energy and thrumming air that he’d come to associate with Barry’s meta abilities. It was like the feeling before a summer storm; gravid air, the smell of ozone, physical tension. Barry used his powers often enough in casual situations that Len had grown attuned to their small quirks. So although everything that happened next happened very fast, he had all the warning he needed to yell at Mick to fire without needing to look behind him.

The heat from his partner’s gun was a little close for comfort, felt more readily through the bulky
layers of fabric and down that was Len’s costume. It did the job though. When Len turned around, it was just in time to catch the end of Barry’s manoeuvre to avoid the stream of fire, waylaid in his attempt to approach Len.

Len watched him through the stream of blistering heat. He’d been wrong. It wasn’t hurt or self-reproach that filled the speedster’s expression. No, the fire from Mick’s gun was mirrored in Barry’s eyes.

His cold gun wasn’t far away and he ran for it before the covering stream from Mick’s gun gave out, Savage forgotten for the moment. In the dark of night, Barry had whispered to him about what the speedsters he’d gone up against could do. One had travelled back in time to kill Barry’s mother over some grudge his Barry hadn’t even been part of yet. The other… well, who knew what his aim was but he was travelling between dimensions and throwing metas at Barry like it was child’s play. Len had been able to hear the fear that saturated Barry’s voice as he spoke about them.

Len knew Barry had always gone easy on him. Honestly, he’d had no idea of the extent of a speedster’s power when he’d started this game. Goes fast? Yeah, he could deal with that. Speed was a challenging but surmountable obstacle. But time travel, dimension hopping, speed mirages, throwing lightning? That was outside Len’s wheelhouse. He couldn’t even begin to comprehend the awesome fury of a speedster unleashed. He kind of suspected betrayal #2 might warrant getting a preview.

Grabbing the gun, he made a quick adjustment to its settings and then swung around to find Barry mere metres away from him and coming fast. He pulled the trigger.

Barry’s lower half was quickly swallowed up by ice, immobilising him, but Len didn’t stop until it was covering up to his chest. The less likely he was to escape in the next few minutes, the better.

With Barry now engulfed, Len had a moment to catch his breath. He had his back to Savage – and wasn’t it ironic that of everyone in this cavernous factory, he was the least likely to attack Len at the moment.

He looked around and saw Mick standing over the prone body of the Green Arrow, his fists clenched tightly, ready for more of a fight. Star City’s premier vigilant must be unconscious if the looseness of his limbs was anything to go by. Awake, he’d held himself with all the tension of the drawn bows that were his trademark.

Axel had his weapons focused on the rest of the Green Arrow’s team but he looked scared, unsure. His eyes kept darting towards Len and Mick for some kind of order. Len was reminded once again
of just how young and inexperienced he was compared to the rest of them.

Mardon remained where he’d fallen, still out to the world, and the hawks stayed close to one another, waiting to see how this played out before they decided to attack again or retreat. They’d been doing this for millennia and would probably keep doing it for centuries to come; they had time to be cautious.

Len looked to Barry last. The grimace on his face made it obvious the ice was causing him pain but his eyes were pleading. Len belatedly noticed the arrow now frozen into his clenched fist. Huh. A knocked out, trigger happy vigilante and a stray arrow. The pieces slotted together quickly. So that’s why Barry had run at him. It didn’t make the next bit easier.

“Len. Len. Please,” Barry said, almost a whisper. “Let me out. We can still win this.”

Len grit his teeth. “You don’t know that, Flash.” He threw the moniker back in Barry’s face like a well-aimed punch. Everything would be so much easier if he would just stop believing in Len’s supposed goodness, if only he’d see him as the villain he was. Instead the boy was full of hope. It was cloying. Len just needed to get to Savage and get this part over with.

Barry struggled against the ice encasing him. “We have to try.”

Len turned his back on Barry and drew from deep within himself to put on his best Captain Cold voice. “The birds mean nothing to me, Flash. They’re immortal. They can afford to play this game. You and me? We die and we’re dead. Full stop. That’s the end of it. You saw the city burn. We’re trying it my way this time. Mick,” he commanded, “take the gauntlets and watch the Flash.”

Len heard the heavy stomp of Mick’s boots as he approached Barry. His gun whirred for a moment, melting the ice from Barry’s hands and then came the metallic clinking of the gauntlets being removed. Barry didn’t speak again and the thought of him giving up on Len was the worst.

Len ducked his head and breathed deep. That was when a static sound assaulted his ear.

Wonderful. Everyone here had given it a go so now it was the brains trust’s turn.

“Cold,” came Cisco’s voice through the comms, “don’t do this. Don’t trust Savage.”
He was easy to ignore. Hartley, less so.

“Snart, what the hell are you doing?” He was pissed. He never called him Snart usually; Len was his usual go-to. Lenny when he was feeling playful. Cold when they were working. More than anyone, Hartley understood the annoyingly umbilical nature of surnames.

Hartley’s tirade continued, unabated in the face of Len’s unresponsiveness.

It was only stopped when Lisa’s voice interrupted, a hesitant “Lenny…” all it took before Len was taking the comm set out of his ear and letting it drop to the floor.

Savage hadn’t moved during the interlude. His staff still remained raised and at rest, as if their little skirmish had been beneath his attention. Immortals probably had different priorities.

Savage reached out and took a firm hold of Len’s outstretched hand when he resumed his place in front of him. He stood tall and Len couldn’t help but notice the air of unwavering confidence he had about him. When Savage looked at Len, his gaze didn’t falter for a second, like he was trying to assert his dominance with his eyes alone. Len supposed you could be a bit cocky when you were immortal. “I’m glad you saw sense.”

“I’m just playing the game,” said Len, breaking eye contact and moving to stand at Savage’s side. “If you know you can’t win, you either change teams or you change the game.” Savage watched in amusement as Len reached into his space to take a hold of his military-style coat between pinched fingers, examining the fabric and then looking up at Savage to give him an appreciative nod.

“How very practical of you, Captain Cold.”

“Well, immortality’s above me and heroics bore me,” Len said as he let the fabric fall from his hand and resumed walking, doing a circle around Savage’s back, running his hand teasingly along the coat as he went, to end up on his left side next to the staff. Savage’s eyes followed him the whole way and narrowed warily as Len eyed off the staff for a moment. It looked every one of its years and just as deadly as they said. Len was sure he could have flipped it for a tidy sum. “You take a look at the world and you see what you can get from it.”

“In that respect,” Savage said, “we are in accord.”
“Enough of your speeches, Snart,” yelled out Mick. Len couldn’t help the fond smile that crossed his face as he continued to examine the staff. “The gloves are on… off… whatever. Just get on with it.”

“I suppose Mick is right.” He took a grounding breath. “It’s now or never.”

Savage broke eye contact with him and looked to the heroes arrayed in front of them. His smile went from amused to delightedly ruthless in a split second. “Indeed.”

“I wasn’t talking to you.” With a smirk, Len gripped the knife he’d pickpocketed from inside Savage’s coat and – before Savage’s attention was fully back on him – slashed at the underside of Savage’s left arm where the tendons were most vulnerable in one quick movement. “Shawna, now!”

Savage’s grip on the staff weakened. One moment it was in his hand and in the next Shawna was standing in front of him, her gauntleted hands bracketing his on the staff. She hardly had to pull at all for Savage’s damaged fingers to fail and for it to slip from his grip. The second after that she was gone, the prize along with her. Blink and you could have missed it.

“No!” Screamed Savage in impotent rage, teeth barred and eyes blazing now that his major source of power was stolen. Or so Len had thought. When Savage rounded on him, he could still feel energy crackling around him, building like static electricity. It was magnetic.

It was magic, Len realised belatedly.

Savage grabbed Len by the throat with his right hand and pulled him forward so they were face to face. He was stronger than a normal human. Len didn’t know why he hadn’t expected that. Savage seethed. “I will remember you. I will find you in this life or the next and I will make your death last.”

Len clawed at the unrelenting grip around his throat. It was hard to breathe but Len still took pleasure in the fact he managed to choke out, “I look forward to it,” before the strength of Savage’s grip seemed to redouble and making more than a keening sound became an impossibility.

It felt like his head was getting stuffed full, like something was going to explode out of his forehead. His vision began to tunnel. As the pain at his throat grew more and more intense, Len heard the sound of people running towards them, yelling, and caught Shawna puffing back into view just over Savage’s shoulder. She grabbed a hold of the immortal, and Len was taken along for the ride when she teleported away.
They appeared somewhere and before Len had a chance to getting his bearings, they were jumping again. And again.

It was nauseating. If Len’s system wasn’t flooded with adrenaline and he didn’t have a vicelike grip around his throat to worry about, he was sure he would have been sick.

When they finally stopped, electricity and burning surged through Len’s body from where Savage’s hand gripped his throat. The madman was grinning at him, his smile writ huge across his face, splitting it in two. Something like electricity - but not - arced between the two of them. Len dropped to his knees, screaming. Savage’s crushing grip on his neck had loosened slightly as he pushed pain through Len. He was able to gasp in some air but it wasn’t any consolation. What use was breathing when it only prolonged his suffering? He felt like he was being ripped apart, not only now but through every point of his life. He looked forward and back and all he could see was the pain. He begged silently for it to stop. It didn’t, and so all he could do was endure until it was over.

His fingers started to go numb and slipped away ineffectually as he clawed at Savage’s grip on his throat. Shapes swum in front of his eyes and then blackness began to leak in from the sides. His heartbeat was loud in his ears and too fast.

Then it was all suddenly gone.

He collapsed to the ground, coughing. That hurt too.

He lay still for a while as his nerves continued to ping pain, not getting the message that Len’s torture was over. Weakly, he turned his head to the side and saw McCulloch standing tall, admiring his work, Shawna beside him, hip cocked.

Savage was locked behind the surface of the safe house’s full length mirror, pounding impotently at the glass. Blood smeared across it from his cut up arm. His mouth was open in a scream but McCulloch had mercifully seen fit to mute it. He wouldn’t be getting out anytime soon.

Len rolled to his back and groaned. He felt like he’d been worked over by an angry bull.

He was getting too old for this.
McCulloch let Len know once the heroes had made it back to STAR Labs.

Len had lain on the floor for a good quarter of an hour before he felt put together enough to get up. Through McCulloch and Shawna, he’d let his own people know to get somewhere safe and hole up there after things had cleared out at Jurgens Industrial. He’d explain everything to them later. McCulloch reported that Mick and Axel had helped drag a still woozy Mardon away from the scene of the battle but Lisa and Hartley had insisted on staying put where they were and rendezvousing with him once he got to STAR Labs.

On one hand, if it ended up that they had to fight their way out of the building or a subsequent gaol stint, having the two of them by his side would make it a whole lot easier. What they lacked in raw firepower they made up for in cunning. On the other hand, Hartley and Lisa were the most wholesome seeming of the Rogues and might make the heroes feel not as guilty letting them walk away consequence free. Len wasn’t sure that the good guys would agree with his point of view that the end justified the means. They seemed to get hung up on ideas of betrayal and underhanded planning. He wasn’t sure if he was just in for a lecture about *teamwork* and *friendship* or if Detective West and the Green Arrow would feel slighted enough to try to bring him in or turn him into a pin cushion.

Shawna reluctantly agreed to teleport Len and the mirror to STAR Labs after some convincing but refused to stick around afterwards. She wasn’t going to let them lock her up again, she said. No way in hell. Lisa had told him in confidence that she still carried some trauma from her time in the meta human prison. Shawna further insisted that this last act would make them even. She would no longer owe the Rogues for freeing her. Len agreed.

He tugged at the collar of his sweater as he waited to leave, pulling it up to try to mask what Savage had done to him. There was no bruising yet, but the angry red encircling his neck held the promise of it.

He took a steadying breath and then gave Shawna the nod. She put the telescope to her eye and they were away. When they eventually puffed back into continued existence in the middle of the cortex after only a few stops along the way, it was like *déjà vu*.

After an initial shock, the heroes stared at them warily and Len swore he heard Shawna mutter, “oh hell no,” before she quickly disappeared again.
Len sucked it up, put on a smarmy grin and waltzed forward. “Why the long faces? We won, didn’t we?”

There was a moment of silence before Cisco sceptically asked, “Did we?”

He knew the exact moment Shawna reappeared behind him with the mirror because everyone’s eyes widened at once and a second later – once they’d seen what was contained within it – some of them backed up in fear.

“We did. And he’s contained,” Len assured. “No need to worry.”

“What did you do?” Detective West asked, circling the mirror while keeping a couple of metres between it and him at all times.

“Trapped him.”

“You little stunt back there wasn’t appreciated.” Green Arrow cut in. He looked pissed. Personally, Len felt that getting decked was fair comeuppance for shooting an arrow at him. It didn’t seem like Green Arrow agreed. Probably a good thing Len had sent Mick home then.

Len wasn’t a good enough person that he wasn’t going to rub it in though. “You firing an arrow at me wasn’t appreciated either. We’ll call it even.”

Barry got in between them. “Don’t start this again.”

Len smirked, backing back towards the mirror. “I can be civil.” Green Arrow just glared.

“Fine. Good. Now the real question is what do we do about him?”

They all looked towards the mirror and Savage looked right back at them. If he could kill with his eyes only, Len was sure they’d all be dead. Luckily his magic didn’t seem to be able to escape the mirror. The blood smeared all over the inside of the glass didn’t make him look any less dangerous.
though, despite his captivity.

Cisco shuddered. “I vote we put him somewhere he can’t stare at us creepily.”

“Can he get out of there? Like I did?” Barry looked towards Len for the answer but he honestly had no idea.

“McCulloch?”

McCulloch’s disembodied voice seemed to come from every direction at once. “There’s nae doors where he is. He’s staying in there ‘til I let him out.”

Caitlin looked conflicted. “We can’t leave him in there, can we? It seems…” Len could see her searching for a politic way to say what she was thinking, “inhumane?”

“He tried to kill Kendra and Carter,” said Cisco, “he’s been killing them since ancient Egypt was a thing. They’ve run for now but he’ll go after them if he can. We can’t let him out.”

Len could sense this decision was going to be long in the making. He went over to join Hartley and Lisa and lounged back against a desk as the heroes debated how to deal with Savage. Green Arrow threw out some ideas about sending the mirror to a prison on an island in the North China Sea. But then how would the get food to him without McCulloch around to manipulate the mirror? Cisco was for sending it to another dimension but was quickly shot down. The heroes argued that Savage was this earth’s problem and so they should take care of it here. Who knew what kind of damage he could do on another earth. Detective West suggested putting him in Iron Heights’ meta human wing. Black Canary said that even if Iron Heights could hold him, they had no legal case against him. Spartan just looked generally overwhelmed.

They argued around and around in circles, Barry looking more and more stressed out as the minutes ticked by, until Len grew tired of it all.

He slipped to his feet and announced, “I’m going to do you all a favour.”

“Yeah?” said Detective West suspiciously. “And what are we going to owe you for it?”
Len gave him a patronising grin. “Nothing, it’s one I’ll enjoy. McCulloch. There’s no way out of this mirror, right?”

Mirror Master leant out of the mirror like he was leaning out a window to talk to someone on the street. “None.”

“And what happens if it gets smashed?”

McCulloch didn’t take any moment to think about his response so Len assumed he knew the answer from personal experience. “You kill him.”

“Okay. Out of the way.”

As soon as McCulloch had disappeared back into the mirror again and before the heroes could do anything about it, Len put his fist through the glass.

“No!” Barry screamed as mirror shards tinkled to the floor.

Len brushed at his fist, checking to make sure no glass had come away on his skin or that he hadn’t done himself any damage. “There, it’s done.”

Detective West rounded on his angrily. “Why did you do that?”

Len wasn’t going to back down though. It was easy for them to take the moral high ground. It was almost a prerequisite to being a hero. But sometimes you needed to get your hands dirty. Sometimes you had to do bad things because doing them would stop worse things happening. There was a strength in that too and he’d be damned if he wasn’t at least going to try to get them to acknowledge that.

“I don’t have powers like the Flash. I can’t run really fast into a happy ending. I’m a thief and a killer. That is what I do. That is what I have done for you because you couldn’t. What else were you going to do? Let him go so he could come back and murder your hawks? If this had been an hour ago and you’d had the chance to kill him at Jurgens Industrial, you wouldn’t have hesitated. This –” he gestured to the frame of the mirror and the shards littering the floor “–makes no difference. You should be thanking me.”
The room fell quiet and as Len looked around he could see that some people saw the truth in what he’d said while others were so far up on their high horse his outburst had only affirmed their black and white view of the world. Barry looked like he was conflicted.

“Well, I think we’ll be going.” He flicked his eyes to Lisa and Hartley and they wove between the heroes to fall into step behind him as he made for the exit.

“Snart.” Len stopped. “Where’s the Staff of Horus?”

Len turned back to look at Detective West. “I think we’ll be keeping it. Payment for a job well done. You understand.”

Detective West rubbed the bridge of his nose. “Just get out before I arrest all your asses.”

“It’s been a pleasure working with you too, detective.”

He waved them off. “Yeah, let’s not do it again anytime soon. My heart can’t take it.”

***

As the last of the Rogues left the cortex, Barry’s team hissed at him and Oliver to escort the criminals out so they didn’t get up to any mischief on the way. Barry wanted to point out that in the span of their short truce, Len had shown he had the manpower in McCulloch and Baez to get in anywhere he wanted undetected with little effort, but eventually thought holding his tongue was the wiser option.

They walked in silence except for the thump of boots and the clack of Lisa’s heels. Throughout everything that had just happened in the cortex, Barry’s eyes had kept being drawn back to Len’s neck. The skin there was angry-looking with the beginnings of a bruise forming. Len’s voice had been a little rough too. When Shawna had disappeared with Len and Savage in tow, Barry had been waist deep in ice. He’d wanted more than anything to chase after them but the cold had slowed him down; so much so that he hadn’t even been able to phase out of it. He’d had to rope a grudging Mick
into defrosting him.

The minutes of not knowing that followed were crushing and McCulloch’s eventual appearance in the side mirrors of the STAR Labs van brought with it an overwhelming mix of emotions that Barry had a hard time suppressing in front of all these people who didn’t know.

When they reached the exit, Barry ran ahead to key in the passcode. He suspected the Rogues probably already knew it but keeping up appearances in front of Oliver was important.

For a second Barry wondered if Len would make a scene but he just walked past Barry without any acknowledgement. Barry turned to watch him as he crossed the empty parking lot, weaving between street lights. Hartley trailed behind him with a wave goodbye and a “ciao bello”. Barry began to wave back until he saw the look Oliver was giving him.

Lisa was the last to leave and she brushed up against him in a deliberate manner. “Celebratory drinks at Saints and Sinners,” she whispered. “Bring Cisco.” With a wink she twirled back around and disappeared into the night.

“I will never understand the relationship you have with your city’s criminals,” Oliver said from beside him.

“Some days I don’t think I understand it either.”

***

Barry didn’t end up going to Saints and Sinners until well after midnight.

After the Rogues had left, they’d returned to the cortex and Team Flash and Team Arrow had had a subdued victory celebration. It hadn’t felt particularly like winning though, so really it had just been a catch up between old friends. Oliver and his team were headed back to Star City the next morning so they broke up while it was still early.
Barry agonised over whether to go to the Rogues’ celebration or not. He wasn’t sure how he felt about the day’s events yet. Logically he knew that it had all worked out, in a way, and that everyone was safe. But for a minute there, he thought he’d been manipulated again, his goodness preyed upon. And not only to erase some records, which had been bad enough the first time. No, this time he’d been manipulated emotionally. For a minute he’d doubted everything that had happened since Len had side eyed him at Saints and Sinners and given him his address.

He’d felt *used*.

And he knew that was on him. Len had never given him a reason to doubt him. He’d gone above and beyond for Barry for months: shared space and time, indulged him on the bad days, smiled along on the good and just generally pushed him to want to be better. A better person. A better hero.

So that immediate compulsion to believe it had all been a lie was entirely Barry’s mind working against him as it so often did lately. Whispering that he wasn’t good enough and that no one would want him unless they were getting something out of it.

And for a minute he’d believed it.

Len was possibly the best thing that had ever happened to him and he’d let his own insecurities blind him to that fact.

In a way, he felt like he’d wronged Len. Which made him feel guilty. Which made him reluctant to see the man even though he desperately wanted to.

As they locked up STAR Labs for the night, he tried to cajole Cisco into coming with him, promising that Lisa had asked for him specifically. He’d feel better having his friend there for backup in case something went wrong. Cisco was safe. Cisco knew.

He’d looked dubious when asked though. “I don’t want to see you mack on Captain Cold all night.”

Barry spluttered. “I don’t… It’s not…”

“Yeah, yeah, man. Whatever you say.”
But he’d agreed eventually, the lure of seeing Lisa again too strong perhaps.

As the moon reached its zenith and the rest of the city started winding down, Barry and Cisco found themselves standing beneath the garish glow of Saints and Sinners’ neon sign. Sounds of revelry leaked out onto the street. Cisco had his hands stuck deep in his pockets.

Barry took the initiative and a hold on the door handle. He pulled.

“You’ve got to be kidding me.”

It was fairly crowded. Axel was standing up on the bar, gauntleted hands holding the Staff of Horus aloft, entertaining the handful of patrons who were paying him any attention with the tale of their victory tonight. Barry caught him saying, “and then our brave and fearless leader produced a stolen dagger from the depths of his coat and stabbed the bitch!”

As he thrust the staff forward in imitation of Len’s actions earlier, a blast of energy shot out from it, flying above the patrons as they ducked their heads nonchalantly out of the way and impacting against the far wall. It didn’t cause nearly the damage it had when Savage had wielded it and soon the bar was sliding back into its previous rhythms.

That was when Axel – mouth still wide open in an excited grin – took a shoe to the head. Barry followed its trajectory back to find Hartley on a bar stool, both feet covered so Barry could only surmise he’d somehow talked someone into sacrificing a shoe for his petty prank. Shawna was with him and they both laughed happily as Axel squawked in indignation and vaulted off the bar to confront them.

Further back in the room Len, Lisa and Mick were standing around the pool tables. By the time Barry had found them among the crowd, Len had already noticed his and Cisco’s entrance. Their eyes met for a moment and then Len turned away and headed towards a door near the back.

Cisco watched the whole thing.

“No! You are not leaving me alone here –” Cisco leant in close, pulling Barry in by his jacket, and hissed “–with these people!”

Barry started waving at Lisa until she noticed the movement and looked in his direction. Then her
eyes settled on Cisco. Immediately she was threading through the room, making her way over to
them. “Hang with Lisa for a minute. She’ll protect you.”

Barry shrugged out of Cisco’s hold and started his way over to where Len had disappeared. Cisco’s
voice followed after him. “Yeah, but who’s gonna protect me from her?”

Barry found Len down a hallway off the bar. It wasn’t the way to the toilets so Barry guessed there
must be a supply room back here somewhere. Len was lounging against the wall, waiting. Barry
took up a place on the opposite wall, leaving space between them.

Len didn’t bridge the gap. He was guarded when he stated, “I won’t apologise for something I don’t
regret doing.”

Barry didn’t want to fight but he had to ask, “Why didn’t you just tell me?”

Len glanced down and huffed out a dry laugh. “You can’t act worth a damn. Would’ve given us
away in a second.”

Barry approached him slowly, ready to back off if Len seemed defensive. He was surprised instead
to find that Len appeared drawn to him and they bumped foreheads as Barry stole a quick kiss and
said, “I’m the Leonard DiCaprio of acting. Underappreciated.”

Len snorted. “You are the Sylvester Stallone of acting.”

Barry stepped back and punched him playfully, couldn’t help letting out a mock-offended, “Hey!”

“Your dad doesn’t like me,” Len teased, taking Barry’s hand.

“Yeah,” Barry pulled him back in, chest to chest, wrapped his arms around Len’s waist and joked
into his neck, “that’s generally the case when someone’s a cop and they’ve arrested their son’s
boyfriend. Multiple times.”

“Boyfriend, huh?”
Barry faltered. Len tried to pull back but Barry tightened his hold around his waist and kept him where he was. Fear spiked through him. He hadn’t meant to say that. He could laugh it off as a joke.

“Barry?”

But he didn’t want to. He wanted to know.

“What are we?” Barry hated the hesitation in his voice.

Len turned his face to rub against Barry’s comfortingly. “What do you want us to be?”

“That’s unfair.” Len made a questioning noise into his shoulder. “I asked you first.”

“I want anything. Everything. I am a thief, after all.” Then his voice dipped, more serious. “Whatever you want.”

It wasn’t the definitive answer Barry had hoped for. It was reassuring though.

“There’s no one else?” he pressed.

“No.”

Nervous anticipation swooped in Barry’s stomach. “Me neither.”

“I feel too old to be called someone’s ‘boyfriend’ though,” Len half-joked. It warmed Barry that he didn’t outright deny that being what they were though.

“Manfriend?”
Len snorted. “Not better.”

Barry backed up, caught Len’s eyes but then his gaze wandered down to the damage at Len’s neck. He reached up a tentative hand but shied away from touching it at the last minute.

“Does it hurt?”

Len made a noncommittal sound. Which probably meant it did, and more than a little. Barry wished he could extend some of his healing powers to Len right now. He was the fastest man alive and Len made him feel helpless.

“You’re not mad I broke our pact?”

“The no killing?” Len nodded. Barry drew back, thinking it over for a minute but with his hands still warm against Len’s sides. He didn’t want to separate them, make it seem like he was pulling back, but his mind was still a bit of a mess. He wanted to reassure Len but at the same time he didn’t want to come off flippant and dismissive. “I am, in a way. I still don’t think killing is right. But I don’t think it could have ended any other way and none of us would have been able to do it.” He stilled. When his hand left Len’s side – advancing, not retreating – Len caught it in his own and wound their fingers together. “You have to show me how you did it.”

“Did what?”

“Stole that knife. I didn’t even see you do it.”

“It’s not hard.” Len drew Barry in.

“Maybe not for you.”

Len leant in to press a kiss to where the curves of Barry’s lips met. “I can teach you. Anyone can do it.”

Barry tilted his head just slightly, enough to catch Len’s lips as his arms wound around Barry’s waist. The noise of the bar and the stress of the day faded away until Barry’s whole universe
narrowed down to them right there in that moment.

One last peck and Barry asked, “You’ve just stolen my wallet, haven’t you?”

“Maybe.” Len’s smirk was all the confirmation he needed.

Bursting with fondness, Barry took hold of Len’s hand and pulled him along behind him as he followed the hallway back towards the sounds of conversation and laughter.

“C’mon,” He shot Len a small smile over his shoulder, “let’s go back to the bar.”

***

Oliver and the Star City crew returned home the next day as planned. Things went back to normal. As normal as things went for them following the particle accelerator explosion at least. Which probably involved more fighting meta humans, intelligent gorillas and homicidal dimension hoppers than your average person’s normal.

Despite Barry’s protests, the majority of Team Flash voted that STAR Labs needed to be Mirror Master-proofed after their battle with Savage and so Cisco was put on the job of making that happen. Mostly it just meant frosting all the windows. He knew it was petty, but Barry refused to help put up the matte sheeting. The Rogues had helped them but still no one trusted them except him.

The days passed and the threat of Zoom was ever-present. Harry was working on a speed dampening serum that seemed like it might work. Barry just wanted it all over and done with as soon as possible. It felt like he’d been plagued by the shadow of evil speedsters out to get him in one way or another almost his entire life.

When an opportunity arose to confront Zoom, he took it.
Len was taking a break from planning the Rogue’s next job and having a drink when his phone rang. Mick didn’t bother with a greeting when Len finally dug the mobile out from under a pile of papers and answered. All his gruff voice said was, “turn on the news,” and then he hung up.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you, as always, for reading. The next two chapters are largely written already so hopefully I'll get them out sooner this time (I've probably jinxed myself by even saying that).

Just a heads up, the rating will be changing next chapter.

I can be found on tumblr.
Len had been living on high alert since the broadcast.

It was no surprise then that four days later he shot awake in darkness with his heart pounding, not knowing whether the noise he thought he’d heard had come from his dreams or the waking world. A quick glance at the alarm clock that had been installed on his bedside table after Barry started spending the night told him it was just gone 2 o’clock.

Another noise started up, more of a thwupping this time. Like a mix between a hummingbird and a helicopter. He hadn’t dreamt it. The noise was muted to unintelligibility but sounded as loud as a brass band in his current high-strung state.

Len had seen the news. Terror had gripped Central City and he wasn’t immune. He’d sent McCulloch off to spy immediately. That was when he’d learnt that the Flash’s team had Mirror Master-proofed STAR Labs. He had no idea where Barry was or if he was even still alive.

They’d all been strung out, panicky afterwards. Mardon and McCulloch might have some very powerful meta abilities between them but none of the Rogues were under any misconceptions of being anything more than career criminals with a slight edge weapons-wise – and that mostly thanks to STAR Labs. Honestly, they had little aspirations to actual supervillain status. They didn’t want to rule the world. When Mick had called him and told him to turn on the TV, the other Rogues were passing the news around at the same time. They might fight the Flash but it was generally all in sport.

Zoom was something else. Brutal. Merciless. Like a cat toying and killing for fun.

The Rogues had converged on their safe house of the week after Lisa had thought to send a group text out. Len had been too numb.

He’d sat removed from the rest of them as McCulloch conveyed what he knew about Zoom from his spying on STAR Labs. He’d heard about Zoom going after people from Earth 1, bringing over their
doppelgangers from Earth 2 and having them kill their counterpart – whether they wanted to or not. With the amount of firepower the Rogues had, Len wouldn’t put it past Zoom to skip the middleman and force them to work for him. He was sure the speedster could find the right leverage if he set his mind to it. Len certainly wouldn’t be able to say no if his sister’s life was on the line.

So Len did the only thing he could think to do and told the Rogues to lay low, stay out of the evil speedster’s way and draw as little attention to themselves as possible. It seemed liked the most sensible advice he was capable of giving at the time.

Staying hidden away in his tiny apartment was driving him insane though. The not knowing was even worse.

He’d taken to locking the door. It was stupid. Barry had always told him to and he’d enjoyed not following his advice and seeing how huffy Barry got the next time he was over and saw he’d been ignored. After a while it just became a thing. Len would leave his door unlocked and Barry would lecture him about it, both knowing they’d repeat the exact same conversation the next time they met up. Now he felt bad for teasing Barry about it.

The cold gun was in the living room, on the table, he realised. Shit. He’d been careless. He was never going to be able to grab it before Zoom spotted him. What else did he have around that he could use as a weapon? Nothing really. He cursed himself for not furnishing the apartment with more than the bare necessities. All that was in his bedroom were clothes and some old knick-knacks hidden deep in the closet. He could maybe pry the shower curtain rod from the wall but the noise he’d create doing so would let the intruder know he was awake, exactly where he was and what he was doing.

There was no other way around it; Len inched his way into the living room, staying low. With the light from the street coming in through the window, he could make out a figure near the entrance, occupied with something else, not looking Len’s way, just a shadow against shadows.

As fast as he could, Len flicked on the lights and lunged for the cold gun. With it now firmly in his grasp, he spun around and aimed it at –

“Barry?”

Barry looked like a deer in the headlights. He was leaning against the kitchenette’s bench, trying to untie the lace on one of his shoes. The other lay discarded a few steps back. His hair was flat, tiredness shadowing his eyes but he was standing. He was whole. He was alive.
“I’m sorry.”

Len rushed to Barry’s side, the cold gun clattering to the floor on the way, and grabbed his face in both hands, moving it back and forth to look for any damage and then patting down the rest of his body. He was unblemished, faultless, as perfect as ever.

“Where have you been? I saw the news.”

“Healing.” Barry shrugged like it was nothing, head bowed. “I was in a wheelchair for a while.”

“You didn’t get in contact. I thought you were dead.”

“I’m sorry.” Barry wasn’t meeting his eyes. “There was always someone with me, I couldn’t get away.”

Len leant in and down and kissed him then, a little desperately, messily. They were of a similar height so once Barry responded – and he did, immediately and enthusiastically – there was no awkward manoeuvring, it was just easy. They fit. So he just went with it, didn’t stop even though he knew he should. If he stopped and started thinking, he’d see Barry’s limp and broken body held up in the air like a hunting trophy and he didn’t think he could handle that. Len had thought he was dead. He’d put his fist through the mirror when McCulloch had given him the news that he was now blind in STAR Labs.

Half of him had wanted to waltz into the cortex or the West’s living room and wave his gun around, demand information. Half of him hadn’t wanted to hear what he was afraid they’d say. Cisco was the only one in Team Flash who might have taken pity on him – knowing what he knew – but he was MIA as well. In fact, the whole team seemed to have gone into hiding. For a couple of days Len hovered in that place of uncertainty. There was no information to be had, not for someone like him. He was persona non grata to the heroes. STAR Labs and Barry inside it had become his very own Schrödinger’s cat.

For the first time in his life, he regretted some of the decisions he’d made that had brought him to that moment.

So now that he had Barry – safe, alive, warm and whole – in front of him, he wasn’t about to let go easily.
Barry gave as good as he got. His hands fisted in Len’s shirt at first, bunching up the fabric at his waist. Then they began to wander; circling around to his back, returning to his sides, dipping lower until Len felt a hint of fingertip brushing the skin between sleep pants and shirt. He couldn’t help stiffening instinctually and the touch was gone as quickly as it had appeared. Barry whispered a litany of sorrys against his mouth but didn’t pull away from kissing him.

For once Len didn’t want him to back off though. He was desperate.

“Don’t be sorry,” he murmured into Barry’s mouth. “Don’t be. You can’t break me.”

It didn’t take much prompting to crowd Barry further into the room until his legs hit the couch and he toppled backwards. They were only separated for a moment – Barry laughing – before Len was pushing back into his space, climbing onto the couch after Barry, his mouth finding the surprised oh shape of his lips. Barry shuffled backwards awkwardly, all flailing limbs and trying not to fall off the couch, to give them more room. Len followed.

In that moment, nothing was more important than getting as close to Barry as he physically could.

“Don’t ever do that again.” There was a conversation to be had here, Len was sure of it, but he couldn’t pull himself away long enough to give it the attention it deserved. “Why didn’t you ask for our help?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know,” Barry said, smearing the words across Len’s lips. “It was stupid. I’m sorry.”

Len hovered over Barry, his forearms braced on either side of Barry’s head, content to trade kisses forever. Barry seemed satisfied to do the same until – in the space between one moment and the next – something changed between them, a mutual acceleration. Barry’s hands migrated from his face to his hips and pulled him down, against the hardness of Barry’s own body.

He gave an experimental roll of his hips, his eyes darting from between their bodies up to meet Len’s.

“Is this okay?”
Len couldn’t fathom in what universe it wouldn’t be. “Yeah.”

Arousal pooled hot and heavy in his groin, becoming more and more obvious in the thin cotton of his sleep pants. Not that Barry wasn’t in the same state. Kisses started to be cut short by groans, sacrificed to the slow grind between them.

Without words but by mutual agreement, Len sat back and Barry’s fingers fumbled between them with the button on his own pants, finally getting it undone and then wrenching the zipper down.

“Just –” But Len didn’t bother following through on the thought, just took it upon himself to half get off the couch so he could drag down Barry’s pants and underwear when he lifted his hips obligingly and get a hand around the straining length of him. Barry gasped in a breath and arched into the touch, gorgeous. Len could watch him forever.

He stroked him slowly at first, just to enjoy the view as Barry came undone. His eyelids fluttered and his mouth opened on a broken moan. Len leant down and licked into that invitation. Barry’s hand came to curl around the arm Len wasn’t currently using to get him off, the other snaking around his shoulders and pulling him in closer.

At one point Len pulled back and Barry gave him a wonky smile, reaching between them to palm at Len’s cock. His touch was electric, even through the layers of cloth, sending bolts of lightning shooting out to Len’s toes and fingers. Len had to stop for a second, take a breath and re-centre himself.

But that let the images sneak back in. Barry suspended in the air, limp, blood dripping from beneath his cowl. Barry said he’d been in a wheelchair. What other damage had Zoom done to him after he’d dragged him from Picture News? Wheelchair meant immobility. Broken bones? Spine damage? Or had Zoom simply ripped him apart? How much damage could Barry’s body take before his powers wouldn’t heal him?

Barry’s legs were mostly bare and a quick glance down assured him they looked undamaged, but what about the rest of him? Len’s free hand clutched desperately at Barry’s shirt hem – hesitating for a moment - and then hitched it up around his armpits. He ran his hands over the planes of Barry’s stomach, searching out any bumps or ridges that might mean scar tissue, any evidence of what he’d been through. Barry healed fast. Open wounds would be gone. Scars might already look like they were years old. Bones would knit back together in hours instead of the weeks Len had endured as a kid. Internal damage was harder to pick. Barry wouldn’t complain. He’d just suffer. Len knew from firsthand experience that even a regular human could survive a decent amount of damage with make-do first aid.
Len’s hands moved over Barry’s skin. There was nothing.

“Len?”

There had to be something.

His touch ghosted over Barry’s sides to reach for his back, see if there was anything there, but Barry jerked away and laughed. The sound broke Len’s focus. He pulled back both of his hands immediately.


A beat and then, “are you okay?”

Len gave a terse nod.

He hadn’t realised he’d been close to hyperventilating until he came back to himself and found himself panting in a way that was more laboured than even their current situation warranted. He wasn’t sure if Barry knew what he’d been thinking and doing but the kid smiled at him reassuringly and his own hand took to working his cock slowly, leisurely, in Len’s absence. Len sat back and simply watched for a moment, his breathing evening out and the panic from a second ago mostly abated, feeling arousal zing around his lower half as the heavy sick feeling bled out.

When the sight became too tempting, he dropped back down to capture Barry’s lips in a messy kiss. He jacketed Barry’s hand with his own and gave a few experimental tugs before Barry relinquished the task entirely back to him. He trailed kisses down Barry’s throat, a slight rasp against his cheek from the beginning of stubble. Barry got his leg up a bit and the friction Len got from rubbing against him was just what he needed.

He mouthed lower, following Barry’s collarbone down. He had a scattering of freckles across his chest that Len had never really paid much attention to before but which seemed fascinating at the moment. Len licked and sucked his way across the constellations on Barry’s skin before flicking his tongue across the nub of Barry’s nipple.

A shiver ran through Barry’s body. Or at least Len thought it was a shiver until it intensified and Barry damn near blurred for a second.
Len pulled back and stopped all his ministrations. Barry whined at the lack of contact.

“What was that?”

“Sorry,” Barry panted. “Happens sometimes when I’m… you know, a little excited.”

“You vibrate.”

“Yeah.”

“When you’re excited.”

“Yeah.”

“You are a wonder.”

Len’s fingers took up the place where his mouth had been on Barry’s chest and the blurring happened again. Len didn’t back off in surprise this time though, kept his ministrations going even as Barry twitched in large and vibrated in miniature. Barry pulled him down to kiss messily and the feeling against his lips was foreign and left behind a tingling when they parted.

The vibrations grew weaker the longer they continued and eventually petered out as Barry pulled back control. Len’s hand snaked down his chest to resume his stroking, speeding up as Barry’s body grew tighter and tighter.

“Len, I’m gonna –”

He was cut off on a moan. When Barry came, he latched on tightly to Len in every way: arms wrapping around him, pulling him flush against his body, his mouth finding Len’s neck and locking on in an almost trancelike way. It stung after a moment but Len didn’t care.
Len allowed himself a moment of stillness to ease Barry through it, untangling him once he was done and laying him down.

Barry lolled contentedly as Len pulled his pants down just enough to get a hand around himself and go to work. Barry’s eyes moving from his face down to the hand fisted around his cock was an almost tangible heat travelling over his body that egged Len on even further.

It wasn’t long before Len felt his orgasm approaching and sped up. A welling of pressure, electricity shooting out through his body and then he was cumming. His whole world tunnelled down to just him and Barry and this moment right here.

For a brief moment, everything seemed to still and grow quiet. For a second, everything was so very clear. The universe laid bare.

Afterwards, as the cum cooled and their breathing evened out, Len remained hovering over Barry. With his pants around his thighs, his cock lying soft and spent against his stomach and his shirt rucked up over his ridiculous abs, he was like nothing Len had ever seen before. Len was sure if he lived another fifty years, he’d never again find anyone quite like Barry Allen.

Len ran a hand from Barry’s sweat-sticky forehead into his hair, coaxing him up and forward into a gentle meeting of lips. Barry was soft, pliant, eyelids heavy.

He hummed pleasantly against Len’s mouth, a less intense version of the vibrations he’d felt earlier. “Should do that again.”

Len would have liked to just lay down and fall asleep as they were, exhaustion seeping back into his body now that the adrenaline from the home invasion and orgasm had faded away. But experience had taught him that if he did that, he’d wake up with a crick in his neck and dried semen flaking off his stomach. That had been fine when he was in his twenties. He knew better now.

Len looked down at the mess they’d made, Barry sporting the bulk of it. He wiped at some that was threatening to spill down onto the couch, grimacing at the tacky feeling of it on his hand. “Wait here,” Len said, kissing Barry’s forehead as he climbed off the couch on shaky legs and headed to the bathroom to get something to clean them up with. He briefly lamented not keeping a properly furnished house with a box of tissue available so he could have avoided having to leave Barry.

He washed his hands and gave himself a cursory wipe over with the damp edge of a bath towel in
front of the mirror, taking in the bruise Barry had sucked onto his neck in orgasm. It wasn’t too conspicuous, even blended in fairly well with the yellowish-green bruises that still remained from Savage’s attack. He brought his fingers up to touch it.

He was surprised to find he didn’t mind.

Which in itself was a problem. He wasn’t so far gone that he didn’t recognise this may have been a mistake. Their whole relationship was predicated on heightened emotional states. Len knew decision making wasn’t always someone’s strength when their brains were going haywire on them, and Barry had been in a bad state from the start of this.

He’d been better lately, Len had noticed, or he’d at least gotten better at acting.

Was Barry with him because he actually had feelings for him or was he with him because Len had filled a hole during a bleak time and now he was coasting on inertia? Was there even a simple answer to that question?

Sex would complicate everything even more. Barry didn’t strike Len as the type who could divorce sex from emotions. Hadn’t he said he could never pay for a prostitute for that reason? Len could see him exaggerating any feelings he may have had, conflating them with love to fit the pre-established patterns of his life.

Len feared that in terms of real emotions, Barry meant more to him than he did to the speedster.

When Len emerged back into the living room, Barry was half-asleep. He helped clean him up and disrobed him of everything except his underwear. Len chuckled to himself when he tried to get Barry’s pants off all the way and found them getting caught on his unlaced shoe. Barry had been trying to get it off when Len had found him in the entranceway and it had been forgotten about until now.

After a bit of coaxing, Len finally convinced Barry to leave the temporary comfort of the couch for the bed. He was a warm weight against Len’s side as they traversed the short journey from living room to bedroom.

The bed was chilly as they slid in, Barry wrapping his long limbs around Len almost instantly. Len was still in his pyjamas while Barry wore only his underwear. That had been their usual routine since they started sharing a bed.
Len kissed Barry’s forehead and mused, “I haven’t gotten off on a couch in a long time.”

“Do I make you feel young again?”

Len huffed out a laugh. “Go to sleep.”

***

Barry woke to feather-light fingertips tracing the column of his spine from neck to waist and back again. He hummed at the pleasant feeling, little more than a tickle. But when he realised what Len was doing, he turned on his side, Len’s fingers trailing powerlessly to his hip, their real goal now out of reach.

“You said you were in a wheelchair,” Len simply stated.

“Complete dislocation at the T12-L1 interspace of the thoracolumbar junction,” Barry recited, remembering what Caitlin had told him.

“In other words…”

“I broke my back.”

“He broke your back.”

“Yeah. But I got better,” Barry was quick to reassure. He wasn’t sure exactly what had been going on with Len at one point last night, but it seemed like he’d freaked out over how Zoom had hurt him. He didn’t want the same thing happening again, not when he was completely healed. “I’m fine now.”

Len frowned. “That doesn’t make it okay.”
“No, but it could have been a lot worse.” Barry buried his head against Len’s chest. In barely a whisper, he said, “he’s so fast.”

“You’ll be faster.” Len’s tone of voice allowed for no refutations.

Chapter End Notes

I hope that wasn't too terrible.
I have a tumblr that is mostly completely unrelated stuff.
It wasn’t a good day.

Len had known it as soon as he’d woken up and his old injuries had started aching. The weather outside had shifted decidedly towards winter overnight. He reached up under the hem of his shirt and rubbed fingers along the raised scar above his hipbone. It was tight today, ropey.

He’d gotten out of bed and rugged up as much as he could, not that it made much difference. Didn’t help that the apartment had a dilapidated heating system that worked as often as it didn’t and that the rooms weren’t all that insulated to begin with. He made a cup of coffee on the stove and let that warm him from the inside out.

A week until Christmas.

It felt a little different this year. He wasn’t about to go out and buy lights, a Christmas tree, presents. No, nothing like that. But after last year… Maybe having company wouldn’t be the worst thing.

He hadn’t seen Barry since the morning after their night together. Something had shifted in him. They each had their own things going on – Barry’s certainly more urgent and life-endangering than his own – and it hadn’t even been a week and yet, Len felt his absence more keenly than usual.

He should probably try to get some work done, maybe plan a job. It had been a while since the
Rogues had done anything together, barring their little foray into heroics against Savage. They may as well live up to their supervillain expectation, Len thought bitterly, if even that hadn’t changed the good guys’ perception of them.

He sat down on the couch and booted up his laptop. There was a new visiting collection opening at the national gallery soon, some antiquities Len had had his eye on for a while at the museum, the usual banks. If he looked harder, asked around, greased the right palms, he’d probably be able to find out about even higher ticket items that weren’t flaunted in the press. He felt listless though and jumped from search to search, nothing piquing his fancy.

Eventually he just pushed the laptop aside and slumped into the couch.

Len winced as he felt a flicker of pain spring to life just above his left eye. He kneaded at the skin above his temple.

It wasn’t a good day.

***

Iris had been fretting the whole way home. Barry didn’t blame her. It was a huge bombshell to drop on Joe coming so soon after the reveal of Francine’s impending death. He had a son. A son he’d never even known existed, who never got to grow up with Joe’s fatherly presence in his life like Barry had been lucky enough to have. They’d both wanted to stay with him right after but he’d ask them to give him some time.

As they climbed the porch steps of the West house, Iris asked, “do you think that he's gonna be okay?”

“I do, yeah, I think it's just a lot to take in,” said Barry, locking the door behind them and throwing his jacket over the back of the couch. Joe was strong, probably stronger than even they realised. He’d made the decision to take Barry in without a second thought, even though he was a single parent on a less than generous police officer’s salary at the time. If he could do that, he’d surely welcome Wally – his real son – into the mix with open arms. “He just needs a little time to process it.”

“You’re probably right.” Iris still didn’t look entirely convinced. Keeping the secret had weighed
heavily on her; Barry had been able to see that as soon as she told him what she’d been hiding. He’d be glad for her not to be carrying that burden any longer. There was a tiredness in her eyes that Barry hoped he’d see seep away at least a little in the coming days. She still managed her usual smile for him though and he couldn’t help but return it. “Do you want to watch a movie or something?”

Barry considered. “No, I think I’ll just head to bed. It’s been a long day.”

Iris nodded understandingly. Barry said goodnight to her at the bottom of the stairs and then headed up to the second storey. He brushed his teeth at normal speed. Sometimes he rushed through it, especially on mornings when he was running late, but tonight he felt like being a little more human, a bit less meta.

Barry put a hand on either side of the sink and leant in to examine himself in the mirror. He’d been making an effort to get more sleep lately when he could. Sometimes he succeeded, sometimes he didn’t. He couldn’t exactly say no when Cisco gave him the heads up on a crime after hours. People depended on him.

The darkness under his eyes had noticeably improved though. That felt like a small victory.

He smiled and it looked real.

Not so uplifting was the slight gauntness he’d acquired after his fight with Zoom. He lifted his shirt and ran his hands over the planes of his chest, feeling his ribs more pronounced than usual. He guessed his body had spent most of its resources healing the damage Zoom had done to his back. He’d have to talk to Cisco about upping his calorie intake for a little while.

Barry splashed some water on his face before heading for his bedroom. He began unbuttoning his shirt as he walked along the corridor, ready to shrug it off by the time he got to his room.

The first thing he noticed was the chill in the air. The window was open, the curtains fluttering in a slight breeze. The lights were off but the moonlight filtering in from outside hit something that shouldn’t be there. He stopped, shirt halfway down his arms, temporarily paralysed by fear. He barely even breathed. It might draw attention to him.

Then his eyes adjusted to the darkness in his room and he was able to see inside.
It was Len.

Len was sitting in his room, on his bed, in the dark.

The instant relief surged through Barry like a wave, coming out of him in a held-in exhale. Barry shrugged his shirt back up and flipped on the light. He still almost couldn’t believe what he was seeing.

“Len?”

“Barry.”

“What are you doing here?”

Len shrugged. “Just wanted to see you.”

He was in his Cold costume but minus the gun and goggles, the navy coat pulled tight around him. Dressed like that, he looked out of place in Barry’s room. Captain Cold didn’t belong in his home. Len maybe could. Barry wondered what he’d been doing earlier in the night if he was dressed like that. They hadn’t heard of any thefts being committed but Len was good enough that sometimes they didn’t know he was robbing a place until well after it happened. On the other hand, maybe he just wanted to look the part while he did a little B&E at the West house.

Why had he done that though? He’d never been here before: Barry always went to his apartment or sought him out at Saints and Sinners. It had always seemed safer. This was – for all intents and purposes – enemy territory for Len. If Joe found him here…

Barry looked more closely at Len. Something had to be up. This was almost sloppy. And now that he was looking, there was something off about him. His usual intense gaze seemed more hooded than usual and there was a slight furrowing to his brow.

“Are you okay?”

Barry approached the bed and tried to smooth out the lines on Len’s forehead with his fingers.
“Peachy.” The way Len leant into the touch and closed his eyes like a satisfied cat said otherwise though.

“Really?” Barry pushed.

Len opened his eyes and looked up at Barry for several drawn out moments before he admitted, “headache. I get them occasionally.”

“Yeah? Anything I can do to help?” Barry asked, continuing to massage his scalp. “We’ve probably got some Panadol under the sink, if you want it. Doesn’t really get to the root of the problem though.” He paused to think. “Have you been drinking enough water?” Len nodded, amused at Barry’s fussing. “Good. You know, I read a study not that long ago that found that having an org…” He trailed off as he realised what he’d just been about to say. Heat pool in his cheeks. His brain unhelpfully reminded him of the article’s title: *The impact of sexual activity on idiopathic headaches: An observational study.*

Len rose, forcing Barry to step back to make room for him, smirking the whole time like he knew exactly what Barry had been referring to. “Are you offering?”

And suddenly Barry realised he *could* offer. And that realisation lit a fire in his middle. Len was giving him an opportunity to either laugh it off as a joke or take it further. Embarrassment and something else warred within him when he thought back to the night on the couch. It had been good. Really good. He’d known they were probably going to have sex at one point or another but he hadn’t expected that a simple hand job could be so mind-blowing. For a while the world had constricted down to just the two of them, Len’s hands and mouth driving him close to madness, and it had felt so good.

He wanted it again.

This time without the panic and desperation. Without the post brush with death franticness.

Maybe a bit slower and more tentative.

A bit more *them.*
“Maybe.”

“Maybe?” Len repeated questioningly, drawing closer to Barry.

Barry hooked his fingers through the belt loops of Len’s jeans and pulled them flush together with a cheeky smile. “Maybe.”

Barry’s shirt was still unbuttoned and Len’s hands were soon snaking up under it, skateing electricity across Barry’s hips, his touch charged even though it didn’t stray anywhere scandalous. Yet. Barry could feel Len’s breath hot against his neck and the rise and fall of his chest against his own. The fur on Len’s coat collar tickled his nose.

He nuzzled in under Len’s chin to escape the sensation and when Len lifted his head, Barry took it for the invitation it was and began placing a trail of kisses along the sweep of Len’s jaw, following it up to his mouth. They kissed lazily at first, slowly getting used to each other again. Len’s lips were a little rough against his own and Barry pulled back, waited until Len’s eyes opened before he licked deliberately against them, maintaining eye contact the whole time.

Len groaned against Barry’s mouth and that was when things sped up a little. The kisses got messier and Len’s fingers dipped lower. Barry’s fingers untangled from the belt loops of Len’s pants to fist in his jacket, trying to keep them as close together as possible even as Len did the same.

By mutual but silent agreement, they slowly edged towards Barry’s bed. When the back of Len’s legs hit the mattress, Barry pushed him down to sitting and – without breaking their kiss – ran his hands over Len’s shoulders, up under his jacket and pushed it off as he followed the dip down Len’s arms. Len grabbed for one of his hands as Barry took a step back, and leant forward to keep that point of contact between them unbroken.

“Are you going to join me or just watch?”

Arousal punched him in the gut as Len’s words evoked a whole slew of images in his imagination. Picturing Len getting himself off wasn’t a purely theoretical exercise anymore. He could imagine the furrow in his brow and the intense look in his eyes, his hand moving relentlessly against his cock as he slipped a finger between Barry’s lips and…

“Lie back,” Barry commanded and flushed at the uneven sound of his voice.
Len smirked a little at that but did as he was told.

As much as he liked hanging out in Len’s apartment, Barry could definitely get used to Len being in his bed. Before tonight there had been a finite number of spaces that were for time with Len and everywhere else was forbidden. Having Len in his room was like pushing those barriers back a little further, chiselling more of a place for them in the world.

He climbed onto the bed and straddled Len’s legs. He began by taking Len’s wrists in each of his hands, using a fraction of his strength to pin them above his head to see how Len would react. Nothing, just an indulgent smirk at the playful display of dominance. Barry couldn’t help smiling back and tried to hide it from Len by kissing him.

His hands slid up Len’s arms as their mouths kept moving lazily together, tangling their fingers together, loving the grounded feeling of being twisted up in Len in such a small way. It took him back to their first encounter in Len’s home, Len’s fingers moving over his hands, massaging, twisting in his hair. Filling that yearning for touch he hadn’t even realised was slowly tearing him apart inside.

He brought one of Len’s hands to his mouth and kissed the palm.

Len remained pliant and willing beneath him, taking whatever Barry gave. The urgency from their last time together was absent. Barry was free to take his time and explore.

He was just starting to mouth along Len’s jaw, one hand snaking downward, when he heard the footsteps.

His brain wasn’t firing on all cylinders and it took him a few seconds to remember that they weren’t actually in Len’s apartment. A moment later he realised what those footsteps meant. By the time he did, he had enough time to get off the bed and back a couple of paces but not much more.

“Hey, Barry. I know you said you were going to sleep but -” Iris’ voice cut off as she looked up and caught sight of Len jolting upright on Barry’s bed. She immediately took a step back. Barry hated the fear that was in her eyes as she looked searchingly at him. “Barry, what’s going on? Why is Captain Cold in our house? Why is he in your room?”

“Iris, don’t freak out, okay? I can explain.” Barry suddenly realised his partial nudity and buttoned up his shirt at super speed.
She raised an eyebrow at him, sarcastic in spite of her obvious panic. “Are you going to say this isn’t what it looks like?”

Barry almost said yes but… it was exactly what it looked like.

Barry could almost feel the shift in the room as Len put on his Captain Cold persona behind him. Barry had figured out it was as much a defence mechanism as it was a display of strength, like putting on a suit of armour. “Read your article on the disappearing middle class. Strong point of view. Nice prose style.”

Barry gaped at him. Of all the things he’d expected to come out of Len’s mouth, that wasn’t one of them. He wasn’t sure if he was more surprised that Len was trying to engage Iris in friendly conversation or that he’d read her articles.

But Iris was having none of it. “I know you didn’t break into our house to critique my writing.”

Barry only caught the disappointed micro-expression on Len’s face that followed that barbed statement because the adrenalin coursing through his system was making everything go a little slower than usual. What did that mean? He didn’t have time to figure it out just now.

Barry sped to Iris’ side, close enough to half-whisper. “Can we talk about this? Privately?”

Iris looked like she seriously didn’t want to leave Captain Cold unsupervised in their house. Not for the first time, Barry wished anyone could see even a fraction of the goodness he saw in Len. Maybe then they’d realise he wasn’t this Machiavellian villain who only existed to cause them grief and heartache. He was so much more than that.

“Please,” he pleaded and she finally gave in. Barry herded her out the door, saying, as he went, to Len, “Just stay here. Please.”

Len gave him a sharp nod.

They only went as far as the hallway, a little to the left of the door so that Len wasn’t in direct line of sight. He’d be able to hear whatever they said as long as they were on this floor anyway so Barry might as well keep them close. “Okay,” Barry took a deep breath, psyching himself up for a conversation he definitely wasn’t planning on having so soon, “remember how you thought I’d been
happier? That I had a girlfriend?” He gestured weakly back into the room towards Len.

Iris’ eyes widened and her voice was more of a whispered hiss. “Captain Cold? You’re dating Captain Cold?” Barry nodded. “This isn’t a ‘blow off some steam’ type of thing?”

“No.”

“How long?” she demanded.

“It’s complicated but… a while.” Barry really had to think about it. In hindsight, this thing between them had started a long time before he’d consciously realised what was going on. Even then, it had taken a while for him to come to terms with and accept it. “Maybe close to a year?”

He could see her calculate the time in her head and wince when she realised what had been happening a year ago. There was sorrow in her eyes and apologies in her voice as she said his name: “Barr… Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I don’t know.” He did know. Because it had become easier not to. Lisa and Hartley had found out and didn’t care that Len had been seeing the Flash. But if it had been his friends and family? He couldn’t help but think he would have been lectured endlessly for his bad judgement. Cisco’s looks were enough to deal with. “I’m still working it out myself.”

“Are you sure you should be doing this?” Barry understood Iris’ concern but wished she had more faith in him.

“Yes. There’s good in him, Iris. I can see it.”

“I just don’t want you to be hurt.” She touched him gently on the arm. “You can be too trusting sometimes, Barry Allen.”

“I know.” Images of Dr Wells flashed through his head. But Len wasn’t like that. Len didn’t pretend to be anything he wasn’t. “But Len… Len’s different. I like who I am when I’m around him.”

Iris pulled him into a hug.
“I hope you know what you’re doing,” she said, her eyes sad as she started to walk away.

“Iris.” She turned back to look at him. “Please don’t say anything to Joe.”

“Barry… You know secrets never turn out well.”

“Just… give me some time, please?”

Eventually, and with a sigh, she agreed. “…Okay. Goodnight, Barry.” She left without saying anything to Len. Barry wasn’t sure how he felt about that.

Said man was just grabbing his jacket off the bed when Barry returned to his room. “I think I’d better go.”

“Len, please, not yet.”

Barry came up behind him and wrapped his arms around him, pinning him where he was. He nuzzled at the back of Len’s neck, where the buzzed hair tickled his nose. Len’s warmth was grounding and he breathed a little easier.

Len didn’t move from his embrace, but he also didn’t relax. He was drawn up as tight as a bow string, his jacket clenched white-fisted in his hand.

“Stay.”

Barry kissed the back of his neck, just above where his jumper ended, and Len’s head dropped forward. His free arm came up to join Barry’s where they crossed his waist.

Barry let his eyes slide shut and buried his face in against Len’s shoulder. They stayed that way for a long time, just breathing together, until Len sighed deeply and untangled their arms to turn to face him.
“I shouldn’t have come here.”

“I’m glad you did.” Len looked like he was about to argue against that so Barry pushed on. “I’ll come visit after patrolling tomorrow.”

“Make it the day after.”

Barry wanted to ask why but held himself back. He didn’t want to sound needy. He could wait an extra day.

“Okay.”

Len put on his coat with practised flair and Barry couldn’t help smiling fondly. He followed Len as he made his way over to Barry’s window and watched in surprise as he shimmied out the opening feet first. When only his torso remained framed in the windowsill, he motioned Barry closer to place a chaste kiss to his lips.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

Then he was scurrying deftly down the side of the West house.

Barry watched as he sauntered up the street until he faded into the darkness.

***

Mick was in his apartment when Len returned home (and when exactly had he started considering this place home?), lying back on the couch and taking a swig from one of Len’s beers.

“Your boy toy’s good for one thing at least. Always know where to find you now.” He raised his beer in a mock salute. “Saves me a lot of running around.” Len grabbed a beer for himself from the fridge as he passed and dropped down onto the couch with his partner. “Might want to switch it up soon though. Can’t be too careful.”
Len knew Mick was right. He didn’t want to admit it though so he just changed the topic.

“How do you feel about pulling a job tomorrow night?”

“Sure, buddy,” Mick replied easily. “I’m in. What’re you thinking?”

Len hadn’t really been thinking. But seeing Mick here had put the idea in his head. He cycled through the marks he’d found earlier in the day during his research but quickly dismissed them all; he wouldn’t be able to get a plan together satisfactorily in 24 hours. On a whim, he answered, “Central City’s Bullion Exchange.”

He’d been mulling that one over for a while. Most of the security was electronic and they’d only have to deal with people once they tripped the alarm system. It was doable.

Mick grunted approvingly. “Sounds fun.”

They drank in silence for a while, Len flicking on the TV to whatever was playing. Not because he particularly wanted to watch it but just for background noise.

“Gonna tell me what’s up?”

Len side-eyed him.

“I’m not complaining.” Mick shrugged. “‘S just, you never do anything this quickly. What’re you trying to avoid?”

Len scowled. “Nothing.”

The looked Mick levelled at him let him know he didn’t believe that for a moment. He wouldn’t push though. Mick was good like that. Once he was in, he was in fully. No questions asked. It was the main reason they’d stayed friends for the better part of 25 years.
Time to plan then.

If Barry’s friends thought they were villains, then villains they’d get.

***

Lights were flashing and sirens wailing as Len hightailed it out of the bullion exchange, Mick only a step behind him.

The thrill of the chase, the adrenaline, was exactly what he’d needed. He was focussed entirely on the job and every other worry in his life faded into the background.

As soon as they made it out of the building, they were confronted by two security guards. The guards – more balls than brains – aimed their guns at them and commanded, “Drop your weapons!”

“Ah, fry, you little piggies!” said Mick, no small amount of glee in his voice as they both raised their guns and sent the guards flying. As per his agreement with Barry, they’d both live with only a bruised ego to show for it in the long run.

“A minivan?” Mick asked, spotting their getaway car. “Really, Snart?”

Len smirked, holding up a box for Mick to see. “Cops'll never hassle a dad buying diapers in the middle of the night.”

Mick snorted at him, but still buckled in and revved up the van.

They sped along the highway, a cop car swinging in behind them, trailing close behind. Len knew that once they got to downtown they’d have the hometown advantage. The cops didn’t know the ins and outs of the city like they did.

But suddenly there was someone on the road.
“What the –” Mick began, slamming on the brakes.

“What it!” Len warned at almost the same time.

There was a bright flash and then everything went black.

***

When Len woke, he found himself looking up at the night sky. Most of the stars were obscured by the city’s usual light pollution but he could make out a few.

Movement to his left made him look over.

There was Mick beside him, and a man in a weird tech suit next to him. Mick half rose up and then folded in on himself as he groaned, a hand shooting up to his temple. “My head!”

Len looked to his other side and saw a familiar face. “Stein?” Professor Stein had attempted to catch him and Mick a couple of times as half of Firestorm before the singularity. They hadn’t seen him since. “What the hell are you doing here?”

In his usual sarcastic manner, Stein replied, “I’m as ignorant as you, for once.”

Beyond Stein was a blonde woman he’s never seen before. “Where are we?” she asked.

Next to her were the hawks and Len had never been less pleased to see someone in his life. He’d thought he wouldn’t have to deal with them again after defeating Savage.

Next to them was a black kid – a kid because, compared to the rest of them, that was exactly what he was. He probably wasn’t even old enough to buy alcohol. Since when did the good guys start recruiting straight out of high school?

“Why don’t you ask the dude who knocked us out and kidnapped us?” He said, seeming hardly affected by whatever had been done to them – unlike everyone else. The perks of youth perhaps.
“British dude with a flashy thing? Ring any bells?”

“The name's Rip Hunter.” All eyes shot to the man in the trench coat who swaggered across the roof with hands on hips. Len recognised him as the same man who they’d almost run over before everything went black. He was starting to wish Mick hadn’t braked. “I’m from East London.” He paused for effect. “Oh, and the future.”

Len rolled his eyes internally. What a pretentious dick.

Turned out the kid was called Jax and he was the other part of Firestorm. Or the new other part of Firestorm, Len supposed. Blondie and Robot Man were from Star City, part of the Arrow’s team, but hadn’t made it to Central for the Savage debacle.

Well, looked like they’d still get a go at him.

As half of Captain Rip Hunter’s potential recruits seemed to prove, being dead didn’t always stick.

So, assuming Rip was telling the truth, Savage would return, enslave the world and set Central and the world on fire.

That didn’t sit well with Len. Central was his city. He liked it there. He wasn’t about to let some psycho with delusions of grandeur burn it to the ground.

Besides, he prided himself on always getting a job done right the first time. He and his Rogues had bested Savage and it galled that – even after all they’d done to him – he’d still somehow managed to reincarnate.

Len guessed now he’d have to take the threats Savage spat in his face seriously.

Still…

“You got the wrong guy,” Len drawled. “Hero ain’t on my resume.” Mick backed him up on that one.
But the things Rip said, about them being legends in the future, well, it made Len yearn for something he hadn’t believed he’d ever be able to have.

Being backup hadn’t changed the way Barry’s people saw him, but if he was a “legend”…

Len barely listened to the rest of Rip’s speech, too lost in his own thoughts. They were eventually set free and given 36 hours to decide.

Len needed to talk to Barry first.

Chapter End Notes

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It was late when Len finally arrived back at his apartment. He’d parted ways with Mick after they’d been dropped back in Central, promising to contact him the next day to make a final decision.

“I can’t believe you’re thinking of hooking up with the Englishman,” Mick had said to his retreating back. “We’re thieves. Crooks. Criminals. Not legends.” Len hadn’t replied or turned back to acknowledge the comment. The snub didn’t stop Mick from adding a parting shot: “Thought you would’ve learnt your lesson the last time.”

Len had kept walking and mentally damned Mick for giving voice to the thoughts running through his own mind. One display of heroics hadn’t been enough to assuage a lifetime of villainy; why would doing the same thing again end differently? Against the same villain even. Doing a thing over and over again and expecting a different result: wasn’t that the popular definition of insanity? Len had killed people. Sometimes they’d deserved it, sometimes they hadn’t. He would admit that. He’d hurt people, too. Even Barry’s own friends. He’d lied and stole and felt no guilt whatsoever. And the kicker was, he still didn’t regret doing any of it. It had been necessary at the time and it had made him the man he was. He’d said it himself to Barry: he was a criminal, a liar. He hurt people and he robbed them. That was who he’d been his entire life. But then Barry had walked into his world and wheedled his way inside his heart. Barry didn’t seem to care who he was, not really – or else he was very good at ignoring it. Either way, it wasn’t a deal breaker to him. He’d never asked Len to stop doing what he did, just to be smarter about it. So Len had upped his game and Barry had been satisfied. But Len had seen the hurt in his eyes at the way Iris had reacted to them being together. Had heard him whisper fearfully, don’t tell Joe. Len didn’t want to be a good guy, but he wanted to be good enough that he wasn’t Barry’s shameful little secret. Joining up with Rip might accomplish that. Or it might not. But he wouldn’t know until he tried.

Barry was reading a book on the far end of the couch when Len opened the front door. He didn’t look up from his page, just said, “Hey. Door was unlocked – like always – so I let myself in,” and went on reading, entirely comfortable in Len’s presence.

Len stood there in the entrance and just watched him for a while. So at ease. He was dressed comfortably, his shoes off. Curled up with one foot tucked under him, the book – one he’d brought with him from home – propped against his knee. In a way, Len wished he could come home to this sight every day.

Barry flipped pages at normal speed until he reached the end of the chapter, then stuck a bookmark in his spot and turned his full attention on Len. What he saw on Len’s face must have revealed something of what he was feeling internally at that moment because Barry’s brow scrunched up in worry and he asked, “Hey, are you okay?”
Len tried to summon the words to describe the night he’d had but all he seemed capable of coming up with was: “Something… strange happened.”

Barry twisted around and hung off the back of the couch to watch as Len shucked off his coat and gloves and went to put them in the bedroom. “What do you mean?”

Barry continued to shuffle around on the couch like a compass needle attuned to Len’s presence as he went to grab a beer. Finally he joined Barry on the couch, sinking into it with a sigh. “Mick and I were minding our own business –” Barry scoffed and Len raised an eyebrow at him, as though silently asking are you going to behave or do I have to stop? Barry waved him on. “Mick and I were minding our own business when we were kidnapped by a time traveller.”

Barry’s brow immediately pinched together in confusion. “You were… what?”

“Kidnapped by a time traveller,” Len enunciated. Barry’s face stayed slack, eyes flicking back and forth – putting together things Len couldn’t see. “He wants us to join him.”

“I suppose weirder things have happened. Why?” Barry seemed to immediately realise how his question might be interpreted and was quick to add, “Sorry. That sounded horrible. Of course I think you’re a good choice, but why did he pick you?”

Len shrugged. “Because he’s a time traveller. Because everything has already happened from his point of view.” Len petered off. After some thought and in a quieter voice, he confessed: “He said we were legends in his time.”

Barry shuffled forward until he could pull Len into a hug which he melted into reluctantly. He didn’t want to have to tell Barry the only reason he was even considering the offer was him. He didn’t want to expose that weakness. And it was a weakness, an admittance that something in him was lacking or not right. He was still feeling a little raw from Mick’s questioning and the doubts it brought up in his own mind. It would be much easier to keep the status quo, to be the villain. He’d gotten used to that role. Legend might not fit as well – or at all. And yet a part of Len couldn’t help wanting.

“So,” Barry said, “when do you have to decide by?”

Len stroked Barry’s hair, the gesture a comfort. “Sunday morning.”
Barry drew back, displeasure on his face. “That quickly?”

“I know.” Len smirked. “You’d think time would be a luxury to a time traveller.”

Barry leant back into him and played with the sleeve of Len’s sweater, avoiding eye contact. In a falsely casual voice, he asked, “What do you want to do?”

Len gave it some serious thought. There were reasons for and against, and most of the logical arguments were for the latter. Who would have thought Mick would be the voice of reason for once? He chuckled at the thought and Barry gave him a questioning look. Thinking about it too intently quickly made him feel like his brain was overloading though. It had been a long day – a long couple of days, if he was being honest – and there was only one thing he wanted. “I want to not think about it until tomorrow morning.”

Barry looked relieved, though he did well to hide it. “Bed then?”

Len nodded. Barry stood first and extended a hand to help pull him up. He waved it off. He might be old, but he wasn’t that old.

“How’s your head today?” Barry asked, leading the way to the bedroom.

“Good.” As an afterthought, Len added, “thanks.”

Barry nodded, as if to himself. “I’m glad.”

***

Len woke with the phantom touch of lips still on his shoulder. He hummed at the feeling as dream merged seamlessly into reality. Being wrapped up in the doona and with Barry’s excessive warmth blanketing his back was the perfect antidote to the freeze of a midwinter’s morning. His body felt
loose, the arms wrapped around his midsection and the legs tangling with his own his only anchor to
the waking world.

Len stroked fingers along the arm wrapped around his chest as Barry continued to mouth at the parts
of his shoulder and neck not covered by his shirt. Len swivelled his head around and Barry leant
forward to join him in a kiss, the angle all wrong, lips barely grazing, but he couldn’t care less - and
neither could Barry it seemed because neither of them moved to correct it. They gave up after a
while, Len with a smirk and Barry with a quiet laugh.

Len relaxed back into the feeling of the body behind him, of the slowly growing hardness against his
lower back. He was in a similar state and silently wished for Barry’s hand to drop lower, but when it
did, it was only to push up Len’s shirt, sneaking in underneath to spread warm fingers over Len’s
stomach.

“Is this okay?” Barry asked hesitantly, and Len could picture the earnest worry on his face without
seeing it. He tightened his grip around Barry’s other arm, still holding tight across his chest, hand
over his heart.

“Yeah.” Len hated how not himself his voice sounded, stripped of all his defences so early in the
morning where no one but Barry could judge him. Sex had been perfunctory for the longest time.
Get off quickly so he could go back to throwing all his attention at the current plan. Barely even
undressed. No one saw him. Things weren’t like that with Barry.

His hand rubbed ever widening circles, pausing so quickly on irregular patches of skin that Len
thought he was imagining it. That is, until Barry stumbled clumsily and paused over more prominent
scars. Like the one above Len’s hip where he’d been shanked on one of his jail stints or the bullet
wound from when a plan had gone off the rails or some hatching where an incompetent lackey with
ideas of promotion had come at him with a razor after he’d upset the Darbinyans.

Almost no trace of Lewis’s lessons remained on his skin. Besides his slip up with Lisa and the
broken bottle, Lewis had been skilled at keeping his children functional and – for the most part –
outwardly unblemished. He’d known enough about the system from his days on the force to know
what cops and social workers looked for as evidence. No marks on skin that clothes wouldn’t cover
that couldn’t be explained away by clumsiness, waywardness or sport. He only got messy when he
was drunk. Which became more and more common until Len was able to stand on his own two feet
and left. He got out of that house as soon as he could.

Leaving Lisa had been a hard choice though. Perhaps the hardest he’d ever made. It was dangerous
for her being with their father, but it would have been more dangerous having her with him. He’d
been young and stupid back then but smart enough to at least realise that. Being new and cocky, he’d
ended up in juvie and on the wrong side of the local crime families more than once in his teens and
twenties. He couldn’t protect himself and Lisa at the same time, and he had no right dragging a ten-year old into that dangerous position in the first place. Lewis was a brute, but he was a known risk. A decade had taught both Snart siblings how to navigate his moods and when humouring him was no longer an option, to just get the hell out of there. Lisa had been safer with him, as contrary as that sounded. Better the devil you know and all that crap.

When he’d established himself and Lisa was old enough that taking her out of Lewis’ house wouldn’t raise any questions, he’d gone back for her.

If Barry kept going and took off Len’s shirt, he’d find a burn on his arm from when Mick had gotten too overzealous on a job. That was the same job that had left the pyro half-burnt, bursting madly from the back of an ambulance and disappearing into the dark. Every time Mick fried someone with his gun, the smell of it would take Len back to that night. He’d only just managed not to throw up back then, knowing that he couldn’t risk leaving behind such obvious genetic evidence. No, he’d held it in until he’d gotten back to the safe house and then he’d retched into the toilet until there was nothing left to bring up. He’d waited there, the taste of bile in his throat and his inexpertly-bandaged arm smarting, expecting Mick to burst in at any moment even though he’d screamed at him that their partnership was over. His last image of Mick had been of him wreathed in fire, his clothes just starting to catch and the madness in his eyes burning out any sense of reality. He’d heard about the ambulance escape afterwards on the news but there’d been no trace of Mick around town. It wasn’t until over half a year later that someone had told him they’d heard Mick was doing petty jobs with nobodies.

When Len had sought him out with the heat gun – his own wordless apology – he’d been viscerally shocked at the extent of Mick’s scarring. No one had mentioned it was that bad. The sight of the painfully stretched skin, looking like melted plastic in places, had brought that particular smell of cooking human flesh straight back into his nostrils. It had taken all the willpower he had not to retch, let alone react.

Mick had covered up after their reunion, taken to wearing long sleeved shirts and that stolen CCFD jacket he loved almost constantly, and Len wondered if Mick had played him in his own special way.

Barry didn’t take off his shirt though, because Barry was too good-hearted and never pushed his boundaries. He left it on and his hand instead slipped inside Len’s sleep pants and cupped him through the fabric of his underwear. Len preferred this new development. He closed his eyes and his whole world narrowed down to Barry’s touch against his skin. For a while he just let him give, only helping by pulling down his pants with the hand that wasn’t still desperately clutching Barry’s arm around his chest to give Barry more room to work. He panted, head thrown back, as Barry coaxed him to full hardness, mouth moving hot and wet and insistent against his neck and jaw, aborted thrusts of his hips against Len’s backside.
Len’s free hand – having nothing better to do – fisted in the sheets. Heat and heaviness pooled between his legs and still there was that craving for more.

Len reached back blindly and got a hold of Barry’s hip. He pulled them flush, connected at every point, and revelled in the hardness he felt against his backside. Barry groaned into the back of his neck when Len gave an experimental roll of his hips.

“Is that good?”

Len smirked and trusted that Barry would pick up on the playfulness in his tone. “Could be better.” He plucked at the waistband of Barry’s underwear. “Take these off?”

Barry didn’t hesitate to obey. There was the briefest moment of separation, when cold air snuck in under the blanket and flooded the space Barry had been, a hint of static electricity crackling along the sheets, and then Barry was back in his spot behind Len, sans boxer briefs.

Len spat into his palm and then reached behind him to take Barry in hand. He stroked him a couple of times, Barry panting wetly against the back of his neck, just to get him at least a little bit slick. Len adjusted his position on the bed so he was a little higher up than Barry and then took him in hand again and guided him downwards. Barry soon took the hint and slid between his thighs with a grunt.

“Fuck, Len…”

Barry started a slow grind, the position not great for anything else, but it was exactly what Len wanted. He reached back blindly, cupped Barry’s neck, leant back panting onto Barry’s shoulder at the same time he pulled him forward. Closer, ever closer. Barry’s cock sliding between his thighs, nudging his balls, his hand on Len, working him quicker as his own thrusts hastened.

It wasn’t long before Barry was spending between his legs, his hand moving to Len’s hip to get purchase for the last few thrusts. A choked off groan and a frisson of energy announced his orgasm and then there was only ragged panting.

Len took himself in hand and finished himself off. He didn’t bother trying not to make mess. The sheets were a lost cause anyway.

Len waited for his breath and heartbeat to calm down for a second before righting his clothing and
rolling over to find Barry still heavy-lidded and cum-dumb. He was momentarily stunned by the amount of fondness that sight inspired in him. He leant forward for a kiss and felt Barry’s lips upturn into a smile under his.

“Were you awake long?”

Barry hummed a no. “It’s still really early.”

“Do you have work today?”

“Not unless I get called in.”

“Stay?” Len hoped that Barry could tell that he meant for more than just the morning. Len didn’t pretend to understand time travel so he couldn’t say with any certainty when they’d be back from their mission – if he chose to go. So right now, in that moment, it felt like a long goodbye. He intended to milk it for all it was worth, just in case.

Barry smiled with a nod and Len pulled him in. They continued to trade unhurried kisses for a while, feet tangling and feather-light touches, before Barry broke away with a grimace. “The bed’s gross.”

Len chased him for one last kiss. “I’ll change the sheets later.”

Barry indulged him a little longer but then slipped from the bed, completely unashamed in his nudity. Len sat up against the headboard, pulling the blankets across his lap as he watched Barry dig his phone out of his folded up pants on the dresser and check his messages. He texted back whoever had been trying to get in contact with him, his fingers moving at speeds Len couldn’t track, and then put the phone back where it had come from.

When Barry turned away and headed into the bathroom, Len got out of the bed and followed him.

It wasn’t big enough in the tiny shower for two so Barry leant against the bathroom sink, brushing his teeth, as Len stripped off completely and stepped under the water first. He didn’t take long, just enough to wash the sweat and cum off of him.
Barry’s eyes trailed over him as he stepped from the shower and snagged a towel. Soon his fingers – warm as always despite the chill in the room - were retracing the scars he’d mapped out by touch alone earlier in the morning. Len stayed as still as stone.

He was suddenly aware of every way in which his body was lacking. Not only the scars, but the general wear and tear that forty-odd years of living did to a body. His hair was greying prematurely, his flesh hanging a little looser on his bones despite his efforts to keep fit. Barry’s body, in comparison, was smooth, unblemished and youthful.

Despite that, Barry touched him reverently.

It was too much.

Len moved away and into the bedroom, leaving Barry's fingers grasping air, and dug some clothing out of the dresser.

He pulled together a breakfast from what he had in the kitchen while Barry took his shower. He laid it out on the coffee table for lack of a proper dining room and sat on the floor, propped up by the couch. Barry had never minded this arrangement before, Len couldn’t see him starting to care now.

When Barry joined him, he looked at the food like a man lost in the desert looking at an oasis. His plate was cleaned off in a matter of seconds. Len snorted and continued to eat his own breakfast at a slower pace.

The silence that followed heralded only one thing: the question. Barry mercifully waited until he’d finished eating and put the dishes in the sink before asking it. “Are you going to go?”

Len had been avoiding thinking about it as much as he could. Barry had proved to be a worthy distraction. “I don’t know…”

“I think you should.” Len looked up at him in surprise. “You could do so much good.”

“I’m not a hero, Barry.”
“But there is good in you. I know there is. You don’t have to be a criminal. That was your dad’s thing and you’re better than he was.”

And Len wanted to believe it so much. He almost hated Barry for making him want to be better. Not good, just better. Because it was all the speedster’s fault. Len hadn’t even realised it was happening for the longest time. But when Zoom had hurt Barry and Len had been completely cut off from him, he’d realised. He wanted to be accepted enough that he could have waltzed straight into the cortex at STAR Labs and gotten the answers he wanted. He wanted to meet Barry’s family and their immediate reaction not be suspicion and fear.

And here he was, being offered all that and more.

Still…

“What about Zoom?”

Barry seemed to shrink into himself. “I’m not going to lie and say I’m not scared of him. I’m terrified. But we’ll figure something out. Hartley will help us if we ask.” Len could see that Barry was tempted to mention that Lisa would too, but realised that mentioning putting Len’s sister into harm’s way would do more for the reasons to stay rather than go. “Besides, you’re going to be time travelling. If we need you, you can be there. Anytime, anywhere.”

“True.”

Silence reigned again, suggesting that at any moment torrid confessions of repressed emotions would overflow and spill forth.

They never came though.

“I suppose that settles it. I’m going.”

“Okay.”
Len paced in the kitchenette with phone in hand. Barry watched him from the couch, pretending to read. He’d been growing more agitated as the hours of the morning melted into midday.

It was one of those flip phones, the kind Barry hadn’t seen since his high school years. Cheap-looking and, Barry guessed, disposable. He’d certainly never seen Len use it before. A burner phone.

Finally he opened it, stabbed at the buttons and raised it to his ear.


And just like that, Len’s future was officially set in motion. In less than 24 hours, he’d be boarding a time ship and flying off to who knows when.

Len hung up and stared down at the phone. When he finally looked up, Barry quickly went back to pretending to read. He continued to pretend as Len came and sat beside him, knees knocking together in the single point of comfort Len allowed himself to ask for.

They spent the day lazily, not really doing much of anything except avoiding talking about Len’s imminent departure. Len was better at it than Barry. He could feel the speedster practically vibrating with the need to say something and make a big scene of it like Hollywood had tried to teach them was the proper way to express emotions. That wasn’t the way Len worked. So when it seemed like Barry was about to drag him kicking and screaming into a scene from a Lifetime movie, he’d distract.

“What clubs were you in at school?”

Barry knew what he was doing. It was obvious from the split-second of disappointment that flashed across his face before he schooled his expression into something more neutral. But then he was
telling stories from his high school days where Iris’ name came up enough that – if he was a jealous man – Len would be slightly miffed. Instead it upset him for different reasons.

It reminded him of why he was running off on a foolish glory mission the next morning instead of staying where he was and continuing to do the things he’d always done. Not for the first time, he wished he didn’t care as much. It had been easier before.

***

They moved back into bed halfway through the afternoon after Len had stripped and remade it while Barry cobbled together a late lunch from what was available in the fridge and cupboards. Leaving the apartment for supplies was never even considered as an option.

They closed the blinds and shut the door, turned off the ceiling light in favour of a dull lamp. Pulled the blankets and doona tight around them, left all communication devices back in the living room. Len was lulled into restful sleep with Barry curled around him and woke again once the sun had gone down outside. He ran fingers through Barry’s thick hair, smoothing it back from his face, twirling it around his pointer. Barry hummed contentedly and snuggled further into Len’s body.

Len twisted enough so that he could see the bedside clock. 8:36 the glaring red numbers told him. Less than 12 hours left.

He watched over Barry as he stubbornly tried to cling to sleep, burrowing his head between the pillow and Len’s shoulder to block out the light of the lamp. The very fact of Len being awake seemed to rouse him in turn though, and he blinked owlishly as in a croaky, sleep-roughened voice he asked, “Are you sure you wanna go?”

Len smirked. “You were the one telling me I should.”

“It made more sense this morning,” said Barry with a shrug.

Len had every intention of going through with it after receiving Barry’s blessing earlier. Barry
thought so highly of Len that he didn’t want to betray his expectations now. Len knew the current hesitation was just pre-departure nerves. Barry had gotten used to having Len around almost all of the time and this would just be a big change. Or so Len supposed. For all he knew, they might leave one second and return the next. The mechanics of time travel were beyond him. In this moment, as far as Barry was concerned though, it must feel like he was leaving for good. Without understanding how this trip through time worked, it was hard to assuage those fears. So he went another way. “I’ll go. And if I don’t like it or if – and let’s face it, this is more likely – they get sick of me and Mick, they can just drop us back 5 minutes after they picked us up. No harm, no foul.”

“But what if something happens to you?” Barry insisted. “I won’t know. I won’t be able to help.”

“Barry, I’ll be fine. I outsmarted Savage once, I can do it again.”

“Make sure you get him this time. Do what needs to be done.”

Len smirked. “Did you just give me permission to get all murder-y?” he asked teasingly.

Len expected a flustered refutation. What he got was anything but: “If that’s what it takes for you to win and get back here alive...”

Barry was dead serious and Len wasn’t sure how he felt about that. Surprised, certainly. Barry knew Len had murdered people, but he had never condoned it before. Even under the threat of exposing his secret identity, Barry had refused to let Len continue operating the way he had been unless he upped his game and did it without a body count. Since then Len had only killed the monster the army had unleashed on them and Savage. The monster had been a no-brainer. So inhuman and unrelenting that it seemed more like euthanising a rabid dog than ending a human life. As far as Savage went, Barry had rationalised his death after the fact as the only viable option they had to neutralise him. Having seen him destroy the twin cities in another timeline probably helped to curb any sympathy he might have had for the man. Giving Len permission to kill him a second time maybe wasn’t so much of a stretch after all.

Still, Len liked being able to hold Barry and the Flash up on a pedestal above the rest of them. Friends might betray you, family could hurt you, and half the police were as dirty as his own father had been, but Barry Allen was a pinnacle of goodness and all that was right with the world. Ruthlessness didn’t suit him.

But then again, sometimes, under insurmountable odds, there was no other choice.
“Then promise me the same thing. Don’t let Zoom beat you. Whatever it takes.”

“I won’t.”

As the bedside clock counted up to midnight, Barry got more and more jittery until Len was just about ready to kick him out of the bed so he could get some rest before his departure the next morning. Instead he clasped Barry’s hands firmly between his own to stop their fidgeting.

Len looked Barry straight in the eye and asked, “What’s wrong?”

“Don’t go.”

Len had thought they’d put those worries to rest earlier. “Barry…”

“I’ve just got a really bad feeling about it. I was wrong before.”

A sick feeling settled in Len’s gut. “I have to go. It’s going to be fine. Like the good old captain said, we’re going to be legends.”

“I…” Barry faltered, looking around desperately. “I’ll come with you!”

“Barry…”

“I can help.”

Barry climbed on top of him and kissed him desperately and relentlessly, like if he could stop Len talking, he would get his way. Len let him for a little while but then turned his head to the side and pushed him back gently.

“Barry, you’ve got your own problems. You can’t leave.”
Len could tell from the crushed look on Barry’s face that he knew that but was almost willing to throw all his responsibilities to the wind to follow after Len. Len couldn’t allow that. Central City needed its hero and apparently the time stream needed him. It felt like a final goodbye now, but when all was said and done, they’d be reunited.

Seeing that far into the future was becoming increasingly hard at the moment though. Len still had his own doubts about how effective this little mission would be, but he was determined to see it through.

So he reversed their positions and peppered Barry’s face with the gentlest of kisses. He only moved to Barry’s lips when he seemed to have calmed down enough to match Len’s tenderness. Satisfied with this small victory, he ceded control and let Barry do what he needed to do.

There was nothing slow or gentle this time. They rutted together like animals, Barry’s blunt nails digging into his hips and his teeth in Len’s neck. Frantic, like trying to pull back time or stop the outside world from leaking back in.

Len was reduced to a litany of Barry’s name, holding him close, impossibly close, breathing the same air, heated skin sliding together.

Barry cupping his face, whispering, “Len, I love you. I love you.”

Not having the courage or the words to give back.

***

Barry woke up in the night, whispers of crackling blue and red lightning chasing him out of sleep.

Len’s left arm was under his head, his right was thrown over Barry in an embrace, keeping him anchored.

He wanted more than anything to wake Len up.
It was irrational. He knew it was. But he couldn’t help feeling it. A sense of impending doom. Like his chest was too tight for his heart and lungs, for all of his emotions. Like Len would walk out and everything would go wrong.

Zoom was too fast.

He’d win.

He’d kill everyone Barry cared about.

These were his last moments with Len and they were wasting them on sleep. His breath quickened as his chest seemed to constrict. Tingling in his fingers. Thoughts racing. Wetness under his cheek and salt in his mouth.

Len’s arms wrapped around him and he made gentle shushing noises into the crown of Barry’s head as he rocked him gently. Eventually his breathing evened out and the tears dried to salty tracks on his cheeks.

“Stop thinking,” Len murmured sleepily, kissing him on the forehead. “Just sleep.”

***

The bed shifting woke Barry up the second time.

He mumbled something incoherent, maybe it was what’s going on? or maybe it was please don’t leave. He was still hazy with sleep and his limbs felt dull, like the nerves between his brain and the rest of his body had been stretched out a hundredfold and the signals running between them retarded. He attempted to sit up but only made it about halfway.

There was a voice, talking in whispered fragments, leaving for a while and check up on him and the soft swish of footsteps on the carpet.
The bed dipped, close this time, and then Len’s hands were tangled in his hair, drawing his slumping face upwards.

“I have to go.”

Barry managed a mumbled, “don’t,” but he was so wrung out he couldn’t do much more than that.

“Stay here whenever you want. I’ll be back before you even notice I’m gone.”

Barry blinked and he was back to lying down. As Len’s figure retreated out the bedroom door, duffel bag slung over one shoulder and cold gun holstered to his leg, he couldn’t fight the exhaustion dragging him back down into the depths of sleep.

***

Mick gave Len a look as he grit his teeth and just managed to not slam the front door in frustration. It might wake Barry, he reasoned, but goddammit, he’d sure like to punch something right now.

“Come on,” he barked a little too angrily at Mick. His partner didn’t complain and he didn’t apologise. Good old Mick. Loyal to a fault.

When they got down to the car – a muscle car, could’ve been one of the ones Mick had been fixing up in his spare time or just one he’d taken a liking to and stolen – Mick slid into the driver’s seat. Len paused a second outside the passenger door and then slammed his fist against the car’s body. Pain spiked up his arm and he hissed.

“Hey!” Mick growled, leaning across the console and pointing a finger at him in warning. “You chose this. Don’t take it out on my car.”

Len held his hands up in a placating manner, hurt pulsing out from his right. “Apologies.”
Mick grumbled some more as Len opened the door and slid into his seat. Mick revved the engine, throaty in a way cars weren’t built to be anymore. Not as inconspicuous as the minivan, but then again, they weren’t going for stealth this morning.

They peeled away from the sidewalk with a squeal and headed towards the Keystone industrial park where Rip had told them all to gather.
Len already regretted agreeing to join up with this team of do-gooders.

He hadn’t thought much of the hawk-people the first time he’d been convinced to help them fight Vandal Savage and now, without Barry and Central City’s impending doom as added motivation, he was feeling even less inclined to care if the birds bit it. Professor Stein and Jax, he could handle. He might even feel a bit of fondness for the new kid. Raymond’s positive attitude was grating. Rip was easily ignorable. Thank god for Mick. But Sara…

Sara was something else and he wasn’t sure if that was a good thing or a bad thing yet.

Tight body, streamlined for violence. All coiled muscles like a tiger. Contrasted against her gorgeous face, splash of freckles crying of an innocence she no longer possessed.

As soon as he saw the way she held herself, he knew Sara was dangerous.

“‘You’re being awfully quiet,’” she said as the rest of their little team traipsed off to do whatever it was they were going to do. Len couldn’t find it in himself to care at the moment. Jax hung back from the three of them, partly like he was scared of them, partly like he wouldn’t mind joining up with the bad kids for a thrill, but mostly just overwhelmed at having been roofied and forced into a time travelling adventure against his will. Len flicked his eyes over to Sara briefly when she addressed him, his body unmoving, but he quickly went back to sizing up the technology around them.

Mick made a dismissive noise that drew Sara’s attention away from Len. “Don’t worry ‘bout him. He’s just pissy he had to leave his boy toy behind.”

Sara couldn’t have smiled any wider if she’d tried. With a quirked eyebrow and a voice fairly dripping with glee, she questioned, “‘Boy toy?’”

Any other man would have withered under the glare Len levelled at Mick but his friend had had 25
odd years to build up an immunity. “Shut it, Mick.”

“No, go on.” Sara leant forward, rubbing her hands together. “This sounds like a story worth hearing.”

“Boy toy? So, wait, you’re…” Jax’s brain caught up to his mouth halfway through that sentence and thankfully reigned it in. “I mean, that’s cool, man. Yeah.”

Len turned his glare back on Sara. “There’s nothing to tell.”

She looked at him then, really looked, and he felt as if he was trapped there, being examined like a butterfly pinned under glass in a museum. It was a full body release when she glanced away. “I think I’m not the only one on this ship who could really use a drink. I say we go get weird in the ‘70s.”

Len sighed in relief. “Excellent idea.”

***

Barry woke up and he was alone.

Of course he was.

He pulled the doona fully over to his side of the bed and cocooned himself in it. It wasn’t what he wanted, no substitute for human warmth and arms holding him tight, but it was all he was going to get. It took everything he had to will himself not to cry.

He stayed where he was until well after midday and even then only got up to relieve himself. Logically he knew he should get up, get moving, try and keep his mind occupied. All those coping mechanisms he’d been taught. But in his mind he reasoned that he had kept himself from crying and so he should be allowed this small indulgence.

He rung up the precinct and told them he’d be taking sick leave for the next few days.
His phone rang a couple of times but he ignored it.

He half expected Len to walk back in at any moment. No matter how long the mission took, with a time machine they could return to any point they wished to. He counted off in his head the time it would take Len and Mick to drive out to the Keystone industrial estate, the time for a quick meet and greet and then take off. Any time after that was a possibility for their return.

As the minutes and hours melted away, it became more and more apparent that the time ship Len was on wasn’t coming straight back. Which begged the question: when would it return?

He had no idea and he had no way of finding out. He might be waiting the rest of his life for a ship that had been blow out of the sky years after his death.

That was the worst part of it. If Len never returned, there would be no way for him to know what had happened for certain. He could live for decades to come and always be wondering if Len was still travelling through time or had been stranded at some point in the future or was simply dead. He didn’t think he could live like that. It had only been half a day and he was already feeling overwhelmed.

So he lay in Len’s bed, a creeping dread smothering him like a weight, leaving him paralysed, drifting off into a doze but never really sleeping.

Hartley came by the next day. Maybe he picked the lock or maybe Len just hadn’t locked the door in the first place. He was always leaving it unlocked. Barry bitched at him every time he found it that way and Len would make all the proper, contrite answers and then not change his habits one iota. It didn’t really matter how Hartley got in. Either way, he sat down on the ground, leant back against the bed and was just a companionable presence.

After a few hours, once the light trickling in between the curtain and window shade has grown wan, Hartley got up and said, “Come on. I’ll call Lisa and we’ll have dinner.”

Barry decided to have a shower before she arrived. He was a little shaky once he got to his feet. It had been longer than he would normally go without eating and he had to lean against the shower’s wall as the water cascaded down on him to steady himself. The hollowness of his stomach bordered on aching. He felt better afterwards though, like he’d washed a husk of sadness and tiredness off of him. There was a spare set of his clothes folded up neatly in Len’s wardrobe and he changed into them quickly when he heard the soft murmur of conversation coming from the living room. He hesitated a moment at the door but then went back and grabbed one of Len’s coats to wear over everything.
The smell of Chinese reached him before he was even out of the bedroom. His mouth watered instantly, almost painfully. The reality of his hunger which he’d tried to ignore until now hit him straight in the stomach like a physical punch at the scent.

Lisa and Hartley stopped talking as soon as they heard the sound of the bedroom door opening and their eyes were on him as he stepped through into the living room. Lisa’s face seemed to melt at the sight of him and the first thing she said was: “my brother’s an idiot.” She was standing in the entrance still, her hands weighed down with plastic bags full of takeout. “I didn’t know what you’d feel like so I got a bit of everything.”

Barry shook his head as he approached them. “He’s not an idiot. I told him to go.” Lisa started unpacking the bags onto the small counter of the kitchenette. “He’s going to save the world.” She hummed, whether in agreement or mollification Barry couldn’t tell. He forged on. “There’s good in him,” he said, looking from Lisa to Hartley, willing them to see things the way he saw them, “even if he doesn’t believe it.”

“No,” Lisa disagreed, slamming a container of fried rice onto the counter harder than necessary, “he’s a stupid jerk face.”

And that made Barry break down crying.

It was so stupid that that was the straw that broke the camel’s back. Lisa was just insulting Len like she always did in her fond way but the silence that followed only made the lack of Len’s usual retort seem even more obvious. He’d normally call her a train wreck or flip her hair but now there was nothing.

Len was gone and Barry didn’t know where he was or when he’d be back. If he’d be back.

Lisa pulled him into a hug and rubbed soothing circles across his back, cooing little nothings at him the whole time until the tears stopped and he got his breathing back under control.

“He’s gonna be alright, Barry,” she said. “He’ll go and he’ll kick Savage’s ass again and then he’ll come home a hero.”

“I don’t want him to be a hero,” he sobbed. “I just want him here.”
She pulled back, taking hold of his hands to keep contact between them, and smiled sadly. “I know. I do too.”

Eventually he was too tired and wrung out to cry anymore so they reheated the Chinese and ate. Barry knew from his exhaustion and raging emotions that he needed to fill up and then get some proper sleep but when he actually raised the food to his mouth, he couldn’t think of anything less he wanted to do than eat. The chopsticks hovered in front of his lips and it took so much effort to open his mouth, chew it up and swallow. But he knew he had to do it, so he did. Then he did it again. And again. Until the carton in front of him was empty and he felt queasy full.

When they were done eating, Lisa went to steal the doona off Len’s bed and Hartley led Barry to the couch. They sandwiched him between them and draped the bedding over all three pairs of legs. The TV was turned on to nothing in particular. Lisa wrapped her arms around one of Barry’s and rested her head on his shoulder. Hartley, on the other hand, leant back against the armrest, drawing his knees up to his chin and wriggling his feet under Barry’s thighs.

“So who’s in charge of the Rogues now?” asked Barry.

“That would be me,” answered Lisa, smiling up at him. “I’m not going to go easy on you either.”

That warmed Barry. “I wouldn’t expect anything less.”

“Just you watch,” she said with a smirk, “Len has nothing on me and Hartley. We’ll have the key to the city within the week.”

Hartley snorted. “The key to the city is hardly a challenge. Even Barry has one of those. What about… McCulloch’s beanie?”

“Oh, that would be tricky. Especially if he just heard us.”

Hartley made a show of thinking. “Then, how about Trickster’s air walk shoes?”

“I’ve always wanted a pair of those,” said Lisa contemplatively.
“Captain Singh’s desk plate.”

They turned to Barry with twin looks of delight. “Is that a challenge, Barry?” Lisa asked.

“If it keeps you from getting up to actual mischief, yeah.”

Barry almost regretted mentioning it when he caught sight of the twinkle in Hartley’s eyes.

“Okay, challenge accepted.”

That allowed them to segue into some more light hearted topics. They talked weather, current events and celebrity gossip.

“Got any more of that super alcohol?” Barry asked out of nowhere. Lisa and Hartley shared a concerned look. He appreciated their worry, but they didn’t have to handle him with kid gloves. “I’m not going to go off on a bender,” he assured them. “Just… I want to feel normal for once. My boyfriend’s just left me to go on time travelling adventures, I think I’m allowed to get drunk like an ordinary person.”

They both looked slightly mollified by his explanation but Hartley’s face quickly merged into an apologetic expression. “You drank all I had. I haven’t seen my contact since.”

Barry took it well. He really did wish he could go back to before he’d been hit by lightning, back when he could still get drunk to celebrate or to grieve. Not that he’d been a big drinker. He was too much of a stickler for the rules during college and only really had Iris to go out on the town with after graduating. But the fact that he couldn’t do it anymore made it more attractive now.

After a few hours, Lisa untwined herself from Barry and explained she had to leave to deal with some business of Len’s. Hartley offered to join her but she waved him off. She told Barry to take care of himself and then was out the door.

“Want some company tonight?” asked Hartley. “No funny business, promise.”
Barry thought about it. It had been nice having the two of them there. It made the apartment feel not quite so empty. “Yeah.”

They got ready for bed in silence, Barry fetching Hartley some clothing he could use to sleep in and a spare toothbrush from under the sink.

Barry took Len’s side of the bed and motioned for Hartley to take his. Barry watched in amusement as Hartley lay himself on his side, facing Barry but on top of the doona.

“You can get under the blankets, you know.”

“No thanks.” There was a playfulness to his voice. “I appreciate keeping all my limbs.”

Barry laughed. “You know he’s not like that.”

“I know.” Hartley wriggled around under he was under the blankets, still keeping a respectable distance between them. “They’re funny people, the Snarts. Like cats. They go off to be alone to lick their wounds and suffer.”

And die. Barry quashed the thought. Hartley was right though. Len wasn’t emotionally expressive even though he was skilled at reading other’s emotions. Perhaps the two things weren’t so contradictory.

“How are you doing?”

Barry thought about it. Unlike Len, he could talk about these things. “My brain…” He searched for the right word and settled on: “buzzes. I know it must seem like I’m always going a hundred miles an hour to you anyway, but usually I can stop when I want. Sometimes I can’t... when it gets bad.” He paused before admitting, “I can’t now. Thoughts just keep buzzing and buzzing and buzzing and I want to sleep but I can’t. Instead I’m awake at 3am, pacing holes in the carpet with my mind humming its way out of my skull. I’m so tired all the time. I just want to sleep.”

Hartley reached into the no man’s land between them, searching out Barry’s hand. Barry clutched it gratefully. “What can I do to help?”
Barry was suddenly overwhelmed by a sense of absolute powerlessness. There was nothing Hartley could do for him. There was barely anything he could do for himself. He didn’t want to say it so bluntly though. Some things were harder to admit aloud. “I don’t know. Nothing probably. Just stay with me tonight.”

Hartley’s hand squeezed his tighter momentarily. “I can do that.”

“Thanks, Hart.”

“My pleasure, Barry.”

***

They buried Carter in 1975 and then headed back to the ship.

Rip allowed them a small reprieve after the epic omnishambles that had been their first attempt at defeating Savage. He’d plotted a course for 1986 to intercept another Savage sighting but had asked Gideon to linger in the temporal zone until the team was rested up again.

None of them had even unpacked yet and already a team member was dead. They all seemed to come independently to the conclusion that sleep wouldn’t come easily and one by one they congregated in the bridge, bringing snacks and alcohol from the ship’s mess with them.

Len and Mick ambled in together with a bottle of something potent looking they’d dug up on the sly in Rip’s quarters. They had no idea what it was, couldn’t read the label, but surely their dear captain wouldn’t drink anything but the best. They took their seats on the outermost part of the semicircle and passed the bottle between them as they waited for the last stragglers to gather.

Sara was the second last to arrive, her entrance supernaturally quiet. She’d changed out of the leather corset contraption into something more relaxed looking. Len couldn’t help the welling of pleasure he felt when she bypassed her chair and the rest of the do-gooders and came to sit on the floor by him and Mick. She made herself comfortable against the side of his chair after he gave her enquiring look a nod. She didn’t touch him at any point, but she was close enough that he could feel the warmth of her even through his jacket.
“Thanks,” she said with a lopsided smile as Len handed their bottle down to her.

When Kendra finally arrived, they started talking as a group about the things they had seen since leaving Central City. With the adrenaline worn off, it all seemed a little unreal. Len had thought he’d led an interesting life up until that point, but it had been nothing compared to what had happened since kissing Barry goodbye and coming on board this time ship.

That discussion eventually morphed into a game of six degrees of separation as they tried to figure out who knew who/how (and at the same time awkwardly tiptoeing around the secret identities of those not present). Rip was the only one separated entirely from their mutual circles of super heroics (and super villainy).

The deeper they got into their cups, the more candid they became.

Sara claimed to have been there right from the beginning. “I was on the Queen’s Gambit with Ollie when it went down,” she said with a proud smile that seemed to be wholly incongruous to a statement like that. “That was the start of everything.”

“Ollie?” Mick grunted beside Len.

“Oliver Queen,” Len hazarded and Sarah graced him with a nod of affirmation. He remembered hearing about the Queen’s patriarch and wayward son disappearing in the middle of the Pacific Ocean years back and the latter’s recent miraculous return. He didn’t recall a girl – and surely she must have only been a girl back then no matter how much the ensuing years had aged and toughened her up – on board getting quite as much media attention. Outside of the trashy gossip mags who latched onto the scandal, that is.

“And what’s that pretty boy millionaire got to do with anything?” Mick asked.

Len had had his suspicions. He liked to keep tabs on individuals who were a little too proactive about taking the law into their own hands and it didn’t take a genius to put those puzzle pieces together. The Queen’s lost son returns after surviving 5 years on a remote island and the same week a vigilant shows up and starts hunting down Star City’s criminals? The only amazing thing was that more people hadn’t figured it out too.

Meeting him during their last battle against Savage had only helped to confirm his suspicions.
The white hats on the team shared a look between them. A *do we out the Green Arrow?* look. An *I don’t think we can trust these two criminals with this* look. It got Len’s hackles up. Damn them all.

As flippantly as he could, Len replied, “Oliver Queen is the Green Arrow. Remember?” His position allowed him to make a face at Mick to play along that would go unnoticed by most of the team.

Mick cooperated like a pro. “Oh, yeah. Must’ve slipped my mind.”

The uneasy look the Star City duo were sharing made it all worth it. *Ollie* must like his secrecy.

There was some talk about bad guys and goings on in Star City that Len had no idea about. Mick neither from the look of the deep furrow in his brow. Len couldn’t have cared less anyway. He zoned them out for a while until something the good professor said caught his interest again.

“If Mr Queen started it all then I suppose we could consider Mr Allen the beginning of the second wave, as it were.”

“Who the hell’s Allen?!” Mick was on a role tonight and obviously getting more riled up the more he drank and the less he understood things. Len wasn’t about to touch that one with a ten foot pole though. He’d made a promise once upon a time and he wasn’t about to break it.

Raymond – ever the eager-to-please puppy – spoke before his prodigious brain and common sense could catch up to his mouth. “Barry Allen, the Flash!” The praise-me smile brightening his face only lasted a moment before dropping as he timidly asked, “You didn’t know?”


Len could see the cogs ticking away in Mick’s head. “Barry’s the Flash?” He turned to Len. “The kid you’re –“

“Mick!” The glare Len aimed his way shut Mick up quick smart.

Raymond looked like a kicked puppy.
It wrapped up quickly after that. Rip informed them they had 10 hours to rest before they’d need to reassemble in the bridge, ready for the time jump to 1986. Len lingered as everyone else wandered back to their quarters, looking out into the nauseous green of the time stream.

Time travel was a funny thing. Seemed like some things were just meant to happen.

He’d stolen the jump ship and tried to change his past but in the end it had all been for nothing. It all happened exactly as it had before. He hadn’t spared Lisa and himself any pain and he hadn’t made himself a better man.

Maybe this whole trip was a waste of time.

He pushed himself up from his seat with a weary groan and headed for his quarters before those thoughts get a hold of his brain.

Sara was lounging against the wall of the corridor when Len exited the bridge. She fell into step beside him as he made his way back to his room. Perhaps he was meant to be surprised, but he just couldn’t muster the energy for it.

“So it seems we have something else in common,” she said, interrupting the eerie hum of the Waverider’s mechanics.

He turned his head to look her way, brow raised. “Besides a particular skill for killing people and sarcastic humour?”

“Don’t forget our penchant for costumed theatrics.” He knew there was a reason Sara was his favourite new team member.

“Go on.”

“It seems we’re both suckers for people we shouldn’t be.”
As intriguing as that comment was, Len wasn’t in the mood to talk about it. 2016 was only a week and forty years back and leaving Barry behind still weighed heavily on his mind. Sara seemed like a good kid though, so he didn’t chew her out like he might have if Raymond or Jax had poked at the same open sores.

“And look where it got us.” Len gestured around them at the cramped corridor.

Sara smiled wryly. “That’s true. But I’m a cup half full kinda girl. I like to think it’s all going to turn out for the best.”

“Must be nice.” Len was much more practical. The glass was as full as it was; no more, no less. High hopes, low expectations.

“Well, it took dying to make me realise it, so maybe not so nice.” Len didn’t understand how she could be so blasé when talking about her death, but she shrugged it off like it wasn’t any more momentous than breaking a nail. “If you want to talk, I’ll be around. I won’t judge. I’m not the straightest ruler in the drawer either.” She shrugged. “Or we could just get drunk again and start a bar fight. Your call. I’m good either way.”

She swung around on her heel and without a backwards glance, continued down the corridor, her footsteps light and her movements lithe.

He hadn’t been in his room more than a few minutes before the doors slid open and Mick walked in.

Len had laid down on his bed when he got back and he didn’t do more than turn his head towards the door when Mick entered. “You could have knocked.”

“You haven’t got anything I haven’t seen before,” Mick said in his usual gruff way.

“True,” Len conceded.

“So your boy toy’s the Flash.”

So they were having that conversation.
“I half-thought you’d already figured it out.” And that was true. The things Mick said about Barry and the Flash were either deliberately teasing or obliviously apt. Len had never quite figured out which it was.


That was true too. Barry and he might have had an arrangement, but with the way he’d started to become friendly with the Rogues, Len highly doubted he’d care too much if they’d told Mick his secret identity. Still… “I know. But I promised him I wouldn’t and I didn’t think it’d make any difference anyway.”

“Doesn’t. I still get to shoot at him, right?”

Len chuckled. “Yeah.”

Mick nodded happily and that was that.

***

Barry was… better.

He wouldn’t say good because that would be an outright lie. No, he was coping. He felt a little less bone-weary but he wasn’t able to brush off the stress of dealing with Zoom and Len’s absence easily. To be honest, he’d thrown himself into the former to take his mind off the latter.

So now they were on a different Earth. They’d found Harry and with his help they’d be able to locate Zoom and Caitlin.

After they locked up his doppelganger, Barry and Cisco were fleshing out the plan while Harry checked up on a Zoom sighting for them. “And so if we —”

Barry’s heart caught in his throat.
He swung around to look at the television screen but there was no image accompanying the news story. He hadn’t heard wrong though. He knew he hadn’t.

There was a Len on Earth-2 and he was the mayor. His Len would laugh at that.

Cisco followed his gaze to the TV and saw what had pulled him up mid-sentence. The chyron was still plastered across the bottom of the screen. *Zoom threat remains. Mayor Snart extends curfew.*

“Dude…”

“Don’t look at me like that.”

“I know what you’re thinking. It’s not a good idea.”

“Come on,” Barry wheedled. “Wouldn’t you want to see a law-abiding, morally upright Leonard Snart?”

Cisco rolled his eyes at him. “Yeah, of course I would. It sounds hilarious. But face it, laughing about it’s not the reason you wanna go find him.”

“But –”

Cisco cut him off.

“He won’t be who you want him to be.”

Barry knew that. On this Earth he was happily married to Iris so there was definitely nothing going on between him and Len. Maybe they knew each other, maybe they might even be friends, but it wouldn’t be what he and his Len had.
It was still tempting to go just to see him. As the weeks went by, Len’s return seemed less and less probable. He would give anything to see him again. Even if it wasn’t really him.

The looks of disapproval and sympathy warring on Cisco’s face brought back a sense of reality to the situation though. Cisco was thinking clearly, much more clearly than himself. They were here for a reason and it wasn’t for Barry to moon over an alternate version of Len.

“Yeah, you’re right.”

What excitement he’d felt at being on a different Earth soured. This world where he was happily married to Iris, and Len was a stranger, wasn’t the world he wanted to be on. It was a dissonant vision of something he had wanted two years ago but which now seemed so empty.

He wanted to get this over with and go home.

He wanted things back the way they’d been.

***

Mick settled in quickly despite him constantly reminding Len that he was only there because of him. Between their first encounter with Savage and their next mission, he had Gideon fabricate him everything he needed to turn his quarters into a facsimile of his spaces back in Central, right down to the half-naked lady on a calendar several years out of date. The rest of their ragtag team marvelled at his ability to adapt to their new life so quickly. They didn’t realise that when you’d bounced around foster homes, juvie, safe houses and gaols for most of your life, you got used to adapting quickly to whatever life threw at you. They followed his trend eventually though; one by one making their private spaces feel as much like home as they could when they realised they’d be using them for a while.

Len alone persevered in pretending their mission would be over with quickly. He had hung his coats and put the rest of his clothing in drawers but otherwise the room remained unchanged from when he first took possession of it. If it weren’t for the convenience the cabin’s storage afforded, his clothing would still be shoved into his duffel bag, ready to go at a moment’s notice.
It wasn’t just the ship either. He was being frosty with the crew too. Sara had grown on him despite his best efforts to the contrary but he’d sell the rest of them out for a big score and not think twice about it. They repaid his churlishness in kind. Ray – big, dumb, tail-wagging Labrador Ray – tried his best at first but soon gave up on trying to be friends with Len. Mick liked him well enough though and was somehow charmed by his naivety in a way Len just didn’t understand. Had even dragged him out of that gulag in Moscow.

Len, on the other hand, did what was required of him and no more.

So he spent a lot of his time on the Waverider in his Spartan quarters or in Mick’s busy space, avoiding the rest of them. Sometimes Mick and Sara were there too and they’d have a drink and play some cards and it wasn’t bad but it wasn’t where he really wanted to be. Something was missing in his life in a way it never had been before.

He couldn’t settle. Legs and fingers restless, a creeping headache worrying him most days. He was short-tempered, irritable.

If he’d had Savage in front of him, he would have ripped him apart with his bare hands and teeth if it meant he could get back to Central City tomorrow.

Instead, he floated through time chasing an enemy who always seemed to be two steps ahead of them.

For the first time in his life, he yearned for something like home.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading, kudosing and commenting. I hope you're enjoying the story.

I've got it mapped out and there's roughly 5 more chapters of this part 2 and 8 in part 3. Knowing basically what's happening in each chapter and how it's ending, I hope I can get through it a lot quicker than I have been. The best laid plans of mice and men, though...

I can be found on tumblr.
For two weeks, Barry’s head swivelled every time he heard a door open.

He became accustomed to listening for the rattle of doorknobs, the creak of the old hinges at the station, the gentle swish of automatic doors.

Every time, his heart beat ratcheted up a notch and his breath caught in his throat. He’d turn, telling himself not to get his hopes up, but not being able to help himself. And every single time, his heart went crashing down into his stomach in disappointment when it was a stranger. The letdown was deeper each time.

After two months, he stopped hoping because hoping hurt too much.

But like Pavlov’s dog, he still couldn’t help turning at the sound of a door opening.

***

2046 was a mess.

Even though Rip kept explaining that this was only a possible outcome for the future, it didn’t stop the roiling pit of anxiety in Len’s stomach. Because how could it have gotten this bad if Barry was still around? Green Arrow might be incompetent, but not Barry. He would have never let this happen. So in this future, Barry was dead. That was the only logical conclusion Len could come to.

A world without the Flash – without wonder, without sport – would hardly be worth living in.

It didn’t seem like Mick agreed with him though. His partner in crime had knocked out some two-bit gang leader, stolen his coat, his women and his henchmen, and imagined himself king of this
dystopian wasteland. He was having the time of his life in 2046.

2046. Barry was born in 1989 so that would make him 57. Older than even Len was now. Len would be… well, he wasn’t about to kid himself. Len would probably be dead. 74 seemed like an unreachable goal. In his line of work it was a minor miracle he’d made it as far as he had already. Hoping for another 30 years would be pushing his luck.

No one seemed to recognise him or Mick in this timeline either, which further confirmed that theory. Not that he was so egotistical as to believe that he’d go down in history as… what? The Flash’s main foe? A time travelling legend, in spite of Rip’s lie? No. But among his type of people – thieves, killers – maybe his name would have meant something.

Maybe whatever had killed Barry had killed him too.

Maybe that was for the best.

And all the more reason to get out of there.

After what felt like hours of watching Mick lord it over all his new lackeys, Len was regretting leading them out of that rusty old school bus they’d been told to hold tight in. A quick bank robbery had seemed like a good way to let off some steam without causing any great harm to their overall mission. Even being held up by thugs without two brain cells to rub together had been amusingly ironic at first, and it was nice to be back to basics, just him and Mick. It had seemed fairly harmless to let his partner fry their leader at the time.

He’d forgotten Mick’s tendency to escalation.

It had quickly snowballed from there.

Now he was nursing a drink he didn’t want in some skeevy bar with the music pumped up too loud as Mick held court over his gang of idiots, chalice in one hand and a woman less than half his age in the other. Len glared daggers at him from across the room, head cushioned on his hand, willing him to bore of this charade before Len had to step in and put his foot down.

After another half hour in which Mick didn’t look to him even once, Len decided enough was enough. He slid from his stool and sauntered over to his partner.
“Your highness,” he said, trying to be civil but still needing to vent with a bit of snark, “can I get a moment of your time, please?”

Mick turned away from the girl who currently had his attention. “Sure.”

“Alone,” he added with a pointed stare at Mick’s companion. She huffed at him, but thankfully she also left without further complaint. The music in here was still too loud. He gestured to Mick to follow him out of the warehouse-cum-bar.

Out on the street the bass of the music was little more than a rumble, almost drowned out by the other chaotic noises of the city. Mick leant against the exterior of the building, masked by shadows, and lit up a cigar he’d pilfered from who-knows-where. He stared at the raw flame coming from his lighter for a worryingly longer time than usual before coming back to himself and taking a few quick puffs of the cigar to get it going.

Len watched the phantom embers burn up the darkness and cast an eerie light on Mick’s rough features. “It’s time to go.”

Mick turned a very unimpressed stare on Len. “Why? So you can pretend to be like them? Did you forget we’re the bad guys?”

“You seemed to get along well enough with Raymond in Russia.”

“He’s nothing.” Mick sneered. “You’re starting to sound like a jilted lover, Snart.”

“You’re not thinking straight, Mick,” Len grit out between clenched teeth, keeping calm through sheer stubbornness. “This timeline isn’t stable. We can’t stay here.”

Len started to walk away, expecting Mick to follow.

He didn’t.

“Mick,” he said in warning, turning back.
“He wrecked you.”

“What?” Len asked, taken aback. Len knew exactly who he was referring to, but Mick had said it so offhandedly and so assuredly, like he was stating the weather. It wasn’t a spur of the moment taunt to rile Len up. He’d been thinking about it. For how long now, Len wondered.

“Your little boy toy. He put ideas in your head –” Mick stalked out of the shadows and went to poke Len in the forehead with his free hand. Len quickly dodged backwards to avoid it “– that shouldn’t’ve been there. This,” he gestured at the chaos around them, undeterred, “is where we belong.”

“We are better than this,” Len hissed.

“You might think so, but we’re not. Did you forget the Englishman lied? We’re nothing. Nobodies. Expendable.” He growled the last word, making every syllable distinct. Then a big, dumb grin spread over his face and he threw his arms out to encompass everything around them. “Why not have some fun here then?”

Len snapped. “Because this world is burning down around us and once again you’re too stupid to see it.”

“You don’t call me stupid,” Mick snarled, getting right up in Len’s face.

He pushed him away. “Then stop acting it. If you don’t get out now, you’re going to go down with this timeline.”

“You know what I want. What I’ve always wanted.”

“Of course I do, Mick. To see the world burn. You don’t have to die though.”

“Didn’t die last time,” he said smugly, leaning back against the building like he’d won the argument.
Len screamed wordlessly in frustration. Mick was his own worst enemy. If Len threw his hands up right now and left, he knew that Mick wouldn’t follow. He’d find that girl again and keep enjoying himself as this timeline unravelled around him. Len wasn’t letting his oldest friend – his partner – sabotage himself like that.

He took a few calming breaths. Anger and impulsiveness were Mick’s things. Captain Cold, on the other hand, stayed cool.

“Neither of us are thinking straight, Mick.” He gestured back to the club. “Why don’t we have a drink and talk this over?”

Mick grunted. “First sensible thing you’ve said all trip.”

Len made a shooing after you gesture and when Mick turned to walk back into the club, he struck him over the head with the cold gun. He went down hard.

Len hijacked one of the quad bikes and managed to lift Mick’s bulk onto it enough to drive them back to the Waverider. A masked army passed him heading the other way but the others could handle that.

He had his own shit to deal with.

***

Eobard Thawne was going to teach Barry how to run faster if he had to beat the information out of him.

The rest of Team Flash thought running back in time to meet up with his former mentor was a crazy plan, but Barry knew it could work. Harry had said that going back would cause some massive ripple effect on the present, but Barry had run back to his mother’s death without changing anything. He’d get in, swap with his old self, get the speed force equation and be gone again. He’d lived that period in time already, he knew exactly how it was all meant to go.
But when he ran into the speed force, for the first time ever, it felt like the speed force was pushing back against him. When he was finally in and looking for the exact moment he needed to come out in to make this work, it felt like he was fighting his way through thick molasses. He pushed on, gritting his teeth. Eobard had the information he needed, he had to get to him.

Then suddenly something was lunging at him and it felt like the speed force snapped back into place like a rubber band. After being dragged back for so long, he shot forward wildly and ended up running straight out into linear time.

He emerged onto the streets of Central in a less-than-graceful bundle of flailing limbs. While he picked himself up and got his bearings, the sounds of his former self and Hartley fighting could be heard loudly even over his own ragged breathing.

Damn it. “I’m too early.”

He was on the back foot already but he could still make this work.

After a disastrous attempt to inject his old self with the tranq dart Cisco had prepared ended in a game of speedster tag in which past-Barry saw who he was, he was finally able to get back to fighting Hartley. It was an odd feeling to overpower and restrain him – even knowing now that Hartley was only letting him win to gain access to STAR Labs. He’d almost forgotten they’d started off this way after everything that had come since.

Hartley was locked up, exactly the way he had been, and Barry went off in search of Eobard Thawne.

He was so close to getting the information he needed. Thawne had picked up a marker and was about to add to Barry’s incomplete scribbles and then the alarm sounded for an attack on the precinct. Barry got a sick feeling in his stomach. That wasn’t part of the original timeline. Nothing was supposed to happen until Hartley broke out. He should have had time to get the speed force equation and get out before then.

Harry’s warnings ran through his head. Who knew what going to the precinct could affect in the future? Was this one aberration going to snowball until he arrived back in 2016 to an unrecognisable Central City? But Thawne was looking at him so suspiciously that not going didn’t seem like an option.
So he ran off but not in time to accomplish anything. Instead, he had to plaster on a smile as he discussed the apparition that had attacked the precinct with Eddie – Eddie, alive and well and smiling that smile of his that lit up any room. All their lives had gotten a little darker when Eddie chose to sacrifice himself. But now here he was: a reminder of Barry’s future failings.

Then it was back to the lab, making up a hastily cobbled together explanation of where he’d seen the dementor (as Cisco had dubbed it) before and why he hadn’t mentioned it sooner. Caitlin and Cisco seemed to buy it, but Thawne asked to talk to him alone.

They went off to one of the many private labs scattered around STAR Labs and then everything went black.

***

After hauling Mick’s still unconscious body to his own quarters, Len collapsed into his bed, bone-weary and fed up with this whole thing. He didn’t want to be away from Barry, he didn’t want to be fighting with his oldest friend and he definitely didn’t want to feel like he’d been tricked into this undesirable position with an empty promise in the first place.

He’d go back later, smooth things over with Mick. This wasn’t any worse than the last argument they had. It could be fixed.

Len dimmed the lights of the room. His eyes were feeling itchy and he could feel the signs of an impending headache. He sat on the bed in the dark, head tilted back against the wall, eyes closed.

“Gideon.”

“Yes, Mr Snart?” Her voice came instantly from everywhere at once.

Now he had her attention, Len suddenly felt silly for the real question he’d summoned her to answer and fished for another to segue into it. “What’s time like to you, Gideon?”
“It just is.”

“And potential futures like this?”

“Impossible to describe.”

Len wondered if Gideon had been programmed with sass or if that had been self-taught. “Very illuminating. Not vague at all.”

“You will understand one day.”

Len hummed noncommittally. He wasn’t so sure about that. Even if someone dumbed it down for him, he didn’t think he’d ever truly get his head around the logistics of time travel.

“What do you know about Barry Allen?”

“Everything,” she answered with what Len could swear was a hint of smugness.

“Everything, huh?”

“Yes. I have a vast amount of information stored in my temporal memory banks. The Flashes are very important to the time line. He is also my creator.”

Huh. Len hadn’t known the kid had those kind of skills. AI seemed more like Cisco’s wheelhouse. His Barry was only 27 though, who knew what the future held for him - the proper future, not this trash fire version they were currently in.

It took Len a while to ask his next question. Gideon wasn’t a real person and besides, she said she knew everything about Barry anyway. Which meant she knew about them. Still, he couldn’t shake the feeling she would judge him for this weakness. “Is there any way I can communicate with 2016?”
“I’m afraid not, Mr Snart.” And the surprising thing was, she did sound sorry. “There is a version of myself in that time who could make communication possible, but she has not been accessed since early 2015.”

“Can you tell me if Barry’s doing okay?”

“In your time? He is… managing.”

Len didn’t like that answer.

“And in the future?”

“I am not in a position to answer that question.”

He liked that one even less. It didn’t sit well with him.

There was one piece of consolation he was sure he could get though.

“Then how about… in the timeline we just escaped… was he dead?”

“Yes.”

“Was I?”

“Yes.”

“But that timeline’s collapsing in on itself?”

“That is correct.”
When Barry woke up later, the back of his head throbbing, sprawled on the floor and with his arm chained to Thawne’s wheelchair, he realised he really should have seen this coming. Maybe he would have been able to fool the Reverse Flash if everything had gone as planned, but he’d been too shaken by his premature exit from the speed force and then the ghost-like apparition to properly keep it together.

It quickly became apparent that playing dumb wasn’t going to fool Thawne either. He knew all about time wraiths and deduced why one would be haunting this current point in time.

So Barry gave up all pretences and allowed the real disdain he felt for the man to bleed into his voice. Thawne seemed to delight in that.

A series of lies assured his safety and a fragile peace was brokered between them. Thawne wanted the time wraith gone from his time and the only way for that to happen was to send Barry back to his.

The timeline was so changed by this point that Barry didn’t know what he’d be running back to. Maybe Harry had been right. Maybe his interference would make Thawne warier. Maybe a future version of himself working together with that Wells would make his younger version second guess any doubts he had about the man’s identity. Could this mess up somehow end in Thawne winning instead of being erased from existence?

He didn’t have time to worry about that for long though. When the time wraith came for him, the only thing occupying his mind was whether Cisco and Caitlin would find a way to stop it by the time he arrived back in 2016 or not.

The speed force took him more willingly this time and he felt that touch again. Like something – or someone – guiding him, showing him the way to get back where he needed to go and escape the
time wraith instead of holding him back.

His exit out of the speed force wasn’t any more graceful than his last though and he ended up sprawled on the floor.

“It’s coming!” he warned Caitlin and Cisco. “Did you figure out how to stop it?”

The wraith shrieked as it appeared in the cortex and as Cisco raised and aimed his gun, Barry had enough time to look and realise that the wraith seemed to be wearing a cowl just like his.

The gun fired and sonic blasts hit the wraith dead centre on its chest where the Flash symbol would have been if its suit wasn’t rotted and torn. It was thrown backwards for all of a second before it shrugged the blast off and continued forward.

“Damn!” Cisco said, his voice full of panic. “We thought so!”

The wraith flew past Cisco and Caitlin and descended on him single-mindedly like a hound after a fox. He could hear his friends screaming his name in the background but his whole world had tunnelled down to the wraith with its face in his and its hand wrapped around his neck. He felt the energy the lightning had given him leeching away first, like knives running through his veins. When that was gone, it started on his life force, his breath growing laboured, his skin growing tight and his heart stuttering.

Suddenly the wraith was gone and everything it had taken came flooding back into him. When his senses returned to him, Hartley was standing over him, extending a hand to help pull him up.

“Oh, hey, Barry,” he said, more cheerful than Barry had ever heard him sound. “How was your trip?”

Barry waved his hand off and collapsed back against the floor.

Caitlin, Cisco and Hartley talked amongst themselves as Barry mustered the energy to get to his feet. Time travel really took it out of him.
He propped himself up against a bench as Hartley started going on in Latin. A passing remark from Caitlin about no one understanding him now that evil Wells was erased from existence put Barry’s mind at ease. At least his biggest worry about the timeline changing had been unfounded.

Hartley said his goodbyes and headed off and Cisco and Caitlin went back to the bank of monitors to input the data about their run-in with the time wraith. Barry wandered over, supplying information when he could.

Eventually curiosity got the better of him and he asked, “What was Hartley doing here? Did you ask him to help out?”

Cisco exchanged a strange look with Caitlin. “Uh, he works here?”

Something twisted in Barry’s gut but he ignored it. “What?”

Caitlin had the worst poker face. Barry could immediately read the concern for his mental health written in the tightness of her lips and the tilt of her eyebrows. Slowly, like she was explaining something complicated to a four-year old, she said, “He came back to use the facilities here after Wells was exposed because no one else would take him. Sometimes he helps us with Flash duties. Are you feeling okay?”

“Oh, yeah. Sorry. I’m still a little… you know. Time travel and all. I’ve just gotta…” He gestured vaguely towards the exit of the cortex and then legged it after Piper.

“Hartley!” He called when he caught sight of him. “Wait up!”

“Hey, Barry.” Hartley turned around with a smile that looked wrong on his face. “Is there something you needed?”

“Have you seen Lisa recently? Is she doing okay?”

Hartley’s brow crinkled in confusion. “Lisa?”

There was that feeling of wrongness in the core of Barry again. “Lisa Snart.”
“Golden Glider?” Hartley asked in surprise. “How would I know? Ask Cisco. I think he’s still got a crush on her.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right,” Barry agreed numbly.

He stood there in shock for a long time as Hartley walked away.

What had he done? His first thought, stupid as it was, was that Len was going to be really pissed off. Discounting Lisa and Mick – obviously – Hartley was his favourite Rogue. And now Barry had gone and ruined him.

The second thing he thought was that with Len and now Hartley gone, how were the Rogues functioning? Did they still even exist in this timeline anymore? Would Lisa be okay? Then he realised how ridiculous that thought was. With or without Len around, Lisa was more than capable of looking after herself. He probably had more to worry about the rest of the Rogues going… well, rogue under Mardon, McCulloch or, god forbid, Axel’s leadership.

He mentally put check up on Rogues as the first item on his to-do list in this new timeline.

He didn’t really comprehend the full weight of what had happened until later. It wasn’t only that Hartley was no longer and had never been a Rogue, it was that he was almost an entirely different person. He was nothing like the Hartley that playfully flirted with Barry and got drunk with him and the rest of the Rogues.

This Hartley was friendly, but he wasn’t a friend. Barry quickly learnt they shared nothing more than a companionable working relationship when he asked if Hartley wanted to go out drinking one Friday night and had been given a very polite but very hard no.

That’s when he realised that Hartley had somehow become his best friend without him even realising it. Without him, he felt bereft. It was like he’d lost a friend but still had to turn up occasionally and make small talk with his corpse. Not that there was anything wrong with the new Hartley. He was a nice guy who’d managed to reconcile with his parents and avoid a life of costumed villainy. Barry was happy for him, he was.

But he couldn’t help mourning the friend he’d lost.
He was getting pretty practised at mourning now.

***

Len was tired. So tired.

How had it all gone so wrong?

He’d lost count of time. There were no days or nights on the Waverider. How long ago was it that they’d left Central City? And in all that time they’d accomplished nothing. Savage seemed to be one step ahead of them at every turn, playing them like a puppet master.

They weren’t legends. They were idiots bumbling through time on an ill-conceived revenge mission. If someone had brought a plan this badly prepared to him in Central City, Len would have laughed in their face and then shot them. He’d let himself be blinded by the allure of time travel and notoriety and he was losing everything for it.

He should never have brought Mick. He should never have put him in this position.

Len hung back as the good guys argued about what to do with him now he’d betrayed them, always dancing around the option of killing him but no one having the balls to actually say it. Eventually Len couldn’t take any more.

He strode forward. “I’ll handle it.”

“By handling it,” Professor Stein said, contempt evident in his voice, “you mean murder?”

Len glared daggers at him. “I said I’ll handle it.”

They were quick to shut up after that.
Len commandeered a jump ship, dragged Mick’s unconscious body into it and headed for a few years before any of them had been born. If he choose the place where Barry had brought him to work out their truce, no one but he had to know. It wasn’t as overgrown in this time period – looking more enchanted forest than haunted woods.

For the second time in as many months he thought tooth and nail against his every instinct, abandoning Mick just like he’d abandoned Barry with every intention of coming back a few minutes afterwards but not really sure if he would survive to do it. Doing it for a second time didn’t make it any easier. In fact, it felt worse.

The other legends’ reactions when he returned to the Waverider were what he’d expected, but not what he’d hoped for. After a month on board the time ship, Len had thought they’d established, if not friendship, then at least a grudging comradery. A certain understanding.

So it stung a little how readily they all assumed he’d killed his partner and friend.

Everything they’d been through and it hadn’t changed their opinion of him one bit. Even Sara, who he’d talked out of murdering Stein on Rip’s orders, seemed to believe he had it in him to kill a friend if it meant protecting the team. And if his actions so far hadn’t changed their minds, then they sure as hell weren’t going to change Joe’s or Iris’ or any of Team Flash’s. This had all been for nothing.

Every barbed remark his “teammates” made afterwards was like a knife in Len’s side and made him long for his old team – his real team – where if you had a problem with someone, you worked it out with your words or your fists instead of being passive aggressive little bitches.

If any one of them had straight out asked him, “What did you do with Mick?” he would have answered them honestly.

But none of them did.

***

“Hey Barr,” Iris said, dropping down onto the couch and snuggling up against him. “What’re you watching?”

Barry hardly knew. He put the TV on a lot these days and then just zoned out to the white noise. It
made it not so quiet all the time. Looking at the screen now, it seemed to be some sort of crime procedural.

He shrugged, jostling Iris’ head where it rested on his shoulder momentarily. “Nothing interesting.”

They watched in silence for a long time. Barry enjoyed the warmth of Iris against his side, the tickle of her hair against his cheek and neck. For a second he allowed himself to muse on what might have been if Len had never invited him back to his apartment. The passionate love he’d once held for Iris had tempered to a familial affection quicker than he would have thought possible. Looking back on it now, he wondered if it had been real love at all or whether he’d just unfairly placed Iris up on a pedestal back when he was 8 and clung to that idealised vision of their perfect future together ever since in spite of anything that happened along the way.

If they’d ended up getting together, everyone would have been happy for them – especially Joe. He’d always known how Barry had felt about Iris. They would have been able to go on dates to cafes and restaurants and the movies, spend holidays with family and friends, and not have to worry about being seen together.

If Len hadn’t come into his life, Barry knew he could have been happy with Iris. He wouldn’t have known any better. He suddenly wondered how the newspaper article in the time vault had been affected by everything that had happened in the last year and a half. He hadn’t looked at it since before the singularity. A part of him knew he’d probably never look at it again out of a combination of fear and hope at what he’d find.

As the screen faded to credits, Iris shifted so she could link her arm through his. Her voice was soft as she looked up at him. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” Barry answered evasively, not quite meeting her eyes.

Iris’ lips pressed together into a tight line. “You’ve been home a lot lately,” she continued stubbornly.

He had. He’d gone to Len’s apartment a few times after he left, clinging to the reminders of their time there together. As the scent of Len had faded from the sheets and pillows and a layer of fine dust had coated everything, it started to feel more like a sepulchre than a home. He hadn’t been back since that revelation.
“And?”

“I just wondered…” she petered off and Barry could see her mentally weighing the wisdom of her next words, “did something happen between you and Captain Cold?”

Barry’s whole body tensed and there was no way Iris could have missed it. He was overcome by an irrational anger – not directed at Iris, but at his entire situation. The kind of anger that was bred from fear and uncertainty and helplessness.

Did something happen between him and Len? He had no idea. He didn’t even know if his boyfriend was still alive.

Luckily, she mistook his tension for avoidance. “Barr… You don’t have to –”

He cut her off.

“Len's gone.”

Iris blinked in confusion. “What do you mean, he's gone?”

“He's gone.”

Barry extricated himself from Iris and the couch quickly but gently. She called out after him but he didn’t turn back.

He needed air. He needed space.

He needed to run.

But as he emerged onto the porch and shut the front door behind him, he realised he didn’t have anywhere to go.
He couldn’t go to Lisa and burden her with his own problems; she was already as stressed out about Len’s absence as he was.

And Hartley wasn’t Hartley anymore. He was a stranger.

The apartment in Keystone, Saints and Sinners, even the safe house they’d holed up in during McCulloch’s misguided attempt at making friends: anywhere that might have offered some comfort only made him feel Len’s absence even more keenly.

He ran the city with nowhere in mind, hoping he’d chance upon a crime so he’d have something else to focus on for a while. No such luck.

In the end he found himself on Van Buren Bridge, looking down at the river flowing sluggishly beneath him and half-remembering a night not so long ago when he’d felt exquisitely happy and carefree.

Chapter End Notes

I'm sorry. It's a bit of a downer chapter.

That "he's gone" line is what decided me on writing a continuation to Things. Obviously it happens much later in the show than I've put it, but it was the spark that got the ideas rolling.

Thanks as always for reading. I can be found on tumblr.
Len lost a hand but he got Mick back.

In those minutes it took for him to pull the cold gun closer to himself and then angle it to aim at his hand, all that was running through his head was: you deserve this.

He’d fucked up so badly.

He’d left Mick in the past with every intention of coming back a few minutes after he’d gone to collect him. Exactly the same as he’d done to Barry. But Mick had ended up being there long enough to resort to killing and eating whatever he could find in the woods so that he wouldn’t starve to death. That wasn’t a couple of hours or even a day – that was weeks in which Len hadn’t returned for him. Weeks of thinking he really had been abandoned and left for dead. Len didn’t blame him for the hate and anger that had simmered within him over those weeks and then in the unknowable amount of time the Time Masters had had him afterwards.

There were reasons Len wouldn’t have returned and the most optimistic of them was that time travel simply didn’t work the way Rip had explained. They weren’t able to return directly to a time they’d just left. Some kind of temporal withholding period or something. Which meant Barry was waiting for him, wondering why he hadn’t come straight back like he’d promised.

The other reason why he wouldn’t have made it back wasn’t worth thinking about at this moment.

Mick almost seemed like an entirely different person as Chronos. He was still and contained, too quiet. Len had always thought of Mick as like a wildfire: if you were lucky, you could get some control over it, but mostly it just raved and raged. In his more egotistical moments, Len had found some satisfaction in being one of the only people who could meld that maelstrom to his will.

Now Mick was like the flame of a Bunsen burner, intense and concentrated, fed by the Time Masters’ orders.
If it had been Mick – his Mick – he would have hit Len, hit him hard, worked his anger off in brutish physicality and then they would have been even again. The long con wasn’t Mick’s thing. Taking hostages had never been his style; the waiting irked him, made him irritable. More often than not Len and Lisa had to pull him off a prisoner after he attacked them for getting too mouthy or trying to escape.

With escape not an option, Len mouthed off. Spat vitriol, bared his teeth, kicked out, hoping something would rile Mick up. Anything to get a glimpse of how he used to be, a bit of that old heat, not this overly still imposter.

He didn’t even flinch. He was ice.

And when he pulled up Lisa’s picture on the ship’s screen, Len’s insides froze. This wasn’t Mick. Mick wouldn’t do that. Wouldn’t even joke about doing that. He loved Lisa almost as much as Len did. Had doted on her until she hit her mid-teens and decided that her brother and his friend were no longer cool. Even that didn’t mean Mick stopped watching out for her though.

To hear him threaten her life – and not only that, but to also be so sadistic about it – made Len’s blood run cold. Whatever beef they had was between them. It should stay that way. Even in the criminal underworld, only the most vicious scum went after families.

This new Mick frightened Len.

He had to get out of the handcuffs, talk some sense into Mick and save his team of idiots. Then he had to get back to Barry. He wasn’t going to repeat his mistake. He wouldn’t leave him waiting forever.

So he dialled the cold gun up to its coldest setting, aimed it at his hand and fired.

It hurt. It hurt like a bitch.

Funnily enough, the cold was so intense that it almost felt like burning, like his whole hand was on fire. Mick would appreciate that.

He grit his teeth against the screams bubbling out of his throat and threatening to spill from his mouth, and slammed his hand against the nearest solid surface.
It shattered into a million pieces, little parts of himself pinging off down the corridor, and then he was free.

For the few hours when he thought he was going to have to relearn all the tricks he knew left-handed, it had seemed like an equal trade to have the chance to make things right with Mick.

Rip informing him huffily that of course Gideon had taken genetic samples from them all and that of course his hand could be regenerated seemed like a bad omen. Len was as far from superstitious as you could get, but he believed in things equally out. You didn’t get something for nothing, ever. Quid pro quo.

So getting Mick back and not losing a hand felt like cheating fate, like he’d unbalanced the cosmic scales.

Something had to give.

***

The next day Rip was going on about Savage and Per Degaton and the Armageddon Virus.

Len was only half listening.

The new hand was bothering him. It felt wrong.

It looked exactly like his old hand, maybe a little softer from lack of use, and there wasn’t even a line to show where new flesh met old. But Len could sense that it wasn’t right.

People talked about the feeling of having phantom limbs when they’d lost an arm or leg, but there was an extra level of dissonance when you’d lost a hand and then got it back again, good as new.
He looked at it askance as it lay draped over his lap, wondering how something that had been so much a part of him for over forty years now felt so foreign.

He didn’t know what to do about it.

He certainly didn’t mention it to anyone.

He was almost tempted to get rid of it again.

He had Mick and his hand back though. What right did he have to complain?

Though Mick wasn’t exactly as he’d been either. He was still more subdued, calmer. He sat in his little prison cell, not moving, and the rest of their teammates traipsed through and had their say but Gideon informed Len that he took none of their bait. Of course he didn’t. He’d had the barest smidge of respect for them before all this happened, why would lifetimes of torture caused indirectly by them change that?

As each of them returned to the bridge after their little heart-to-hearts, they cast a heavy look Len’s way. He didn’t appreciate that in the slightest. They’d told him to deal with Mick and he had. Now it had backfired on them, they were looking to him again to fix up their mess. It was grating.

His decision to stay away from Mick’s cage – because, call it what you wanted, that was exactly what it was – was half motivated by spite for those beseeching glances. The other half was fear that he’d ruined things so badly that there was no getting Mick back. He didn’t think he had it in him to put his partner of decades down like a rabid dog.

So Len started hiding away where their looks couldn’t find him.

Sara eventually tracked him down in the cargo bay. He was throwing a ball around on the pretence of working on the dexterity of his new foreign fingers, though actually it was mostly to mute his meandering mind with monotony. She deflected every attempt to derail the conversation and told him to get his shit together and go see Mick. Len knew she had a point.

When their plan of the day to stop Savage failed spectacularly once again – surprise, surprise – Len had no more excuses to put off his visit. As soon as he walked through the door, he could tell from the fire in his eyes that Mick’s anger was still down there, somewhere beneath that cold exterior, just
aching to get out. Mick had an iron-tight grip on it now though. He was still. So still.

As soon as they got to talking, though, Len knew there was something of his friend still left in Chronos. The way they talked, there was something of their familiar back and forth in the words.

They reached an agreement. They would settle it the way Rogues settled things: with their fists.

Mick worked him over until he couldn’t stand and he deserved every minute of it.

It didn’t hurt as much as losing a hand, but Len hoped it would suffice. Even out the scales a little.

If Mick had decided to kill him then and there, he wouldn’t have raised a finger to stop him.

Len didn’t ice his face afterwards, didn’t make any effort to cover the mottled and swollen skin on the left side where he’d taken the brunt of the beating. He didn’t take advantage of Gideon’s offer to fix up the damage either. Like Mick and his scars, he left it all out on display. The rest of the team had trouble looking him in the face for a while and that was as it should be. Mick, on the other hand, sought out the evidence of his handiwork anytime they were in the same room together with a satisfied look in his eye. As the cuts scabbed, as the scabs flaked away, as the bruises turned from a heavy purple to sickly hues of green and yellow, the hard feelings between them seemed to heal up in concert.

When all evidence of his beating faded away, Len dug out a small silver ring from his things. He couldn’t even explain to himself why, out of all the things he owned, he’d brought this along with him. Had he even packed it or had it simply still been in the bag from a previous trip? He couldn’t remember now. It was the only thing he’d managed to get away with on his first job with Mick after it had all gone so disastrously wrong. What had convinced him to keep working with the guy after that, he’d never know – but he was glad of it. The ring was a reminder that even the best laid plans go astray.

For better and for worse.

It also kept him anchored to himself. A little something to ground his hand to the rest of his body when nothing else did.

It didn’t take Mick long to notice it. He never said anything, just gave Len an understanding nod and
that was that.

Good old Mick.

***

Playing dress-ups throughout time had very quickly lost its appeal after that.

After his experience leaving Mick behind, Len just wanted to get back to Central City 2016 as quickly as he could. But now they had a time travelling assassin after them who was targeting their child selves.

When someone was gunning for you like that, you didn’t really have the choice to ignore it.

They tried fighting off the Pilgrim at first but as it became quickly apparent that they were woefully underpowered to accomplish that, the plan changed to kidnapping their child selves.

He never thought this would be a situation he’d find himself in. Hiding in an orphanage in a secret location in history, being hunted by a time travelling assassin, and cradling his baby self.

He should probably be glad that they’d nabbed infant him instead of teenage him like they had with Mick. He’d jokingly warned Rip’s adoptive mother that he was a handful as a baby, but teenage him had been a ball of anger, ready to lash out at the slightest provocation. He’d thought the whole world was out to get him.

He held baby Len closer to himself. So small and innocent. He still had almost a decade before things would start going downhill for him. Len wished he was old enough to understand words. Then he could warn him off from ever boarding a certain time ship. But he wasn’t, and so Len just held out a finger for him to grab with surprising baby strength.

Rocking a baby was such a familiar feeling despite him not having done it for close to 25 years. Lisa had been a quiet child. Mostly out of necessity more than anything else.
He remembered running through the house with her clutched in his arms when she was only a couple of years old. The first few strides were uncomfortable, her body being jostled by his movements. But it didn’t take long for her to relax, fold into his body and move with him. Then it was easy. Barely old enough to understand the world but already she knew how to escape and hide.

Len had wondered if it was an ability all babies were born with, something instinctual from when humans were still prey, or whether it was all Lewis’ doing. Thinking about Lewis always lit of fire of anger deep in his gut and this time wasn’t any different.

He was glad the man was dead. He only wished he’d had a hand in it.

He must have jinxed himself thinking about Lisa as a child though.

Almost as soon as they were back on the Waverider, they were receiving a trans-chronal beacon from the Pilgrim. And there was Lisa’s photo among the rest of his teammate’s loved ones. He barely listened after that. He’d deserted Barry in his darkest hours, abandoned Mick to lifetimes of torture under the Time Masters, and now his only family was in danger because of him.

His reckless decision to join Rip’s crew to redeem himself had now officially hurt and endangered everyone he truly cared about.

While Rip went to organise the transfer of his younger self, Len slipped the rest of the team and went to his room. He lay on his bed and let his left hand gravitate to his right, as it did so often these days. He rubbed at the smooth skin where new joined seamlessly with old. He knew exactly how much of his hand he’d lost when he smashed it to smithereens and he tried to find some evidence of the damaged he remembered with such stark clarity. When he failed to find what he’d been searching for, yet again, he moved up to the ring on his pinkie. He twisted it around and around as his own mind spun.

The Pilgrim had Lisa. His sister. She also had Jax’s and Sara’s fathers, Raymond’s fiancé and Professor Stein’s wife. The most important people in their lives.

He was glad that Rip had capitulated so quickly. He would have given the Pilgrim and the Time Masters anything they asked for to keep Lisa safe. He probably would have thrown the whole team to the wolves or even sold out the whole damn multiverse for his sister.
Then he thought of Barry. The one caveat to his complete surrender for Lisa’s safety would be that Barry not be hurt either. The two were the most important people to him.

Eventually he addressed the ceiling.

“Gideon.”

Her reply came instantly. “Yes, Mr Snart?”

“Why did the Pilgrim take Lisa? Why not Barry?”

“Though it may not seem like it now, the Time Masters do have certain rules for the greater good. There are some things which simply must not be altered.” She faltered. “Or cannot be altered, perhaps. To try to do so would cause irrevocable harm to the time line. The Flash is one such entity.”

Len held his hand up to the light, trying – not for the first time – to find some difference in the skin tones to try to make out where his original body ended and the new hand began. “So they won’t target him because of me?”

“No.”

“Thank you, Gideon.”

“My pleasure, Mr Snart.”

***

The young girl who rounded the corner, despite all the differences, was at once immediately familiar to Len. Despite the terrible noughties fashion and the softness that adulthood hadn’t stripped from her face yet, he could already see traces of the woman she would become.
This version of Lisa couldn’t be much older than 15. She didn’t have her ears pierced yet, and that had happened on her 16th birthday. Len had taken her to the piercers himself. He hadn’t had much to do with her at that point in time, too busy making a name for himself that wasn’t dependent on his father’s, but he and Mick dropped by the old home every now and again when they knew Lewis would be out to check up on her.

Lisa stayed in the doorway even as the rest of the Pilgrim’s hostages filed into the bridge, marvelling at the technology around them. She looked around the room, searching out someone familiar, and her eyes passed right over Len.

He pushed himself off his chair and made a beeline for her. He had to dodge Professor Stein on his way, the man just as single-minded heading towards his wife. He vaguely registered Sara’s happy reunion with her own father and then hints of confusion in Professor Stein’s voice behind him.

Lisa quickly noticed his approach and her eyes never left him as he closed the space between them.

“Lisa.”

She shied away as he went to reach out for her. Her nose scrunched up and she asked with a hint of confusion, but mostly disdain, “Do I know you?”

“Rip,” Len called, giving Lisa some room by stepping back a few paces but not taking his eyes off her in case she tried to leg it. “What have you done?”

Lisa continued to stare him down too, like he was a wild animal who might attack if she took her eyes off of him for a second. There was no flicker of recognition in her look.

“Rip!” Lisa flinched at his raised voice.

Lisa had never been afraid of Len in her life.

It was like the ground had been pulled out from under him. He stumbled back and everything seemed to tunnel. Lisa stayed half hidden behind the doorway. Now he really looked, he could see she wasn’t as young as he’d thought. Seventeen, maybe eighteen. But what had happened to her
earrings? What had happened to Len taking her to get her ears pierced?

What had they done?

Why was it all wrong?

He felt himself being moved by big hands to a seat, being pushed into it. Those same hands urged him to hang his head between his knees. He knew those hands. Any other hands and he would have fought back.


He breathed in.

He breathed out.

He continued the pattern.

Len looked up once he started feeling less panicked. Sara was talking to Lisa, the two huddled together. Every so often Lisa would shoot him a wary glance. She must think he was insane.

“Until we return your younger selves to the timeline,” Rip explained, coming to crouch down in front of him, voice soft so that it wouldn’t carry, “none of you will have ever existed. That’s why she doesn’t remember you. As long as we return your infant selves before time sets, everything will go back to the way it was.” Len moved backwards in his seat, as far away as he could get from Rip with the chair hedging him in. He felt ashamed he’d reacted like that, but even more so that the rest of the Waverider’s crew had seen it. “Then what are we waiting for?” he snapped, gesturing to the Lisa and the other hostages the Pilgrim had taken, “get them home, so we can get on with our mission and finish this once and for all.”

They returned their nearest and dearest to minutes after they’d taken them, their memories of their kidnapping and subsequent rescue erased. Lisa still looked fearful around him so Len aided in getting Sara’s father home instead. Before they drugged him, he told them he’d been abducted from the precinct almost immediately after Sara’s attempted kidnapping. They plotted their course for just after that event and arrived to find the precinct still in disarray.
The cops had cleared out, taken their injured and retreated. Glass crunched under Len’s boots as he walked, and he had to dodge the splintered wood from walls and furniture that littered the hallways and rooms. There was a smear of blood on the floor, still glistening wetly, not enough to have been from anything serious. Maybe a broken nose.

It couldn’t have been ten minutes since the fighting ended.

Well, that settled that then.

Time travel could work that way.

***

They were about to blow up the Oculus and stop the Time Masters interfering with history.

The end of their mission was almost in sight.

Rip had ordered Len, Jax and Sara to take point outside the building while he and Mick covered Raymond as he did his thing to make the Oculus self-destruct. The Time Masters’ goons weren’t any tougher than any of the other challenges they’d faced along the way, and Len almost felt like he was at a carnival shooting gallery, knocking them off one by one with a minimum of effort.

They were just finishing off the last of them when Rip came running out of the building that housed the Oculus. He was alone.

“We're leaving,” he yelled.

Len shot the last goon. “Where's Raymond and Mick?”
“Ray is in my pocket and Mick has elected to stay.”

“Why?”

“Someone needs to be present to destroy the Oculus. Mick has elected himself.” Len clenched his jaw. He could hit Rip right now if he didn’t have more pressing things to do. He began to run back the way Rip had come from, Sara hot on his heels. “No, no, no, no, no, you can’t. There isn’t ti—”

Firestorm joined in the chorus. “We gotta go!”

He ignored them both.

Len knew exactly what he was running towards. It was strange how calm he felt about it. Maybe it was because he already knew what he had to do and how it would end. Knew that it could have ended no other way.

They picked off a couple of soldiers as they ran up to the Oculus. There were still a group firing from the other side but they shot wide once he and Sara reached the cover of the Oculus.

The wellspring of green energy surrounding the Oculus device hummed with latent power. It held the potential of static electricity but on a whole other level. Len felt the hairs rise on the back of his arms.

In the middle of it all was Mick, his arm stuck elbow-deep in the Oculus.

“Mick,” Len greeted.

“Get outta here.”

Len leant around him to shoot another soldier.

“Not without you, Mick.”
“Pretty boy said I gotta hold this stick for the ship to blow.” Len ripped the goggles from his eyes and took a good look at the workings inside the device. “So I'm holding this stick. Now leave!”

As Mick said, all he was doing was holding down a stick. Anyone could do it.

“My old friend, please forgive me.”

“For what?” Mick turned to look at him but, with one hand disabled holding down the failsafe, he couldn’t protect himself in time from the blow Len struck to his head with the cold gun.

He dropped like a rock.

Len hoped he wouldn’t hold it against him once he woke up. He did feel bad, but this was the way it had to play out. He wasn’t letting his oldest friend die because he’d wanted to play hero for his boyfriend. No way in hell. Mick would hate him for punching him out a second time but at least he wouldn’t be dead.

The handle had sprung out without Mick’s attentions but Len pushed it back in. It took no effort. It was easy.

Sara stepped from the gangplank onto the Oculus’ mounting with a confused look at Mick’s prone form. Len ordered her to take him and get out of there. He saw the moment that his decision dawned on her.

“No.” He hated the catch in her voice.

“Just do it.”

She stepped forward, her right hand reaching out just slightly. She probably didn’t even realise she was doing it. But it gave Len an idea.

He wished he had more to give him than this, a conceit for his failure. Barry deserved better.
He wished he could do something. Some grand gesture.

But he had less than a minute left and he was stuck holding this damn handle if it was all going to work. Not the best opportunity to work out how to say a proper farewell to the love of his life.

So he quickly swapped hands on the stick and used his teeth to rip off his glove and manipulate the cheap ring off of his pinkie finger. Sara moved forward when she saw what he was doing and he pressed it into her palm.

“Give this to him. Tell him I love him and I’m sorry.”

“You don’t have to do this.”

“I do.” A look of understanding passed between them. “Get him out of here.”

Sara pulled him into a hug, a quick thing born of desperation but it was the last piece of evidence Len needed to know that he was making the right choice.

As he watches Sara drag Mick away, the thought briefly flashes through his mind that this is why there was no trace of Captain Cold in 2046. Gideon had told him that that timeline was collapsing in on itself but maybe some things were just written in stone. He briefly mourned that he wouldn’t get to find out what happened to Barry - or to stop it - but he didn’t let that emotion take the reins for long.

Being pragmatic had its benefits at times. He just had to hold this stick down and the universe would be safe until the next existence-threatening event. Someone else would have to field that one. Len wasn’t making it out of here alive.

He was glad Mick got away. Sara too. They were good people, even if they weren’t good people. They deserved to be able to walk away from all of this, battered, bruised and scarred but still alive.

The oculus’ whirring seemed to intensify. He assumed that meant he didn’t have much longer.
He was glad he hadn’t run off without telling Barry. He got to say a proper goodbye. Mick’d tell him what happened and Sara would give him the ring and he’d be sad for a while but he’d move on. He was strong like that. And still so young.

Len hoped he’d find someone to love and grow old with. Someone better than Len.

He had one regret: he wished he could have seen his sister one last time – not a younger version who didn’t even know him, but his grown up Lisa, the train wreck. She’d survived a lot of pain and loss already in her life and he was sad to think he was only heaping more upon her. She didn’t deserve that.

Some Time Masters showed up and tried to make him stop what he was doing but it was too late for that.

This was the way it had to be. This evened the scales.

There was blinding light and searing pain and then it was over.
He ran.

No one saw him and no one heard him.

He didn’t tell anyone what he was doing.

He knew he was being silly. If Len was back, he’d come find him. And if he wasn’t back, then Barry wasn’t going to find him anywhere in this time period.

Nevertheless, he ran.

He searched every street and building in Central City, Keystone and then further afield. If he saw crime, he stopped it and then he moved on. Never stopping. He ran highways pitted and ragged with disuse. One day, on a whim, he traced the faded arteries of the old railway system; lush greenery turning to red desert turning to gunmetal grey cities and back again like a zeotropic whirly-gig.

He never found any trace of Len.

For a while, life just happened around him. He went to work, did his job and then went to STAR Labs afterwards. He patrolled the city as the Flash but he was just running on autopilot. The threat of Zoom was ever present.

Weeks later, he was walking out of STAR Labs when strong arms grabbed him from behind.

He started struggling, panic flooding his body, until he a heard a woman’s voice yell out reprovingly, “Mick!”
Mick! Mick was back! Which meant –

With excitement overwhelming him, Barry used his powers to phase out of Mick’s hold and spun around. He was greeted by the sight of Mick and a woman he didn’t know in a white leather costume. She looked vaguely familiar but he couldn’t place her.

There was no one else with them.

“Hey, Flash.” Barry hadn’t realised how much he’d missed Mick’s gruff baritone until he heard it right then. It put the widest smile on his face.

“Hey, Mick. How’d the time travelling go?”

The wince that scrunched up Mick’s face put Barry on edge. It wasn’t like Mick to be reticent. Say what you liked about his many faults, but you could always rely on him to tell it like it was. When he didn’t answer, the woman beside him stepped forward.

“Hi, I’m Sara Lance.” She extended a hand which he shook on autopilot. “Laurel’s sister. I was on the time ship too.”

Sara. He’d heard about her from Oliver’s team but had always seemed to miss her when he was visiting Star City. Now he knew who she was, he could see the resemblance to her sister. They had the same features except where Laurel’s were clean angles, Sara’s were deceptively gentle curves.

“Hey. So,” Barry stuck his hands in his pockets and stepped back to lean against STAR Labs’ facade, trying to project a casualness he didn’t feel, “what’s going on?”

Mick and Sara shared a look and Barry’s heart dropped into his stomach. There was a roiling ocean inside him, oil-slick and heavy.

Again it was Sara who spoke.

“Maybe we should go somewhere a bit more private?”
Barry didn’t even ask for permission. He grabbed Mick first and ran. Dropped him off at Len’s place in Keystone and went back for Sara to do the same. He wanted to be somewhere he knew but where they wouldn’t be disturbed. It had taken him less than a minute to relocate them all.

“Okay, talk.”

Mick was doubled over though, hands on his knees, looking green about the gills.

“Ugh, that’s almost as bad as time travel.” Sara was only a little better and it took a while for them both to gather their wits. It felt like years to Barry. The air weighed down on him. And even after the look of motion-sickness had passed from their faces, they seemed to have trouble finding the words for what they wanted to say.

There was only one thing Barry wanted to know.

“Where’s Len?”

Quiet fell. The sound of the city crept in from outside.

Sara looked at him and Barry knew.

“I’m sorry, Barry. Snart…” The name tripped her up and her mouth worked soundlessly for a moment before she found her words again, “he’s dead. He sacrificed himself.”

No. He couldn’t be dead. Barry looked to Mick for the punchline to the joke but he wouldn’t even meet his eyes.

“No.” Barry shook his head. “No. Len’s not dead. He can’t be.”

“Barry…” She moved forward, hand extended and he stepped back, away from her touch.
“No!” He said. “He’s fine. I’ll find him.”

“Barry, there wasn’t even a body after. He died saving us. All of us. All of time. He’s a hero.” Sara looked conflicted for a second but Mick nudged her forward. She reached into her pocket and pulled something out. “He wanted me to give you this.”

There was a silver ring on her palm. Barry took it tentatively, as though it might shock or burn him. “A ring? Why?”

“It was all he had on him when…” Sara faltered, “Well, at the end.”

Barry turned it around between his fingers, looking for any mark, any message, that Len had left for him but there was none. Barry had never even seen Len wear this before. For all Barry knew, they could have bought it from the dollar store before coming to find him. “Mick?”

Mick spoke up for the first time and his gruff voice was rougher than usual. “I’ll tell ya about it another day, kid. Not quite up to it now.”

Barry continued to stare dumbly at the ring for a few moments in silence until Sara approached and gently closed his hand around it. Her eyes darted up to look at him from under dark lashes and he saw his own grief reflected back at him. Her voice cracked as she said, “He said he loved you, and that he was sorry.”

No petting or stroking, Barry wrapped her up in his arms and held her tight. She froze for a second and then melted into it, arms coming up to fist in Barry’s jacket, pulling him closer.

Barry looked over her shoulder and saw Mick standing awkwardly, eyes averted. Barry wished he could do something for him too but he didn’t know how much he’d accept.

When Sara finally pulled away, she ducked her head and took a stilted breath. Barry looked away as she began to wipe at face with the back of her hand, suddenly feeling too much like a voyeur watching someone he didn’t even know cry.

“We can’t stay,” Sara said apologetically, and Barry took it as his permission to turn back to face her. “We still haven’t defeated Savage. He has to pay.”
Barry nodded dumbly. Sara smiled at him and then, without another word, she was leaving. The living room in Len’s apartment only had two doors and it was obvious which the exit was. She started heading that way. Mick lingered a little longer, awkwardly avoiding looking at Barry for what felt like a very long time.

As the sound of the door opening reached them, he finally looked up and met Barry’s eyes.

“I’m sorry. I’ll be back,” he promised.

Barry nodded again, not trusting his voice.

Then Mick was gone too.

The sound of the front door closing was deafening in the quiet of the apartment.

Barry felt... nothing.

Numb.

Hollow.

He stood where they’d left him for a good five minutes, breathing and waiting for something to happen. He didn’t know what he was waiting to happen. Maybe Len would walk through the door and tell him it had all been a misunderstanding. Maybe Cisco or Iris or Joe would come and tell him what he was supposed to do next.

When it became apparent no one was coming to help him, he looked around: the tiny kitchenette, the linoleum and paint peeling over near the fridge, the coffee table, couch and radiator. Barry could make out the thin film of dust that had coated the room in the five months since Len had left. He ran his finger over the kitchen counter beside him, leaving a path of cleanliness in his wake.

Barry still had the ring grasped in his closed fist. He put it in his pocket and then bent down and
fumbled around in the cupboards, looking for cleaning things. He found an old rag but no cleaning products, so he just dampened it and started wiping everything down. Next he cleaned out the fridge and the cupboards. Len had thrown away the perishables before he left so Barry just packed anything that was still good for a while – canned and dry goods, spices, oil – into bags and threw the rest out.

He opened the windows and let the warm air wash through the room. It would get a lot hotter in a few months but for now it was pleasant. Outside this apartment, everything went on like normal. No one else knew what had happened.

That was wrong. They should know what Len had done, what he’d sacrificed for them. He shouldn’t be remembered as just a villain with a cheap gimmick. He was a hero. Sara had said so.

He wanted to shout it from the rooftop, plaster the news all across town.

Leonard Snart had died a hero.

He was dead.

With nothing more for him to do in the kitchenette and living room, he moved into the bedroom.

He smoothed out the bedsheets and fluffed the pillows. He drew the curtains and opened the window. Dust was gathering under the bed but he couldn’t find a duster to reach under there so he left it.

He opened the wardrobe and looked at the jackets hanging up and the rest of Len’s clothes folded neatly in the drawers. Len had taken his favourites but Barry reached out and grabbed the wrist of a coat he’d worn often enough around the house. It was made more for comfort than for leaving an impression so of course he hadn’t taken it with him when he left. Barry clung to the sleeve like he should have clung to Len. He shouldn’t have let him leave. He’d had such a bad feeling about it.

He pulled the entire jacket to him. It caught on the hanger for a moment, a second of resistance, and he yanked it with growing frustration until it twisted and dropped off. He bunched it up, buried his face against it, his body too tight to be holding in everything it was trying to feel and he screamed and screamed into the worn fabric until his voice was hoarse.
Barry slumped to the floor and muffled his sobs into the jacket until the flash of hysteria passed. He took deep breaths. In and out. In and out. The jacket didn’t smell much of anything. Everything in the wardrobe had come straight there from the dryer.

He unbunched the jacket, slid it onto his own lanky frame but left the rest of the clothes where they were. It was one thing to clean out food; Len’s actual belongings were another matter.

He pulled the cardboard box Len kept his personal things in from out of the bottom of the wardrobe and sat cross-legged on the floor with it in front of him.

He’d never looked through it himself. Len had only told him it was there.

The first things he pulled out were books – mostly children’s books. They had passed through many hands judging by the wear and tear on them. Far from new but well-loved all the same. Barry looked for the book Len had read to him, the collection of children’s stories with the Happy Prince, but couldn’t find it.

Digging deeper into the box, he found all sorts of things: photos of people he didn’t recognise, a pair of child’s ice skates, a set of old car keys on a worn leather fob, an empty beer bottle, a flip lighter with the year 1987 scratched inelegantly onto the front of it, and buried right down the bottom was the stupid Flash costume Lisa and Hartley had bought Barry for Halloween.

He pulled each thing out one by one and placed it around him. He didn’t know the stories behind them but he knew they’d been important to Len. The ring had been important to Len too. He pulled it out of his pocket and looked at it again. It was plain, silver, with a hammered finish. Nothing too fancy. He wondered where it had come from and what it had meant to Len.

Even with as long and thin as his fingers were, it would still only fit on his pinkie. So that’s where it went. He lay out on the floor, surrounded by Len’s things, the hand he’d put the ring on laying just in front of his eyes.

His outburst had worn him out.

He closed his eyes and let himself doze.
Barry was woken up by a hollow thud and soft cursing.

He sat up, blinking blearily, the room dark except for the street lamp outside throwing a shadow play against the far wall.

There was light under the door to the ensuite.

Barry went to turn on the lights in the bedroom first and let his eyes adjust before he opened the door to the bathroom. There was McCulloch, in the process of helping Lisa to climb out of the bathroom mirror and down off the sink like a gentleman assisting a lady out of a carriage. They’d knocked a shampoo bottle to the floor.

“Thanks, McCulloch,” she said softly once she was standing on solid ground.

He looked between her and Barry, his usual gap-toothed grin straining at the corners. “You gonna be awright?”

She smiled back at him, head tilted. “As much as I can be.”

McCulloch tipped his head to Barry and then he retreated back through the bathroom mirror.

“I thought I’d find you here,” Lisa said as she approached him.

Barry turned away, suddenly nervous to look at her, and led the way back through the bedroom and out into the living room. He knew Lisa would have noticed Len’s things spread out on the floor but she was nice enough not to say anything about it.

They sat down on the couch, a healthy distance between them.
Nervously, he asked, “Did Mick visit you?”

“Yeah.”

Barry continued looking straight ahead. “I’m sorry.”

“You don’t have anything to be sorry for.”

“Still, I’m sorry.”

“Barry…” she began warningly but he soldiered on.

“If I hadn’t—”

“Barry!” She turned to him and took hold of his hands, making him look her in the eye before she continued. “You have nothing to be sorry for, okay? He’s an adult. He made his choices. You were good for him.”

How wrong she was. “I got him killed.”

“You didn’t. Don’t you dare think that.”

No matter what she said, he wouldn’t be convinced otherwise. If Barry hadn’t forced his way into Len’s life, he would have continued leading the Rogues, committing annoying but victimless crimes and never would have tried to be anything more. Barry only ever brought pain and suffering to the people around him. His mother, the real Professor Wells, Eddie, Ronnie and now Len. They were all dead because of him.

“Does everyone know?”

“Yeah. I got McCulloch to pass the message along to the other Rogues.” She smiled fondly. “He’s pretty handy to have around.”
Talking about Len’s death with Lisa like this was the realest it had felt since Sara and Mick had told him about it. Before, alone in the apartment, only he’d known and maybe he’d been having a bad dream or Zoom was trying to manipulate him or something else was going on that would make it not real.

The more people who knew about it, though, the harder it was to write it off as any of those things. Lisa, the rest of the Rogues – if they knew, then it was real.

Barry felt like the room was squeezing in on him, his own body squeezing in on him, overwhelmed by everything. “What are we going to do, Lisa?”

She looped her arm around his shoulder and pulled them flush together. “I don’t know.”

“It’s funny.” Barry turned tear-filled eyes on her. “I’ve avoided my mother’s grave for over a decade. Maybe it isn’t healthy, and maybe it’s kept me from really accepting her death, but it doesn’t weigh on me most of the time. But now Len’s gone and I just want to be able to go somewhere I can be with him. There’s nowhere though. They said there wasn’t a body so there won’t be grave… All I have is this –” he gestured futilely to the empty apartment around them “–this stupid shell of a place he didn’t even care about anyway.”

“Barry…”

“It hurts, Lisa. I’ve lost so much and it’s always my fault. I didn’t think anything could hurt this much again.” Barry swiped at his eyes angrily. “I’m sorry. What am I even saying? I can’t even begin to… You’re his sister.”

Her smile was watery. “It’s not a competition, Barry. It just is what it is.”

Barry couldn’t find the words he wanted to express his sorrow and his shame to her. They gummed up uselessly at the back of his throat where he choked on them. It was all his fault and then he’d made it all about himself. It made it even worse that she was acting so understanding. Maybe he would have felt better if she’d cursed him, hit him, blamed him.

“C’mon,” Lisa said, pulling him up from the couch and into her arms. Lisa hugged like her brother and that unleashed the tears Barry had mostly managed to hold onto until then. She was softer, a smidge shorter even with her heels on, but the way she didn’t hesitate to wrap herself fully around
him, pull him in and just keep him there was all Len. Barry ugly cried, getting tears and maybe a little snot all over the shoulder of Lisa’s shirt. She rubbed his back as hummed a tuneless lullaby.

When he stopped hiccupping around the tears, Lisa took his hand. “Come with me.”

“What are we going?”

“Just trust me.”

She led him back into the bedroom and sat them both down on the floor, side by side inside the ring of Len’s things.

“Oh, okay,” she looked around the items and plucked out the set of keys and handed them to Barry, “these are the keys to our grandfather’s ice truck.” He ran his fingers over them. They were the old kind of car keys, back when they looked almost the same as house keys. Whatever had been on the fob, some kind of business logo, had been rubbed away over the years through use. “He used to take us with him when he could, on his deliveries. Get us away from our dad for a little while. It was fun.” Lisa’s gaze went distant, seeing things from before Barry was even born. “He’d always buy us an ice cream before he took us home, even in winter. He passed away when I was… five or six? Lenny was fourteen. He ended up in juvie a few months later.”

Lisa shuffled closer to him, threading her arm through his and leaning her head on his shoulder as he picked up the lighter.

“What about this?”

She traced the numbers on the front with her pointer finger. “I think it was Mick’s. You’d have to ask him for the whole story. These, though,” she said, leaning across Barry to snag the ice skates, “these are mine. Have I ever told you I used to skate?”

“No, I don’t think you ever did.”

Lisa held the skates out in front of her, a wistful look on her face. “I was really good.”
“Why’d you stop?”

“Dad thought it was a waste of time and money. As soon as Lenny left, he stopped me going.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s in the past.” She shrugged. “All I ever wanted to do was follow after my brother; I would have given it up sooner or later anyway.”

Barry threaded his fingers through hers and squeezed.

“Tell me more.”

Chapter End Notes

I mentioned this several chapters ago, but in light of some comments in the last chapter I think it needs reiterating so no one goes into chapter 13 with undue expectations. There is a third part to Things. It's currently 8 chapters long and I don't see it getting any longer than that. For anyone who's worrying - and I hardly think this is a spoiler - it all ends happily.

Thanks for reading as always. Come say hello on tumblr.
His dad was dead. Zoom was as good as dead.

And a part of him had died as well.

Even now he couldn’t say with any certainty whether the version of himself that had died saving Joe and destroying the magnetar was the "prime” version or if he was. It seemed entirely possible that the real Barry had created him and gone off on a suicide mission, more than happy to put an end to it all. He knew it was a possibility because, when he was at his lowest, he sometimes wished it had been him who’d burned up into nothing.

It was four days before the coroners released Henry’s body to him.

He took that week off from work on compassionate leave. He couldn’t be in the building knowing his dad was only a couple of floors under him, cold and unseeing as the medical examiner cut him open to determine cause of death. He’d been in the morgue before. He knew what they did. He couldn’t see his father like that.

He spent the time off in his room with the curtains drawn.

A few days later Henry was buried next to Nora. Matching headstones: beloved wife and mother; husband and father.

His remaining friends and family walked slowly behind the hearse into the cemetery, winding their way around the headstones. The ground was soft underfoot. As the rain tumbled down, their little cortege made its way towards where his mother was waiting.

The priest had his say but Barry wasn’t listening. He was looking at the matting they’d put down on the ground. He hated it. Some kind of attempt to sanitise the gaping hole that was claiming the last member of his family. He wanted to pull the mats away to see the scar in the earth they’d opened up to put his father in. Once the casket was lowered and dirt was heaped upon it, there would be a rectangle of open earth to tell everyone who came by, here lies the newly dead. Like cleared forest, it would be an ugly interruption on the pristine lawn. Then that too would heal over, covered by grass,
and it would look like they’d always been here.

Barry came back to himself when the priest stepped back and motioned to him. He shuffled forward and cleared his throat.

“My father’s…” He choked on the words. They lay heavy on his tongue, clogging the back of his throat. He turned away. His heart jackhammered and his eyes burned. He couldn’t say anything. “I can’t do this right now.” All his father had done for him and he couldn’t even find the words to thank him.

As Joe stepped forward and made up for his failure, it struck him suddenly that at 27 years old he was now an orphan.

Except for some aunts, uncles and cousins scattered across the country who he’d only met a handful of times in his life, all his relatives were dead. He was all that was left in the world of the Allen family tree.

He stared down into the hole his father’s casket had been lowered into as everyone else trickled away and felt more alone than he ever had before.

He didn’t cry. He’d cried every night leading up to the funeral but he didn’t cry then.

The overbearing grief was gone and all that took its place was numbness.

This was his life now. He’d accepted that fact.

Or maybe it was more accurate to say he’d resigned himself to it.

One final look into the hole and he left too.
The rain had let up just before sunset leaving a fresh chill to the night air. Barry sat on the steps of the West house, his feet traversing the line between dry and damp. The neighbourhood, being far out in the suburbs, was quiet of manmade noises as it always was; crickets chirruped in the background instead.

The sounds of his friends came mutedly through the wall at his back. Barry hadn’t changed out of his suit, just popped some buttons and loosened his tie. He stared fixedly ahead, not really looking at anything, and continued to do so even when he heard the door opening behind him.

Iris settled beside him, leaning into him and sharing a little of the inside warmth that still clung to her clothing. Barry welcomed the touch – as inconsequential as it was.

“Are you okay?”

Barry huffed out an aborted laugh and Iris turned to him with pitying eyes and downturned lips. He wished she wouldn’t look at him like that. He wished no one was dead and everything was fine so that she didn’t have to look at him like that.

Wasn’t he the hero? Wasn’t he supposed to get a happy ending? He felt rage welling up inside him, bitter and acidic, and swallowed it down before he took it out on Iris. She was only trying to help.

“As much as can be expected.”

She hummed in answer. Barry understood. What could you say at a time like this that wouldn’t end up sounding clichéd or trite? He’d stumbled over the same ground with her when Eddie had died, tongue-tied and awkward. His crush at the time and his shameful hope had made him even more self-conscious of every word he said. He’d ended up running away instead.

Iris wouldn’t run away. She was stronger than him.

They sat in silence for a moment, Barry continuing to stare ahead and Iris fiddling with her nails, eyes downturned.

Quietly, she asked, “What’s going on with you, Barr?”
“My dad’s dead. Why, isn’t that enough?”

As soon as the words were out of his mouth, Barry regretted how sharply he’d said them. He had to remind himself again that Iris didn’t mean any harm. He was letting his own feelings taint the conversation.

She took his anger in stride, her pursed lips the only indication that Barry had been anything but civil in his answer. “I’m not trying to pick a fight with you,” she said, voice gentle, reaching out to place a hand on his arm. “You’ve been out of sorts for weeks now, there has to be something going on that I don’t know about.”

Barry scrubbed his hands over his face. “I’m sorry, Iris. I shouldn’t have snapped like that.” He suffered her touch as long as he could before he extracted himself and stood up, leaning against the balustrade and looking out into the street. “It’s just… we won. We beat Zoom. So shouldn’t everything be better? Why does it feel like it’s all just gotten worse?”

“I don’t know, Barr. Life isn’t fair. Bad things happen.”

“Shouldn’t it even out though?” Barry knew he was getting too loud and angry. He couldn’t stop himself though. The unfairness of his situation seemed too much to bear in silence. He knew venting to Iris was ineffectual but there was nothing else he could do. If there was a god up there, they definitely weren’t listening to him. “I’ve been through so much shit and I’ve worked so hard to keep this city safe. My mum, Eddie, Ronnie, Len, my dad… It doesn’t make sense. We lose even when we win. Why can’t any of us just have something good?”

She looked lost and he felt terrible for heaping all this on her. Helplessly and with misty eyes, she once again answered, “I don’t know.”

Barry turned around and went back inside.

He bypassed the living room and went straight up the stairs to his room.

He sat on the bed and opened the bedside drawer.

Inside was Len’s ring.
He took it out and held it.

***

Life went on.

Barry put on a brave face and went on with it.

He was plodding down the stairs into the bullpen, trying to catch sight of Joe one day when his eyes landed on another familiar figure first.

“Lisa?”

“Hi Barry,” she answered, sending her blonde hair flying in a graceful arc as she spun around to face him. It looked like the same wig she’d worn to entrap Cisco the first time they’d met.

“What are you doing here?” He crowded in close, lowering his voice so that they wouldn’t be overheard. “What if someone recognises you?”

She seemed to be getting enjoyment from his panic if her broad smile was anything to judge by. She wasn’t so different from her brother in that respect. He seemed to like to watch Barry squirm too. Had seemed to.

“Don’t worry.” She winked conspiratorially and jerked her head in the direction of the bank of windows across the room. Barry thought he saw a shadow move across them but that could have been him letting his imagination get away from him. “McCulloch’s got my back.”

That made Barry feel a little better about the situation, but he still needed to get her out of the CCPD’s foyer sooner rather than later. Like all the Rogues, her face got plastered all over Central City on a regular basis. On top of that, she had merch. People knew her face. It was only a matter of
time before someone recognised her.

“You know,” she continued, “you’re a hard man to get a hold of. Always on the run.”

Barry groaned. “Is that just genetic or something?”

“Perhaps,” she answered with a secretive smile. “Can we go somewhere more private?”

“Uh, yeah, sure.” He gestured for her to follow him as he ascended the stairs and headed for his lab. She slipped her arm through his halfway along the corridor and he hoped to god no one reviewed this security footage. He’d get so much ribbing just from taking a beautiful woman to his lab; if they found out it was Golden Glider he was getting all cosy with, he might be fighting for his job.

“Nice. I like it,” Lisa remarked as they walked into his workspace, turning in a circle to take the whole room in. “Real Frankenstein’s lab vibe you’ve got going here.”

“Yeah, well, I was too weird to work out of the main lab.” Actually a half-truth. He hadn’t fitted in with the other CSIs. Too strange, too flighty. When they’d suggested he take up residence in the old lab, he hadn’t protested. He liked the quiet. He went to lean against him desk as Lisa continued to roam. “So, what’s up?”

“It’s about Lenny…” Barry took an involuntary inhale at the mention of his name, like he was bolstering up his courage to confront something or preparing himself for a hit. Lisa circled the room, eyes moving everywhere except to Barry. “I thought about what you said the other day. We can’t do anything legitimately because of course there’s no body or even proof that he’s dead, but… we scouted out some abandoned cemeteries, the Rogues and I. There’s all these old ghost towns not far out of Central. I thought Lenny would get a kick out of that. We found one, it’s called Avernus. We’re all going to go there tonight. Put something up, maybe say some words,” she shrugged, “you know, do all those things Lenny would’ve hated us doing. Mick’s going to be there, he’s back from doing whatever it is he’s been doing. I’m not even going to pretend to understand it, especially not the way he explains it.” She deliberately kept her eyes focused downwards as she drew swirly patterns on his desk with her finger. “I’d like it if you could come too.”

Barry didn’t have the courage to tell her it had taken him sixteen whole years to even pull together the courage to go see his own mother’s grave. That was so pathetic. He hadn’t been able to speak for his father last week either, but he thought he could do this for Len. And Lisa. He could be there and offer whatever support he could. Maybe receive some in turn. The Rogues were the only ones who knew what Len had been to him.
“If you want to come, McCulloch will take you there.”

He nodded. He couldn't make himself promise he'd be there.

“Bye, Barry,” she said, ruffling his hair.

Barry slumped down into his chair as she walked away, running his hands over his face.

The click of Lisa’s heels stopped halfway to the door and then paused. Barry looked up and was just about to ask her what was wrong when she turned on her heel and strode back to his desk.

She smiled down at him then pulled a name plate from some hidden pocket in her coat and placed it down in front of him.

*Captain Singh.*

He didn’t notice when she left; he was too busy laughing.

***

“Awright, Flash?”

Barry didn’t think he’d ever truly get used to the image of the Scotsman popping into view behind him in the mirror between one blink and the next. It was too much like a scene from a horror movie.

“Hey, McCulloch. Time to go?”

“Aye. Just climb through,” he said, making room for Barry to step into the mirror beside him.

“They’re all there already.”
Barry took one last look at the ring Sara had given him from Len. He’d kept it in his bedside drawer since she’d handed it to him, taking it out at night to simply hold in his hands as a connection to Len. He hadn’t worn it since that first day. It was too conspicuous. People would ask why he was wearing it, where he’d got it from, and just thinking about having to answer them brought a lump up into his throat.

He’d been carrying it around all morning, not quite sure what to do with it. One part of him wanted to take it with him to the cemetery, similar to bearing Len’s last remains to his final resting spot in lieu of an actual body. The other part viewed it the same but shied away from that ultimate act. Then there was a third voice that hissed at him, asking what he was playing at. He wasn’t Len’s grieving widow. He didn’t get pride of place at his funeral. He’d only known him a year and a half. Lisa and Mick had been with him almost his entire life.

He wanted to be acknowledged though. He wanted his pain acknowledged by people who knew what he and Len had been to each other. In every other facet of his life he had to lie but he didn’t want to in front of these people.

God, he wished Hartley was still himself. He would have understood.

At the last minute as he was stepping through the mirror, he reached back, grabbed the ring and put it in his pocket.

Through the mirror in his room and out into the cemetery. He turned back and saw that they’d propped a pane of full-length mirror up against the trunk of an old oak tree. The cemetery wasn’t as overgrown and unkempt as he’d imagined. The grass wasn’t manicured like the lawn where his mother and now his father were buried but it didn’t reach any higher than mid-calf. The tombstones showed their age but most were still intact.

The Rogues were a little way off and all looking at something away from Barry. They turned with a murmur as Barry approached and parted for him as he passed. He hated the way Shawna looked at him, the pity in her eyes and the soft touch of her fingers against his hand. Mark’s familiar contempt was much more palatable. Axel seemed entirely out of his comfort zone, unsure of what to do or where to look. He was so young, he’d probably never buried anyone before. He and Shawna were dressed like they were heading out for a night on the town, only slightly more modest. The rest were in the usual black suits.

And behind them all was a monolith of black stone pushing up out of the ground.
They’d got a headstone.

**Leonard Snart.**

Just his name. No dates. They didn’t have a date for when he’d died. The way Mick explained it, the place where he’d died wasn’t even in the normal time/space continuum.

They were all gathered around it, leaving the room where the coffin and body would have normally been placed on top of the open grave free. Mick and Lisa had pride of place and McCulloch ushered him up to stand near them.

Lisa hugged him and kissed him on the cheek and then he stood there awkwardly as beers were passed around from an esky, not being able to take his eyes off the slab of marble in front of him.

He was vaguely aware of someone pressing a bottle into his hand too. It was like he was underwater: the sounds and sensations far away, swaddled from the present. He felt disconnected from himself. The Rogues raised their bottles in a toast and Barry watched, detached.

It was too much.

He couldn’t do this.

He couldn’t do this.

Lisa must have noticed that he didn’t toast and approached him slowly, hand out. “Barry?”

Cold, hard stone and there was Len’s name. Solid. Real.

He shook his head, like that would make any difference.

Len was gone. He was dead. And this cold stone in an abandoned mining town was the only testament to his existence.
“Barry?” Lisa sounded more worried this time.

“No, no, no, nononono.”

“Hey, come here.” She reached out for him and he shook away from her, turning to look out across the cemetery, anywhere but at Len’s grave. “It’ll be okay.”

“Calm down, kid.” That was Mick’s gruff voice. He didn’t try to touch Barry.

“No, I can’t be here.” Barry struggled to find the words to describe what he was feeling, why this was wrong. “This isn’t… I don’t…”

He clenched his teeth in frustration.

“Barry…”

He should have run here himself, not taken McCulloch’s shortcut. There was a way to do these things and this wasn’t it. The slow cortege, winding up to the cemetery: that was how he should have done it. His breathing quickened. He felt lightheaded. He felt claustrophobic.

His body was all jittery, lightning skating along under the skin.

“What’s wrong with him?”

“Barry, look at me.”

“Just give him some space.”

“He’s a meta?”
He needed to get away. He felt the lightning come to him, felt it crackle at his fingertips.

“McCulloch! Watch him!”

He turned and ran.

He didn’t care that the last few Rogues who didn’t know his real identity were now in on the secret. Lisa was calling his name and the sky was clouding over and the air was growing heavier. He sped up before Mark could try anything.

He hit Mach 2 as he crossed the Iowa border and then it was only a matter of finding the right vibrational frequency to slip into the speed force. It opened up to him like pin-diving into warm water. A feeling of security and rightness flowed through him. He just had to find that one night, the night that changed everything. Everything had started going wrong from that night.

He’d tried this once before and another version of himself had warned him away. But if Barry had learnt anything since then, it was that he was a fuck up and he shouldn’t be trusted. He’d listened that first time and now everyone was dead: his mother and father, Len, Ronnie, Eddie. All because of these stupid powers he never asked for. If he was normal, none of this would have happened.

He would stop Eobard from killing his mother. He would lock him away.

Barry would be normal. He wouldn’t have anyone’s deaths on his hands.

And he’d find Len. Wherever he was, he’d find him.

He’d get back what he’d lost. He’d right all the wrongs his existence as the Flash had caused.

He’d make a better world.
Title is a paraphrased lyric from Cotton by The Mountain Goats.

Works inspired by this one
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