Escape

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by MarkOwen

Summary

They used to fight for truth, justice and freedom. Now that Lex Luthor has become the most powerful man on Earth, Chloe and Oliver had to wonder if these words meant anything, anymore. With their friends at the hands of the government and the public thinking of them as criminals, the last two members of the Justice League are no longer fighting for ideals, but for their lives.

Notes

A little word here (http://mark-online.livejournal.com/13864.html) first before reading this fic.
The Man From Gotham City

'It's a miracle' – Tyler Randall, Season 1, Episode 17: “Reaper”.

[GINGLE]: CNN, your source of information. Professional and Independent. CNN. Professional and INDEPENDENT!

[SCREEN SWITCHES TO JOURNALIST.] “Welcome on CNN, I'm Carrie Castle. Breaking News from the Pentagon: Oliver Queen and his partner, Chloe Sullivan have broken out of custody where they were being detained under suspicions of Domestic Terrorism.”

[VISUAL CUE] Pictures of QUEEN, Oliver and SULLIVAN, Chloe shown on screen.

“Both of them are at large and considered to be violent and dangerous individuals. If you see them, do not try to intervene and contact the authorities as soon as possible. Their accomplices are still being interrogated by the FBI.”

[SCREEN SWITCHES BACK TO JOURNALIST] “International: President Luthor has reaffirmed our military partnership with Saudi Arabia citing the necessity to ensure the stability of the Middle East in the future. The president is on a twelve-day trip in the region and is next awaited in Syria to discuss the Iranian civil war with Bachar Al-Assad and Iraqi Prime Minister, Nouri Al-Maliki.”

[TAKES A BREATH] “Back at home: Yet again another shooting this morning in Fayetteville, Arkansas. A gay-support center was the target of a lone white individual who believes he acted in the name of Christ. Five dead, thirteen wounded...”

September 1st 2011. No more information.

Chloe stared at the ceiling, her eyes clouded over by the fog still clogging her mind. It took her a long moment to realize she was even awake. Her hands felt the blanket under her just as her eyes blinked and saw the gray paint of the low ceiling.

She yawned and sat up on the bed, taking in the sparse furniture of the bedroom and its baroque design. When she shook her head to clear up her thoughts, she realized she wasn't alone. “Ollie!” she rolled over her left to his asleep form on the bed.

His shirt had been taken off and his left arm was caught in a sling along with the bandages around his ribcage. He stirred under her strokes. “Shhh.” she soothed. “It's okay.”

“Chloe?” he opened his eyes slowly.

“I'm here.”

Oliver breathed in, becoming more aware with each passing second. “Where are we?”

“I don't know. Last thing I remember is us being tortured by Lex.”

He grunted at the memory and looked down at himself. Chloe followed his gaze. “God, Ollie... what did they do to you?”

His hand found hers, he squeezed her fingers gently. “I was in a car accident...” he recalled. “I was
chained up and alone in this desert... ghost town. Then I passed out.” his brow furrowed. “You were kidnapped.”

She was cut off as the door opened, letting in an elderly man carrying a tray. He froze at their sight. “Oh. Oh, by Jove!” he spoke with a british accent. “You're awake. Just in time for breakfast. You must be hungry after such a long sleep.” he put the tray on the nightstand at the bedside.

Oliver eyed the food in temptation as Chloe made a face. “Thanks, hm.... how long have we been asleep?”

The butler gave her a warm smile and pushed the sleeve of his suit back on his wrist to peek at his watch. “Over nineteen hours, Miss Sullivan.” he replied. “I'm Alfred Pennyworth.” he added when he saw her open her mouth to ask a question. “There is a bathroom behind this door, I'm sure you will want to have a good shower before leaving this room and we have clothes for your size Mister Queen but none for you Miss Sullivan, unfortunately, but we do have bathrobes. We will have to make do with these until I can send someone out to buy you something.”

Chloe nodded politely. “Thank you, hm, Alfred.”

The man bowed and walked away, knowing when he was dismissed. “I will tell my master you are awake, he will no doubt, pay you a visit a few minutes.” he finally said and closed the door after himself.

Oliver stared at the door. “Uh.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Yeah. Don't touch the food.”

His stomach growled, he sighed and she couldn't help her smile. “So, we have to get outta here but we have no idea what and who is on the other side of that door except for the enigmatic butler.”

“And for course, no windows.” she shook her head. “Would have been too easy. Hey isn't it a bit cold around here?” she asked when a shiver made her tremble.

“It's somewhat chilly, yeah.” Oliver agreed and started to look around the room. “Let's see if we can find some weapon or something.”

The door opened again and another voice surprised them. “I'll take into consideration the fact that you've just been captured by the government but, for your information... it's frowned upon to try to use a weapon on your guest.” The man walked forward, his dark cape flowing after him. “At least it is on the east coast.”

Chloe's eyes nearly popped out of her head. “Bruce?”

“What. The. Hell.” Oliver had the same reaction. “Wayne, what's this you're wearing? You look like the--”

“The Batman.” Chloe supplied.

Bruce smirked. “It seems I did a better job than you at keeping my identity a secret.”

“Meh,” Oliver grumbled. “You didn't have Lex Luthor to go up against.”

Chloe circled the bed, ignoring the men's bickering as she examined Bruce's suit. Her hands poked at the material and she looked deep in thought. “It's strong and modular. Kevlar. Isn't that Queen Industries' exo-skeleton?”
“Indeed it is.”

“Hey wasn't the Batman supposed to have disappeared eight years ago?”

By the door Alfred joined the conversation, his calm and charming wit hiding a jab at his master. “Oh he did retire back then, he just decided he missed the thrill of the adrenaline...”

Bruce sent him a glance. Chloe and Oliver understood all was not well between the two men on that matter. She cleared her throat. “So, how did you find out where we were? Where are we by the way? Because I don't want to break the mood or anything but we’re likely to be wanted fugitives now. Do you think the Watchtower's still safe? Maybe we could --”

“Breathe, Chloe, breathe.” Oliver teased.

Bruce gaped at her, his mind still whirling from her questions. “You've lost me.”

She pinched the bridge of her nose. “How did you know Lex arrested us?”

“Why don't you come with me? I'll show you.” Bruce proposed. “Alfred, could you call Dr. Hamilton down? I'm sure he'd like to take a look at your arm, Oliver.”

“Wait, Emil is here?”

“I brought him with us when I realized you would need more care than I could give you.” Bruce explained to the other man. “Also, I wasn't certain if he could be safe alone considering Luthor is either imprisoning or monitoring everyone you know.”

“All the more reasons not to lose any time.” Chloe declared, grabbing Oliver's hand. “Let's go.”

“You might want to cover yourselves a little more.” Bruce warned them. “This place is not exactly heat-efficient.”

Oliver raised an eyebrow. “And this place... is?”

Their host led them outside their room into a huge rock concave where darkness and advanced technology met and wove. The blond couple stared at the natural cave, their jaws on the ground.

“Woah!”

Bruce sported a proud smile. “This is the Batcave as Alfred likes to call it. We're right under my mansion.”

“This is amazing!” Chloe breathed, her admiration displeasing her partner.

“Meh, it's just a cave.” Oliver grumbled, earning himself a glare. “But it's cool... kind of...”

“I would say the next time we have to meet you don't have to hurt yourself, but that would be a waste of time, now would it?” Emil asked as he wrapped Oliver's arm in gauze.

The blond grimaced, shifting a little on the operating table he sat on. “Believe me when I say there's nothing personal in the fact that I'm never looking forward to meeting up with you again, Emil. Lovely chap as you are.”

His joke stole a laugh out of Chloe. She shook her head and left them for the computer bank a few yards ahead. The doctor, himself, merely broke out a smile. “If I knew signing up for this implicit
partnership would have gotten me kidnapped by a cape-clad phantom in the middle of MetGen...”

“To be fair, I hardly had any other choice than--”

Emil looked over to Bruce, his eyebrows raised to make a point. “Was it really necessary to scare me half to death, Mr Wayne?”

The batman went silent for an instant. “Theatrics are a powerful weapon.”

His words drew everyone’s gazes to him. He sighed and rubbed the back of his neck. “I suppose you are right.” Emil's unimpressed tone concluded. He slapped the gloves off his hands and pushed his glasses back up on his nose. “No strenuous activity for at least three weeks, you'll have some painkillers for a few days. And Oliver? Next time, a phone call will suffice.”

“Always a pleasure, Emil.” The blond grinned.

The doctor gathered his belongings and started for the exit. “Keep a close eye on him, Chloe.” he said as goodbye.

“Have a safe trip home.” she replied.

He went up to Alfred's level, sent one last glance to Bruce before addressing him. “Is there a more civilized way to leave this place than having to crawl through hand-carved galleries?”

“Certainly, follow me, sir.” Alfred led him towards a lift. “Can I interest you in a drink, Dr Hamilton? Metropolis is a long way back.”

As the men's voices faded away, Oliver hopped onto his feet and approached Chloe. Back on the large screen facing them, information was being fetched, analyzed and sorted. Faces appeared and disappeared in a flash, having him blink.

“Found anything?”

Chloe's eyes never left the screen. “No. Or rather, yeah but it's not what we wanted.”

That drew Bruce closer. “What is it?” he asked, intrigued.

“It's... all the people reported missing to the police who never made it to the FBI's database.” she explained, turning towards them. “48 hours after being reported missing, if the person's not found she's added to the National Crime Information Center's Missing Person file, which is basically under the FBI's governance. The thing is: these people?” she pointed at the screen. “They been missing for weeks and their names are nowhere to be found. So either the police never reported them or...”

“Or someone in the FBI deleted their entries in the database.” Bruce concluded. “I'm a little familiar with the police's procedures, I can tell you such a thing is automated.”

“Great so I'm going to go out a limb here and say this is somehow linked to Lex's new pet project.” Oliver said. “Doesn't look good.”

Chloe shook her head. “At all. We are talking about thousands of people, Ollie. Thousands! This is beyond what we've seen in the past with Lex. He's gone on an industrial scale.”

A shiver went through her and Oliver's healthy arm wrapped around her waist while Bruce looked deep in thought. “What about your friends? Any leads?”

“They're a special case.” Chloe replied. “Officially they're in Rikers Island awaiting trial for charges
of terrorism or whatever crap Lex will come up with. Now from what I've seen, there has been no new prisoner in Rikers for a week.”

Oliver sighed. “Figures, it all ties up with what Tess said.”

“Yeah but since we lost the file when we were arrested...”

“So what are we gonna do?"

Chloe pursed her lips and started to pace in front of the men's eyes. She wrung her hands together and Oliver could almost see her brain working out an idea, a smirk almost pulled at his lips before she exploded and came back triumphant towards them.

“I know!” she exclaimed, turning towards her partner. “Remember what Tess said about Lex's hidden activities? That it was a strict collaboration between the government and the army. The FBI and CIA are kept on a need-to-know basis.”

“Yeah, I remember.” he said. “Lex's not willing to take any chances.”

Chloe grinned. “That might work at our advantage. Who better to find out what he's up to than a four-star US General?”

“You're thinking...”

“Uncle Sam, Lois's father.” she clarified. “He's the only one who can find that piece of information.”

“Okay but we've gotta be careful there...”

“Don't worry, he's got years of experience.”

“I'm not worried about him, Chloe, it's Lois.” Oliver said. “She's going to be ecstatic when she hears from you and we both know how impulsive she is when she's like that. I don't want anyone to overhear what we're going to tell her.”

Chloe looked up at him, doing her best impression of her puppy eyes. “I'll ease her into it. It can work, you know it.”

He sighed. “Okay.”

“Yes!” she grinned and kissed him.

“Sorry to be the bearer of bad news but,” Bruce interrupted them as he typed away at the keyboard. “You might want to be extra-careful with your future communications with the outside world.”

“What?”

“Look up.” The older man said.

On the monitor, the FBI's most wanted list pulled up two names at the very top: Oliver Queen and Chloe Sullivan.
Alexander The Great

'He is ready. This is his time.' – Jor-El, Season 10, Episode 20: “Prophecy”.


When Lex Luthor declared the meeting over, noon had just rang up ten minutes ago. The staff cleared the Situation Room in a bit of a daze. This morning had been slow and the President used the free time he had to good use, preferring to inform his closest staff and top military advisors of his ambitions in Iran.

General Wilson didn't share the current mood. He was already aware of Luthor's goals, being one of the very few in the President's circle of trust. The thought made him scoff internally. Trust was a word Lex Luthor held a special definition for. He expanded and shrunk it at will for his own convenience and interests.

Most would shrug and say it was the President's job to be secretive in order to protect the national security but Wilson wasn't fooled. His experience at the White House wasn't as expansive as some and yet, he knew for a fact that Luthor's predecessor – President Bell – had been more open and preferred to rely on his staff a lot more than Luthor did.

His reasons were simple enough for someone like him, in Luthor's confidence. Wilson knew the American people would be outraged if they were aware of them, most of his colleagues would also be opposed to the President, probably. But these people were deliberately kept out of that knowledge and Wilson was more than aware that he would be too if Luthor didn't need him for his secret side-project.

The fact that he had picked him, a perfect stranger, to protect the most sensitive and unethical experiment ever made by the government was a mystery. Wilson had another card up his sleeve though, and he was about to play it.

Everyone had spilled towards the cafeteria to reflect over a meal on Luthor's plans. He walked past the self-service to get a good look at a group of suits in the corridor, dodging a few staff members carrying their plates. He studied one of the men with interest as he overheard people around him expressing their disbeliefs in hushed tones.

“Do you realize what it means? What the President wants to do?”

“Politics are a game of chess, sometimes you need to take some risks.”

“Do you think he could do that? The President?”

“Where is he, by the way?” one of them asked, looking over his shoulder, almost fearful to find the bald man sitting in the same room.

“I think he went up the stairs to the Oval Office.”

Wilson smirked. The President this... The President that... It would never come to their idea to call him Luthor, they were too afraid of him. The man carried a certain aura that commanded people to never speak against him in his presence and since he took up the fashion of sporting all-white suits after taking up the mantle of President, there was something almost supernatural about him. Something that elevated him above mere mortals, like a deified roman emperor who could be
nowhere and anywhere at once.

If there was one thing Wilson had to give to Luthor, it was his charisma. The man sure knows how to work a crowd, he thought in amusement.

“Slade,”

The grave voice surprised him, drawing his attention away from the corridor to find another officer greeting him at his side. “General Lane.” he said, his eyes rounding. “Well sir, if it isn't a surprise.”

Lane sported an embarrassed smirk. “Heh at ease Wilson, we're not in front of the boys so let's forget protocol, alright?”

Wilson nodded towards the drink in the man’s hand. “What are you doing at the White House? I thought you were preparing your retirement.”

“Well I'm not so fond of this place anymore but I still have to bring a full report to the Secretary of Defense once in a while.”

Sam Lane had been the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff for two years when Lex Luthor had been elected. A couple of months later, the Secretary of Defense promoted Four-star General Revson at his position and asked Lane to start rolling up his career. The man had been shocked by the news considering that he and Luthor had collaborated in the past. Since then it was notorious that both men couldn’t stand each other and made sure not to cross paths.

Talking about it was taboo in the general's presence but most suspected his ousting was linked to his family, mainly his daughter, Lois. Slade Wilson himself, a man with the reputation of being fearless, didn't dare talking about it with him.

“I hear you're a busy man these days.”

Wilson cracked a smile. “Oh you know I'm used to it. It's what we signed up for, didn't we?”

Sam Lane grunted and looked down his glass for an instant. Wilson used the moment to steal a glance towards the corridor. The suits were gone, he felt like cursing. “Listen, Slade there's something I need to ask you.” his superior started, getting his attention. “Can we catch a quieter spot around here?”

“Yes, yes of course.” Wilson chewed on the inside of his cheek. I can't lose the guy now or the plan's blown! “If you could just spare me ten minutes and we can meet in the Kennedy Garden.”

Lane seemed taken aback for a moment, his steel-blue eyes taking on a slight annoyance at the idea of sticking around the White House more than necessary. Wilson winced internally but pressed on. “I'm sorry I just have a pressing matter with someone, just ten minutes, that's all I ask.”

“It's okay, Wilson, I understand.” Lane nodded. “Ten minutes, it's not the end of the world. I'll be waiting.”

“Thank you.” He breathed a sigh of relief and started down the corridor, following the path he assumed the other man had taken.

Crossing the west wing at a quick pace to keep up appearances wasn't an easy thing to do. Especially when Wilson's heart was pounding against his chest as he wondered if he had waited for too long and his target was gone. Beads of sweat started to run down his temple. He brushed them off and leaped down the stairs.
Bursting into the main hall, he straightened his uniform and cleared his throat to evade the odd glances sent his way by a few people. Wilson breathed when he caught sight of a group of men gathered in the middle of the room, laughing together.

He eased his features and approached them just as they were about to leave. “Mr. Matthews! Mr. Mathews!” he called, grabbing their attention. One of them bid his goodbyes to his peers before joining the officer in front of the Vermeil Room.

“General Wilson, is it?” Regan shook hands with him, a pleasant smile on his face. “What can I do for you?”

“Oh it's nothing much,” Wilson started. “The president sent me after you, he said he forgot to have you look over something. Do you mind?” he asked, pointing towards the ascending stairs on the adjacent wall.

“Of course, of course.” Regan agreed eagerly. “Can't have the president waiting, can we?”

Wilson chortled. “Exactly, after you.”

The stairs were empty bare the two men. They were walking up towards the first floor, an area only open to the staff and guests which, at this time of the day, should be gathered at the cafeteria.

“Did he tell you how long it would take?” Regan asked, looking ahead. Wilson glanced at the lone door on the right wall and speeded up his pace to reach the other man's level.

“General?” he looked at him.

“Well…” Wilson started. “You see, it will entirely depend on you.”

Regan stopped. “Wha-” He was pushed roughly into a small side-room. “What are you doing?”

The general punched his abdomen, making him sprawl down, half-seated against the wall as his attacker closed the door and produced a retractable knife from his pocket. “Are you mad?! he coughed, holding his belly.

Wilson held the blade against his neck while his other hand started fumbling inside his jacket. “Keep quiet, listen and you will walk out of here in one piece.” he said. “Got it?”

Regan's eyes went wide. “Got it?” Wilson insisted, pressing the blade further into his skin. He winced and nodded fervently. “What do you want?”

“Give me your wrist.”

“What?”

“You wrist, son.” Wilson smirked. “Extend your arm, pull back your sleeve and show it to me.”

Regan gulped and hesitated for a moment before obeying. The general's right hand reemerged from his jacket holding a small rectangular device which he pressed against the other man's skin. “Hold your breath.” he instructed.

The device emitted a quiet noise as a strangled shout tore through Regan's throat and his body jumped. “There!” Wilson sounded satisfied as he pocketed the device, leaving only a small red dot on Regan's wrist.
“What did you do to me?” Regan demanded, his breathing almost impairing his ability to talk.

“Ah! I said, quiet.” Wilson reminded him. “I just injected you a GPS beacon. If I were you I’d be more worried about Luthor than this little chip under your skin.”

The other man's brows furrowed. “Why?”

Wilson looked at him for an instant, a smile on his face. “You are going to work for us.” he said, ignoring the question as he handed him a cellphone. “Take it. There’s a saved text message in it with your instructions. Follow them and be ready to take a call at all times. Got it?”

“No!” Regan shook his head. “Why should I work for you? You're insane!”

“In that case...” Wilson drew back his knife and hid it back in his pocket. “You're free to go.” he said as he helped him up. “Go, you're free. Though I doubt you'll get far once Luthor knows you tried to assassinate his girlfriend.”

Regan froze, a mask of horror taking over his face. “How?”

The general ignored him and set him straight, patting his shoulder in a rough fashion. “Go on with your day and follow the instructions. There's nothing more you need to know.”

“You're blackmailing me!”

Wilson's stare hardened. “You should have thought about it before pissing off the most powerful man in the world.” he said. “Now, don't try to play it smart. You listen to us and you'll get out of this alive. Got it?”

Regan swallowed his fear back and nodded.

“Good. Now get out of my sight.”


Sam Lane tapped his finger against his suitcase, a gesture of impatience which accompanied his wandering gaze over the gates of the White House's east wing. He checked his watch again and gritted his teeth. Fifteen minutes. Lane was starting to think Wilson had blown him off.

He started to debate whether he should leave or stay a little longer around the Kennedy Garden. The White House wasn't a place Lane was fond of now that Luthor was in power. He certainly didn't want to stand in the middle of the tailored grass hidden under a layer of snow looking like a lost idiot any longer. He exhaled and shook his head, turning for the exit.

“General!”

Lane's head jerked up to meet with the man who had had him waiting for so long. He looked out of breath as he trotted down the stairs in his direction. “I'm so sorry to have made you wait...”

“This is the last time you pull that one on me, Wilson.” Lane disapproved. “Understood.”

The second general stood up straighter and nodded solemnly. “Yes sir. Please believe me, it wasn't my intention to be so late, I had an urgent talk to have with one of the staffers.”

Lane grunted. “That will do for once.”
“I'm at your disposal now, General.”

“Heh, forget the formalities.” Lane cracked a nervous smile.

Wilson relaxed. “What did you want of me, Sam?”

“Well, it's a special request.” Lane looked around to make sure no one was eavesdropping. “I'm here on the behalf of a third-party who detected an anomaly in the communication system between the police and the FBI. An anomaly concerning missing persons.”

Wilson sucked in a breath and looked behind his shoulder frantically before grabbing Lane’s arm and leading him further away. En route, his forceful gesture eased and he moved his arm to pat him over the back as he laughed nervously.

“It's a sensitive matter, apparently.” Lane commented quietly.

“You have no idea.”

“What is it?” The most ranked of the two asked when they reached a clear part of the garden.

“Sam...” Wilson started. “This third-party... who is it?”

Lane's eyes gave nothing away, forcing the other man to take a guess. “It's family, correct?”

“Yes.”

“I see. Lois?”

Lane hesitated. “The request didn't come from her.”

Wilson nodded. “You should be very careful.” he said after a moment. “You're on the watch list.”

“I'm being tailed?”

“No, Lois is but your communications are all monitored. Beware what you tell her over the waves.” he explained. “Sam, why did you come to me with this?”

“You're in on it, aren't you?” At his nod, Lane sighed. “I knew you'd been involved with the CIA for decades so it made sense that you would be aware of whatever Luthor is up to.”

“Didn't you fear I could turn you in? You could be tried for treason, Sam.”

Lane was taken aback. “What sort of activities is Luthor trying to hide? Treason? It sounds like he's desperate.”

“No, he's merciless and wants to take every precaution he can.” Wilson rectified. “Plus if he caught you... he wouldn't go easy.”

“You're one of the most trusted officers I know, Slade.” Lane said. “My fate is in your hands.”

Wilson looked at him, he was honored by the trust Lane put in him. “What do you want to know, exactly?”

“What's Luthor up to?”

The other man looked down, trying to muster up some courage. “Lane, I want to be sure your niece
keeps my name out of these leaks. I'm not just risking my career, if you see what I mean.”

Lane's jaw tightened. “Goddammit what kind of shit is Lex up to if he's ready to murder one of his closest advisors?”

“There's an ongoing program in the government's black chamber, codename KUDEVIANT. Neither the CIA nor the NSA know anything about it.” Wilson explained.

“And the FBI?”

“They're clueless. All they know is that your niece and Queen are to be captured at any cost, direct order from the President.”

“What's KUDEVIANT about?”

Wilson sported a mirthless smile. “I think it'd be better if you discovered this on your own. It's not something one can put into words easily.”

“How? How do we do that?” Lane pressed, sensing Wilson was retracting.

“There are facilities all over the country. The closest one to Kansas is in Missouri. In the Reynolds County just south of the Number 51 lake there's a wide building surrounded by the forest for miles on end. It's the only one in the area. Have them check it out, they'll get their answers.”

He stopped. Lane saw him look rather ill-at-ease as his gaze wandered over the garden, he wondered if Wilson thought he had made a mistake of telling him these things. Both men spent five years in the same battalion in Vietnam and never lost contact as their careers made them go their own ways to climb up the army's hierarchy. Since their first meeting and the hard conditions of the war in the far-east at the time, a certain trust had formed and, if they didn't dare defining themselves as friends, there was a definite sense of kinship bonding them.

Wilson put a hand over his belly and stroked it as if to calm himself. “I've told you everything I could, now. We better not be seen together for too long.”

“Slade, wait!” Lane prevented him from leaving, feeling one last question begging to be asked. He drew in a breath before talking. “Why are you part of the project? What's your angle there?”

An enigmatic grin crossed the one-eyed officer's face. “I have the reputation of being a dangerous maniac, don't I?”

A glint of remembrance shone in the older man's eye. Lane had a picture of a forgotten time coming back into his mind. A time when they were both young, draped into dark-green uniforms and Wilson still had his two eyes as he aimed into the jungle. Back then things were simpler. The roles were clearly defined whereas today, they were constantly waiting for any of their allies to stab them in the back.

Wilson gave him a farewell nod. “Take care of yourself, Sam.”

The other man watched him go, his eyes still clouded over by the memories. “You too, Slade. You too.”
'I don't know. Just got a bad feeling. Kind of like when you can smell the air change before a storm.

' – Lex Luthor, Season 1, Episode 21: “Tempest”.

March 8th 2012. 02:59 AM UTC-6. South of Number 51 lake, Reynolds County, Missouri, USA.

The ventilation system proved to be impossible to sneak into. Its pipes were too narrow for two broad-shouldered men as Oliver Queen and Bruce Wayne. Besides, it seemed the facility was pumping out a lot of gas, potentially harmful substances out of the air vents. Even if the two housebreakers had brought breathing masks with them, it wouldn't protect their skins from the thin traces of mustard gas in the air filtering out of the pipes.

Working with the Batman brought many upsides. Notably the numerous and useful gadgets he carried with him. Oliver was grateful he had managed to save them from suffering any dangerous effects of the crap they would have been in contact with had they picked their first choice of route.

Crossing the eighteen miles of intensely prolific trees and bushes surrounding the building had been the easiest part of the plan. For once, Oliver's green suit had been an advantage. It took them four hours and a half to do so in order to avoid any patrols circling around. Knocking out a few guards would have made the process a lot quicker but they couldn't risk anyone alerting the security because someone wasn't answering their radio.

The hard part had been to cross from the forest to the facility itself while digging under the high electric fence. Oliver recognized luck played a big role there. The guards had set up a perimeter following the fencing around which another patrol of four guards divided in two groups walked. These groups had two dogs with them; German Shepherds, known for their excellent sniffing skills. When he and Bruce dug themselves into a hiding spot close-by, they were certain the dog would sniff them out and they'd have to force their way in.

It was a surprise when the patrol walked right past them and the dog trotted ahead of the men blissfully unaware of the vigilantes' presence. Bruce theorized the soil was composed of a lot of sulfur which, mixed in with water, expelled a strong smell that could have covered their own scents. Considering it had rained a lot the day before and the ground had turned into mud rather than dry particles of dirt, Oliver could only agree.

After slipping inside the facility's perimeter and closing the hole under the fence, things had been quieter. When both men realized the dangers of sneaking inside through the pipes, they decided to hoist themselves up the building's wall towards the roof. An easy task, when the light projectors were focused outwards of the facility which created an artificial shadow for anyone looking in from the outside.

Since it was a moonless night, the area was dark enough to hide them from being sighted by anyone while most of the guards seemed to be either inside the facility or sleeping in their own homes at this time of the day.

Oliver climbed onto the roof first and was about to breathe a sigh of relief when it caught in his throat. Before him, just inches ahead, two surprised eyes stared at him. The man seemed unable to do anything but gape at the impressive figure of the Green Arrow. Oliver himself, had lost a second as his heart skipped a beat when he first realized he wasn't alone.
It was only when the guard started to raise his tone and his rifle began to point towards him that Oliver gave his face a world-moving blow, propelling the man to the left. The vigilante seized the opportunity to turn the young man around and position him in a sleeper hold while muffling his cries.

The sentinel, a soldier in national guard uniform who didn't even look past twenty years old, fell into a silent heap on the ground as Oliver could finally release a shaking breath. That was close, he thought. Had the poor guy's finger twisted on the trigger, the whole area would have been aware of the security breach and, then, he didn't even want to think about what would have happened.

“Arrow, are you okay?” came a frantic voice in his ear.

He nodded, knowing she could notice the movement from the camera integrated into his glasses. “I'm a lot better than I would be if I hadn't spotted him in time.” he admitted. “It's really dark out there.”

“Don't give me another adrenaline rush like that, Arrow.”

That made him smile. “Worried about me, Tower huh?”

“I'm not going to answer that, this isn't even funny!”

He bit back a chuckle when another voice invited itself into their dialogue over their encrypted canal of communication. “When you two are done arguing, do you think you'd be kind enough to give me a hand, Green Arrow?”

Oliver leaned over the edge and grabbed Bruce's extended arm, pulling him to his level.

“I hope I won't have to drag you around for the whole thing, old man.” he teased the Batman who gave him a sharp glare.

“Try coming back into the fold after a ten-year hiatus, kid.”

He pursed his lips to prevent his amusement from showing on his face. “Admit it, though... you missed this, didn't you?”

Another growl. “Eye on the prize, Arrow. We're on a tight schedule.”

Once the unconscious guard was positioned in a way that made it look like he had fallen asleep at his post, the two men started down the stairs leading into the facility. The big concern was the cameras. They had to reach the communication room to take control of the surveillance system and thus, keeping their presence hidden. It ended up being an issue once Oliver found a map of the building hanging on the wall.

“See that?” he whispered, showing his colleague the map.

Bruce leaned over it and grunted. “We won't be able to make it all the way down without being caught.”

“No,” Oliver said, staring at the elevator doors at their end of the corridor. “But I've got an idea.”

The chaotic noises of the keyboard made Oliver even more nervous. He growled in impatience and sent a look over to the four sleeping men laying on the ground. Green darts poked out of them. They'd been laid under the desks out of view from the outside. Not that it would help if someone was going to enter the room wondering why it was empty. He shook his head. These thoughts weren't
"Try again, I've coded a hole into their MAC." Batman's rasping tone said from the main chair.

"Same port?" another voice asked in the comm.

"Yes," Bruce confirmed. "Are you connecting?"

"I'm in!" came Chloe's excited voice.

Oliver let his shoulders fall in relief. "You're in the game now, Watchtower." he reminded her.

"I've launched a scanning process to see what they've got." she explained. "The cameras and blueprints were the first thing I saw, how nice of them!"

"What do you see?" Batman asked.

"Looks like they're still clueless about you guys." she paused. "Okay! I've got some results already. Wow this facility is actually much much bigger than we thought."

"What is it?"

She remained silent for a moment. Oliver could picture her speed-reading over the results on her screens. "They have over 1300 inmates in this facility. 1300, Arrow!"

Oliver cursed. "They didn't waste time. It's too much for us, we can't break them all out safely."

"We have to try." she insisted. "At the very least to know what's truly going on there and gather some proof."

"They must have a massive underground installation," Bruce mused. "This building is large, but not large enough to accommodate so many people. Even prisoners."

That made the Green Arrow grimace. "Tower, Is this going to be a problem for the comms down there?"

"It seems they're using wireless access points all over the facility," she answered. "That's one point for us. I can make our communication channels go through their network and back to me but..."

"But that's going to give away your location." Oliver guessed sadly.

Her sigh was all the answer he needed. "Sending so much data through Tor would create so much latency. I'd be useless to you if you ever ran into trouble."

However, Bruce didn't see things their way.

"We're already running on borrowed time," he started. "Watchtower, you should be safe for another half-hour if we proceed. To be sure, you pack in twenty-five and head straight to base, we'll meet you there."

"It's risky!" Oliver protested.

They all knew this mission was a gamble. If anything went wrong for Oliver and Bruce, Chloe would have little to no chance helping them since there was nobody else to call as back-up. Likewise, Chloe being the pivotal member of the League, the men couldn't afford losing her and all her directing skills. Besides, her worth was much more than what she could bring to the team for
Oliver. He often wondered if he'd be able to think rationally if she somehow was the one to get kidnapped.

Bruce seemed to be running out of patience. He grunted and turned on his heels, heading towards the door to keep watch. “Make a decision.” he told them.

“We have to do it.”

“Do you realize what they're going to do to you if they ever catch you?” Oliver asked.

She sighed. “It would be just as bad as if you were captured.” she retorted. “Listen, we both know the risks. Don't you think the reward would be worth it?”

Oliver huffed. “Do you really want an honest answer?”

“Arrow...”

He dropped his head to his chest. “Alright.”

“Okay?” her voice became hopeful.

He nodded. “Do it.”

The Green Arrow threaded carefully through the darkened corridors of the first underground level. He and the Batman had split to map the facility faster. They planned to meet up at the last level before going back up.

His comm link crackled. “Okay so, we are now connected through the Clearnet.” Chloe announced. “All cameras are on a loop, there are no guards patrolling this area so far and I've also deactivated your video connections to speed things up, so make sure you don't damage or lose them because they'll be lost if you do.”

“Copy. Batman, out.”

Oliver poked at his ear. “Got it, Tower. Remember your time is limited.”


Now was the time to become the shadows and explore. In case they ran into trouble or if Chloe detected an issue, they'd be in contact. Until then, both Bruce and him needed the quiet to focus on the task ahead which was simple enough: Go in, report, go back out. Alive.

Such was their plan. One big gamble. In the past, had something gone wrong, Oliver would have asked for help. Now was a different time. All of his friends bare Bruce and Chloe had been captured. They were either being tortured or...

Oliver breathed out slowly. It was better not to think about it.

His forearm buzzed. He looked down to the dimmed screen fixated on his arm. One red dot blinked on the map. Chloe signaled to him of a guard's presence close to his position. The dot seemed static and entrapped in a small room. Oliver guessed it was a resting area where the men could have something to eat or sleep.

Ten paces further and his speculations were confirmed. Round the corner of the main alley came a sliver of light and the whispers of a few voices.
Moving forward in silence, Oliver remained glued to the outer wall for a minute to listen to the sounds and determine the situation. The guard's room, a few feet to the right, was the only animated part of this facility's section. It was vital for the vigilante to neutralize whoever was in that room if he wanted to cross this section and explore the next one which was supposed to be one of the prisoners' lots.

Letting conscious and fight-able guards trailing his path could prove dangerous if he ever encountered any problem ahead and needed to pull back.

He was now close enough to make sense of the sounds muffled behind the door left ajar. It became clear to Oliver that whoever was in this room was listening to something, either a radio or a television post.

Deciding to take another risk, he came up the door and let himself make sense of the words.

"...since 2003. The President declared it was time to end the conflict once for all and pacify the area, I think it's clear he didn't share the national enthusiasm when we took down Saddam and I'd say, looking at it after all these years, that he was right!"

*Lex.* He gritted his teeth. It shouldn't be any surprise to him that they would talk about the Luthor heir since it became the medias' favorite pastime when Lex won the presidency. From then on, it became impossible to find an unbiased opinion about him on the papers.

Sometimes it became so grotesque he wondered how the population didn't notice the propaganda hitting them over the head again, and again, and again.

"We have to stop saying the people's always right because it obviously is not. We need a strong man in the office, one able to give back America its power. I believe we found such a man in Lex Luthor. We're going to do great things--"

Unable to take any more of it, Oliver kicked the door open and rushed towards the lone guard half-sprawled on the chair in front of his TV screen. He barely had the time to stand up before the Green Arrow knocked him out.

"I'm doing you a favor, buddy." Oliver whispered as he turned off the offending monitor. "You shouldn't listen to all these lies."

He left the man on his chair, bringing his arms together on his chest to make him look like he fell asleep. Oliver then locked the door behind him with the keys found in the guard's pocket and continued on his way down the corridor.

The further he engaged himself into the alley, the darker it got. This part of the facility was bare of any light source which forced Oliver to activate his night vision. A few paces later and he met with a reinforced steel gate, a password-activated one.

The Green Arrow typed on the screen fixed on his forearm.

"- Code for door 71?  
- 729016"

Following Chloe's word, he entered the password into the gate and heard the locks being pulled away as it opened. Oliver remained frozen for a moment when he realized he couldn't see the end of the room. Another pitch black area, but this one was different.
On each side of the corridor were cells. All the way down the alley and it seemed to go on and on. It looked like he had found the cell blocks. Oliver shivered in anticipation of what he was going to find.

“Let's see what your sick mind has in store, Lex.” he murmured before moving into the room in silence.

Looking into each of the cells, Oliver found they were all populated. Some contained only one person, others several and he found two of them that contained twenty people. He had lost count of how many cells he had examined, it felt like he spent hours looking and still, the end of the alley remained unreachable.

He must have looked into dozens, if not hundreds of cells and he could count on his hand the number of times he found someone awake. Most of the people remained unmoving on the concrete ground, sleeping – or at least, he hoped so. The only ones awake looked to be in a state of shock, hidden into a corner, hugging their knees to their chests as they watched him, through their cloudy and unblinking gaze, unresponsive.

If Oliver was unsettled when he observed the first cells, now he was starting to get sick. The more he was watching, the more he noticed the appalling conditions in which these people were detained. The cells were spacious but that didn't hide the lack of proper waste management, the bucket in the corner as the only source of water and the utter and complete lack of food.

Most prisoners were obviously underweight. Some even looked like skeletons while others, were surprisingly, morbidly obese. Nothing in between. At one time, Oliver passed by a woman scratching her arms in furious fashion until they bled. She only stopped for a second to give Oliver a glance before she resumed her task with more vigor. The noise of frantic scratching made the Green Arrow's hairs stand up.

He shook his head, trying to keep his wits only to be taken by surprise when he noticed one of the prisoners had pressed himself again the bars and seemed to be calling to him, extending a frail hand for him to take.

Oliver hesitated for a second before approaching the man. He crouched to be at eye-level with him. The prisoner, a malnourished man of asian origin, trembled as his mouth moved and quivered. It seemed he was trying to talk to him but no sound came out of him. As if, telling the horrors he had seen and lived through was an impossible task.

He held the man's hand, feeling bones rather than fingers circle his own as the prisoner gripped him in fear he would leave. Through it all, the man never ceased trying to speak to him. Oliver couldn't only watch in dismay as he tried to communicate vainly. The Green Arrow felt his throat constrict at the man's despair until he noticed the tears rolling down his cheeks in abundance. At this sight, Oliver let out a strangled sob.

“God, what kind of hell is this?” The man looked down and cried harder. Oliver gave his hand a light squeeze.

He had decided to force the gate open when a sharp noise hissed from the other end of the alley. Immediately, the prisoner had let go of his hand and fled to the depths of his cell. Oliver leaped to his feet and took hold of his crossbow, aiming it at the opening door.

A scientist appeared. He made two steps before jumping in surprise at the sight of the Green Arrow holding him in contempt. His clipboard slipping from his hand and clattered on the ground, the sound echoed throughout the area.
The vigilante growled as he motioned him forward. The man, fearful of him, obeyed and approached, his steps noisy. Oliver moved to the side in order to circle around him and close the gate. However, he hadn't planned the moment when two arms dashed in his back and flattened him against the bars of a cell.

He cried out in pain when the prisoner screamed against his ear. It sounded like a mix between a laugh and a plead of despair. It went on and on while Oliver struggled to get free until the arms went away. He jumped away from the cage and turned around, feeling his heart pounding in his chest.

There, in the darkness of the cell, a cackling form emerged from the shadows. The prisoner bent from side to side hiding his face behind his hands as his eyes peeked from between his fingers. Oliver took another step back when he witnessed, horrified, the terrifying spectacle of the prisoner uncovering his hands as he laughed harder.

A sizable portion of his face had been teared off. The skin hung in the air while the muscles under it had started to rot. It dangled around when the man was caught in a fit of cackles, his eyes, the picture of insanity, focused on Oliver.

The situation went from bad to worse when the alarm blared through the walls as red lights flickered incessantly from all over. Oliver turned around to see the scientist removing his arm from the alert panel.

"Surrender yourself, you won't be able to leave this place!" The man asserted even as he tried to back away from him, fear painted all over his face.

The Green Arrow looked as mad as he felt, the veins in his neck bulged out as he stepped towards the lab coat and punched him.

When he opened his eyes, the scientist felt his heart in his mouth. There, looking down on him, were two imposing figures hidden by the shadows of the night. He was in the middle of the forest, far from the facility even though, his ears picked up a faint echo of agitation in the background.

He was starting to sit up on the mud when the thunder ripped through the skies, illuminating the two vigilantes ahead of him. A cry escaped his throat when he recognized the hooded face of the Green Arrow who wasted no time pulling him closer.

Arrow was ticked off and he was shaking, a terrifying rage motivated his tone as he started to talk.

"KUDEVIANT. What is it?!"

The scientist, paralyzed, could do nothing but stare at his captor. His only answers were unintelligible stutters. Another voice rose, breaking his torment.

"Why is there no centralized databank in this facility?" The second vigilante asked, his voice a rasping whisper. The scientist could only stare for a moment. Two pointy-ears, piercing eyes and a long dark cape; these were adjectives that were only used to describe a legend, a myth. The Batman.

"The databank?" he gulped.

Green Arrow shook him. "Where is the information about the project hidden?!"

"It's not here!"

The shaking continued, becoming violent. "Don't try to stall!" The shouts and barking of dogs were
“We’ve seen first hand what kind of experiment is going on here.” The Batman continued. “Do you want to know what he will do to you if I leave you alone?” he asked, pointing to his companion in green.

Of the two men, Batman may have the fear element on his side with his mysterious aura but at the moment, the barely repressed rage the Green Arrow was radiating preoccupied his prisoner much more.

“It’s all sent off-site!” the scientist almost cried. Arrow and Batman shared a look before another shake prompted the rest of the answer. “The project... it comes from the very top! All orders are sent from Location X. It's the root of the experiment, they collect the results and everything else too!”

“Location X.” Batman repeated.

“Where is it?” Green Arrow tightened his grasp.

The man took a much needed breath, he could feel the tears wetting his cheeks. “Don't kill me, please!”

“Where is it, damn it?!”

“On Metinic Island, in Maine!” he sobbed, going on incoherent rants, pleading them to spare his life.

The bushes rustled around as the dogs' barks were close. When the scientist took his hands off his face, the two vigilantes were gone just as the guards emerged from the depths of the forest.

“Sir, are you okay?”

“I... I don't know...”
April 7th 2012. 01:45 PM UTC-6. Republican Palace's gardens, International Zone, Baghdad, Iraq.

Regan Matthews walked through the imposing gallery of the Iraqi government's residence meddling notes of a prestigious past with the modern era of chaos and obsolescence. He glossed over the mural paintings, with an air of nonchalance he pulled off quite well. The intendant led him towards a secluded part of the palace and Regan found himself wondering if behind the façade of magnificence, they truly thought they were fooling anyone.

It became a recurring theme in his mind since the start of his journey in Iraq, accompanying Lex Luthor's visit along with several hotshot American businessmen. The Iraqis welcomed them in an atmosphere of grandeur and power in an effort to make their guests forget about their difficult position in the region.

Regan, like many of his peers, had been surprised by the show put on for them even as he caught his President smirking his way a few times. When came the time for negotiations, and the Iraqi politicians came into play oozing arrogance and disinterest, he started to wonder if there would be any significant deals to be made with them. The relative peace that had settled in the country for the last couple of years had renewed commercial interests in the country and many economists labeled Iraq a new El Dorado for capitalists.

An uncomfortable sensation began to take over Regan as he became convinced Luthorcorp's efforts would be rewarded with little to nothing compared to the seven hundred millions they had spent to prepare their infrastructures in bordering countries for future deals. Even with the knowledge of Lex's support on his mind, Regan doubted the company was a true preoccupation of the president now that he had other matters on his hands.

Then they shook hands, sat down and started to discuss and it all turned around. Regan started with small offers which the Iraqis accepted right away. Hiding his surprise, he pushed them a little and, sensing the hubbub in the room went up a notch along with their increasing discomfort, he started getting bold. They accepted everything.

The Iraqis looked more and more contrite and gritted their teeth as they realized their guests asked for more. Regan took an opportunity and was about to ask for the unthinkable when shouts came behind his back. He turned and watched an Iraqi vehemently refuse a bold offer from a negotiator until the later retracted and the politician launched himself at his side, almost begging the businessman to forgive his outburst.

Regan realized they had zero leverage and would accept anything he proposed. At this instant he relaxed. When the Americans left the room all smiles and with the confidence of touching the jackpot, they left the Iraqis frustrated and ashamed.

All smiles.

That was three days ago. If Regan had smiled then, he certainly wasn't now. Despite his untroubled appearance, his stomach was knotted as fear seeped into him. He thanked the intendant and walked
into a large office room. One large marble desk took up half the room and the golden decorations kept on the illusion of wealth which couldn't dissipate the desolation he could take a glimpse of from afar through the two windows of the office.

“Matthews, what a pleasure!” A tall military officer asked from his spot on the far-left window ledge. The man's advanced age hadn't hindered his physique yet and even the dark eye-path he wore couldn't conceal the piercing stare he sent his way.

Wilson.

Regan wet his dry throat. “General.”

The officer climbed down his perch to meet him. “How are you doing?” his grasp on Regan's hand asserted the commanding aura he carried. “I take it everything went well this morning?” This time, his voice had lowered, betraying the implications of the question.

“You do not need to put on a show with me.” Regan grumbled, he might be afraid of the man but not enough to hide his annoyance. “I know your true self.”

Wilson bent towards him, a condescending eyebrow watching him carefully. “Is that a yes or a no?”

Regan was silent for a moment as he fought not to evade the other man's gaze. “I didn't want to be associated with this.” he huffed. “This is Lex Luthor we're talking about! The man who gave me everything! If you weren't forcing my hand like this, I'd have you --”

A hand falling on his shoulder stopped his rant. He looked up to the close-faced general. “Have me what? Killed?” he challenged. “Son, I'm going to be honest: I don't give two fucks about your remorse or what you want to do to me. You had a job to do. Remember our little deal?”

“Remember?” he pressed, forcing Regan to nod. “Good. Now I want my answer.”

“Yes! It went well! Are you happy with yourself, now?!”


“You won't get away with this.” Regan muttered.

The general laughed and was about to retort an acerbic comment when their conversation was cut short by the door wincing open.

“Mr. Matthews, General.” a voice greeted them.

Wilson straightened up and walked past him. “Well if it isn't the lovely Miss Reiser.”

She smiled. “Always a pleasure, General. And aren't you feeling cheerful tonight?”

“Ah, Miss Reiser, I just feel tomorrow is going to be a good day.” he sent Regan a glance. “A very good day.” he said before addressing the second visitor in a more professional fashion. “Mr. President, you sure know how to make yourself desired.”

Lex smirked. “Protocol.” he explained. “Why don't we take this outside? I hear the gardens are pretty quiet at this time of the night. Regan?”

He took in a deep breath and nodded. “Of course,” he agreed, sending a withering glare towards the general as he walked past him.
Ties set aside and collars let loose, the group strolled through the Palace's gardens under the setting sun of the Middle East. At this time of the day, the dimming light in the sky burst beams of warm red lights, giving a relaxing atmosphere to the people who braved the last hour of hot temperatures before they plummeted into the night.

Lex walked towards a frail path leading to a secluded patio. Satisfied of the area, he sat on a ledge and faced his peers.

“We will invade Iran next week.” he said without preamble. “We will stage an incident on the border and make it seem like our interests in Iraq are threatened, etcetera, you know the drill.”

“So soon, sir?” Wilson asked.

Lex smirked. “I know we agreed to wait another month and use this visit to setup the last preparatives but given the reports back at home about the deviants' results, I felt we need to move up the date.”

“Well let's just hope the scouts were right and there's enough Mono for our needs.” Wilson said.

'Mono' was the diminutive for Monoleum 99, an alien metal that fell in the Iranian desert in October 1989 following the meteor shower of Smallville. The origins of the metal was no secret to those who knew about kryptonite.

Given the monoleum's vastly superior properties compared to uranium, it had the potential to replace petrol and nuclear power with a more efficient and eco-friendly energy which would ensure the future of the human species for centuries – if not millenniums.

Well... that was what Luthor had told them. In reality, Wilson had never seen a shred of evidence backing the president's claims but he figured that if the man was right, the Monoleum 99 could be the catalyst of another era of American domination over the planet or... another cold war, if somehow, another country found out about the metal.

Neither options were acceptable in Wilson's mind. He feared what Luthor might do with the power of the Mono and he was even more pessimistic about the planet's future if say, China, also exploited the metal and initiated another round superpowers coming at each other's throats.

With these thoughts in mind, the officer sent a discreet glance to Regan before addressing the president. “Aren't you afraid of Checkmate or Queen who might foil your plans?”

Lex's expression darkened. “Queen only got away because of the incompetence of the FBI. The people responsible were punished and I made sure it won't happen again.”

“First we need to capture them again, though.”

“That shouldn't be too hard.” Lex continued. “We have his friends in our facilities, we know everything there is to know and it's safe to say he wouldn't let his friends down. That's how predictable he is.”

Wilson nodded. “And Checkmate, sir?”

Lex laughed. “Checkmate are licking their wounds, they're too busy trying to survive to do anything else. I have them covered.”

Regan noticed the general smirk and remain silent as Lex turned to him. “Luthorcorp will have the biggest part of the business deals in Iraq and in Iran once we control the country. I also need you to
cooperate with our scientists in order to control Monoleum 99.”

“Of course,” he continued. “this will mean a massive re-information campaign back at home. We control all of the mainstream media and most of the smaller businesses will follow our lead, I'm not worried about them... No, what I'm worried about are the idealists who have some audience.”

“I wouldn't consider them a threat.” Reiser said. “The public will consider them as conspirationists and they won't be taken seriously. Let's not forget the masses still believe everything that's said on TV.”

Lex smirked. “We are kindred spirits, Condy.”


“Just in time.” Lex rose. “You're up to date on the latest information. Why don't we walk back to our apartments?”

“Right, I'm not fond of staying around during the night. Baghdad still is not safe, even here.” Regan chimed in, trying to get Luthor out of the area as he looked around, his heart beating faster when he heard Wilson's approving tone.

“Even the green zone has not had the safest record, I would tend to agree with Mr. Matthews here.”

“Off we go, then.” Reiser prompted.

They walked back through the main alley under the tall palmed trees of the gardens towards the Palace where they resided. Lex climbed up the marble stairs leading to the terrace. “General, how would you feel about some Scottish whiskey? I believe I have a bottle from '67 in my case.”

Wilson grinned. “I would never pass up such an offer, Mr. President.”

He smiled. “Condy? Regan?”

Reiser agreed to the invitation and Regan was about to do the same when a shadow leaped out of the bushes behind Lex. A blade shone in the night like a spark flying to Lex's neck. The president's hands flew to his wound as he grunted, blood seeped through his fingers.

Reiser shrieked and went to Lex's side while Regan watched the scene in horror and the shadow disappeared from where it came. “Help! Call some help!” Reiser said, holding Lex on her lap.

Regan approached them. “Let's get him to his suite!” They carried him past the porch into the bathroom. He couldn't help staring into his boss's horrified eyes while he held his neck. Back on the doorstep, General Wilson stood aloof from the scene, a neutral expression on his face.

“What are you doing?” Regan raged. “Call security!”

Wilson stared at him. His face was a wall, the man was a master of controlling his emotions but Regan could imagine him laughing inwardly. “Do it!” he raged, his own guilt swallowing him whole.

The other man reached for his phone. “Code one to all units, I repeat code one to all units...” he hollered, walking out of the room.

“Hold on, hold on!” Reiser said to the wounded man.

Lex calmed down and let his neck loose as he watched his blood covered hands. “I don't...”
“Lex!”

He pushed past them and stood before a mirror, examining his wound. “There's nothing!” he said, astonished.

“The blood...” Regan said.

“My nanosuit...” he mumbled to himself. “How come they were able to slit through the skin?”

He sucked in a breath, his hand covering his hip as he realized in horror the cause of his weakened state. “It can't be!” and yet, he still remembered the claws of the beast.

Lex burst through the door, Reiser and Regan in his tow. “Have you caught him?” he addressed the general surrounded by a dozen security men.

Wilson's awe couldn't be hidden. “Mr. President... I thought you were...”

“He missed me, I'm alright, it was scarier than it really was.”

The general looked unsettled. “So? What's your report? Have you caught my attacker?”

“We... yes sir.” Wilson said. “But it's not a man as you seem to assume. It's a female attacker.”

“Female?” Lex's eyes widened. “Where is she?”

Wilson motioned to a closed door guarded by the men. “In here, sir. There's no window in this room. We tied and gagged her.”

Lex moved past him and into the improvised cell, freezing on spot when he took notice of the person lying on the ground. Her horror mirrored his own shock. “Well, I'll be damned....” he muttered. “Leave us alone.” he ordered and heard the door closing behind him.

“Oh dear, what a surprise.” he sneered. “I had all but forgotten about you, Lana. But don't worry, we have all night to reconnect....”

Lex remained immobile, staring at Lana even as he addressed Wilson, who was frozen in the doorway. “Leave us.” The president said.

Wilson didn't move. “General, leave us.” Lex tilted his head to send him a glare.

The officer, forced to execute himself, started to back away, his eyes set on his fellow agent all the time as he tried to convey his sympathy. He closed the door behind himself and left her to her own devices.

When the first muffled cries filtered to the adjacent room where he and the security detail were, Wilson knew he couldn't stay. On his way out, his gaze caught Regan's grinning face looking back at him. The two men shared a glance full of hate.

Slade Wilson retreated to his personal bedroom in the palace. The first thing he did was locking the door and closing the curtains. He then sat on his bed and reflected for an instant before leaning into the bedside table to retrieve a cellphone.

The other side picked up immediately.
Wilson's mouth felt dry as he looked for words to explain the situation.

"Well?"

"... Mission failed, sir."

There was a sigh on the other end. "She couldn't get to him?"

"Oh no, she did. She did get to him."

"I'm afraid I don't understand you, Slade."

The longtime checkmate agent ran a hand over his face. "She slit his throat. I saw it happen, I saw him bleeding. He should have died. I left him for dead, for Christ's sake!"

"Are you saying..."

"... he's not normal. The president's a mutant."

"I see." his superior said. "And agent Anaa, is she...?"

"No, sir." Wilson hesitated. "Not yet, at least."

"She was caught alive?" the voice was incredulous.

"I tried to get to her first but I couldn't."

Another sigh. "She's being interrogated?"

"No, not really, she... does it matter anyway?" Wilson answered, agitated. "She can use her cyanide pill."

"No she won't, she doesn't have one. She always refused them."

"Are you serious?" Wilson rose from the bed.

"I'm sorry, Slade."

"I should have caught her first." he started rambling. "At least if I couldn't get her out I could have given her a quick and painless death!"

"Don't beat yourself up."

"Don't beat myself--" Wilson interrupted. "Do you know what he's doing to her right now?!"

A long moment of silence followed. "Agent Anaa's fate is sealed. There's nothing we can do to help her anymore you have to focus on yourself now. Is your cover still on?"

Wilson took a deep breath and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Well that depends on whether or not she'll talk. Oh and that dickhead – Regan, of course. If he feels empowered he won't hesitate throwing me to the wolves."

"Can you run? Take him out?" the voice asked immediately.

"And get myself caught? Not a chance. If my name hasn't been thrown around already it would seal my own fate."
“So we wait.”

Wilson chortled. “Not much else I can do now, can I?”

“Slade if they ever... Well I want you to know it's been an honor working with you for all these years.”

“It's mutual, Max. Don't worry about me, sleep, that's all you can do. When you wake up next morning I'll call you... or I won't.”

Max sighed again. “Goodbye, old friend.”

“Chao co em, Butterfly. At least I'm on the right side.” he said before finishing the call and dropping the phone on his bed.

Wilson knelt and pulled a metallic box from under the mattress. He settled himself on an armed chair in the corner of the room set up so he could face the door on the other end. Lifting the lid, he let his eyes run over its content for a long moment, admiring the insides, almost awed by the sight.

He shook his head. *Fuck it. He told himself. They don't call us the Suicide Squad for nothing.*

Wilson grabbed an old Colt M1911 from the box, checked its magazine. He held up the weapon, pressed it against the side of his head and waited.

He waited all night.
Location X

"I believe the term is cry havoc and let slip the dogs of war!" – Lex Luthor, Season 1, Episode 21: "Tempest".


The Expandable's crew was agitated as men ran up and down the courses, following their captain's instructions. Rick Flagg did his best not to hinder their work as he dodged them here and there on his way to the back of the ship. He knew they were preparing for action. Their next stop wasn't a secret, the Black King himself hadn't bothered keeping up the mystery.

As soon as he had received the information, the king immediately asked the captain to set course towards the American east coast then demanded to see Flagg. Ever since he'd gotten on board, the relations between him and his superior had been tense but an order was an order and Rick Flagg wasn't one to disobey.

He presented himself at the Black King's cabin a quarter of an hour later, taking the time to clear his throat and prepare to face the man before knocking on the sealing vault door. "Come in, Flagg!" the voice inside called.

Rick nodded at the man who looked up from the opened case on his table. "Sir."

"We have a situation." the king said without preamble. He looked worried. "Can you dispatch an agent to Maryland?"

Flagg thought for a moment. "I may be able to call on a sleeper agent, sir but the commute might last several hours, maybe even a day. When do you need them on the field?"

"Yesterday." The Black King replied bluntly. "Send them to the town of Glenmont, that's Wilson's residence."

"Something happened to Wilson, sir?" Rick's interest was piqued.

"He was the one to send the memo about the Island. He'd just come back from Iraq and learned of Queen and his friends attacking several KUDEVIANT facilities then figured they were close to finding the central point." he explained. "He was supposed to send more information hours ago and I can't get him to answer his contact link."

Rick looked down at the reminder of the failed mission which took Lang's life in Iraq. The king himself noticed it. "I know, Flagg. It's never easy." he said. "Look on the bright side: you wanted Queen and Sullivan on board? You'll get them. Soon."

"Sir, whatever happened to agent Wilson, I'll make sure we find him." he stood upright, galvanized by the idea of finally sharing their goal with the vigilantes of the Justice League against their common enemy.

"See to it." The King dismissed him and put on his jacket, before heading down to the captain's spot, catching Flagg one last time in the corridor. "Bishop! Make sure to tell your agent he's on his own, I have a feeling I'm gonna need you on the field when we get there!"

Rick saluted him and took off to his own room.
May 29th 2012. 10:44 AM UTC-6. Off the coast of Maine, USA.

The northern part of the Atlantic was renowned for its capricious and often violent weather. Rare were the moments of peace in this ocean and there was always an underlying fear of the fishermen's families off the coast of Maine that their loved ones would not return home at the end of the day.

Such matters hadn't stopped one frail shipping boat from adventuring itself out at sea, navigating further away from the coast as it slowly approached an island bare of any human being as it was closed in an effort to preserve the wildlife on it months ago: the Metinic Island.

These claims were known to be lies by the three occupants of the boat. They knew the true nature of the activities taking place on this piece of land lost at sea as they prepared themselves to accost on it.

“The facility's larger than the other ones.” Chloe held onto the satellite pictures sprawled on the small table, keeping it from moving away as the boat rocked onto the powerful waves it encountered. The weather wasn't looking good, it rained a lot and the skies were dark, which was exactly what they wanted.

“It's certain. They're keeping inmates in there too. Do you think we can find the guys?”

“That depends on whether Luthor keeps all his assets in one place or prefers to decentralize them. You know him better than I do in any case.” Bruce answered, thoughtful. “I wouldn't want to seem selfish but I think we'd better not make them our priority. I know how it sounds.”

“You're right.” Oliver's dark voice replied from the wheel as he steered the boat closer to the shore. “They'll be expecting us anyway. That scientist we interrogated? No way he didn't tell them about what we know. As much as it pains me to say this, we have to look after ourselves first and make sure we can find the data. Then we'll have all the leverage we need for a negotiation.”

“Piece of cake.” Chloe muttered drawing the men's attention.

Oliver left the wheel, prompting Bruce to take his spot. “You look pale, you sure you're okay?” he said cupping her face.

She tried to give him a smile but her stomach twisted and all she could muster was a grimace. “Make sure you get back in one piece.” she said. “Then I'll be okay.”

“We'll be fine.” he whispered, finding a little smile in himself for her benefit.

Chloe didn't look convinced but nodded anyway. “Hopefully this is the last time we do this.”

“Touching land in two minutes.” Bruce warned from his spot.

Oliver nodded and kissed her for a long moment. When they came up for air, his eyes had taken on this hardened glint that Chloe called 'the warrior look'. He stroked her face for an instant before backing away.

“Okay let's do this.”

On the island, a man shook his head and took a bite of his sandwich. “Fuckin' weather.” he spoke with a mouthful, spewing a few bits of food on the dashboard of his truck as the rain poured onto the windshield.
At his side, another man shrugged. “It is what it is.” he zipped up his coat and pressed on the handle. “See ya for the night cargo.” he said before climbing down the truck and circling to the back, hurrying into the concrete hangar.

“Godspeed, amigo!” the driver rose his sandwich as a toast before taking another bite.

The door opened again and the man swallowed his food down. “What the rain's too strong out there, Jorge?” His attempt at humor fell short when he found himself side to side with a tall blond guy wearing his colleague's clothes.

“I'm sorry, Jorge had a little... accident.” the visitor said, his blond hair hidden under a corporate cap. “Too much rain. He slipped on a stone and banged his head on the ground. Poor guy.”

“What are you doing?” the driver started to lunge for him but was forced to back off when the other man pulled out a small-sized crossbow.

He gaped at the weapon, recognizing the man's face. “You're Oliver Queen.”

Oliver smirked. “Nice observation skills buddy, now put your hands down on the wheel again, and try not to look at my friend behind you.”

“Your frien--”

“Over here.” A raspy tone in his back almost made him jump through the roof. “What in god's name...!” he yelled at the sight of a caped bat in the back of the empty truck.

“Warned you.” Oliver mocked him. “Now be a good boy and drive us inside the facility and all will be well.”

The driver took a moment to regain his breath along with his assurance. “And if I refuse?” he challenged.

A dangerous glint appeared in Oliver's eyes, he slipped closer to the man. “The last time I was in a vehicle with two government agents they both wound up dead. Do you want me to add your name to the list?”

The man opened his mouth but was cut off. “I don't want to know your name, actually.” Oliver reflected. “I'm going to call you Truck Driver, alright? Now unless you want to change that to Dead Truck Driver, I'd suggest you turn on the engine and drive.”

Truck Driver's assurance was gone, he realized his predicament when he noticed the area was empty of anyone else and he wouldn't be able to call for help on the radio as Oliver had just taken it away from him and turned it off. He was forced to comply with the vigilante's request if he didn't want to receive an arrow between the eyes. Besides, he didn't even want to think about the creature in the back.

Even with the headlights on and the sweepers brushing off the windshield, the visibility was terrible. Rain kept showering the road ahead and enveloping the truck in a bubble making its occupants feel as if they were alone in the world. Thankfully, the large grooved tyres of the military truck were more than good enough to keep it on track towards the facility.

“You're halfway there.” Chloe's voice whispered into Oliver's ear.

The latter grunted and sat back, letting his crossbow rest on his lap, still pointed at the driver. “You know how many people are working in there?” he asked him quietly.
Truck Driver gave him a suspicious glance before looking back at the road. “I don't know man. All I do is transportation between the port and the workhouse. I've never got inside the damn thing except for the warehouse and there shouldn't be more than five people there right now.”

Oliver nodded, aware of Bruce keeping an ear open on their conversation as he watched at the back of the truck for any sign that they were being followed while he exchanged information with Chloe in full discretion.

“So you don't know what they're doing in there? The workhouse?” Oliver asked, almost relaxed, the edge in his tone was gone when he spoke to the driver. “Haven't heard any rumors?”

The driver shook his head, his own worries tampered. “Nah man, they're pretty quiet the ones working inside, white-coat types and all that. They've got that professional secret thing going, you know?”

Oliver pursed his lips. “I suppose it's better that way.” he reflected, earning a curious look from the driver. “When we get there,” he changed the subject. “You're going to have to find some bullshit to feed them so you can get inside, let us in and drive out. That gonna be okay with you?”

“I think I can manage.”

“Great. And don't think about getting smart. The thing I told you about those government agents? It's real. Okay?”

Truck Driver nodded empathetically. “So long as I get outta here in one piece, that's fine by me.”

Oliver nodded. “Then we have a deal. Give them the bullshit and let us handle the rest.”

They stopped at a tall steel gate. The driver let out a breath and pointed towards the radio sitting on the dashboard in front of the other man. “Press the green button on it. It's gonna ring them so they know we're here.”

Oliver stared at him through thinned eyes. “It's the normal procedure, honest!” Truck Driver insisted. “They need us to ring them before they open the gates that's how it goes.”

The vigilante glanced back at Bruce before grasping the radio slowly. “Alright. But remember? Don't play smart.”

“It's safe, honest.” he pressed on.

Oliver hesitated, looking over the gates engulfed in rain. It almost felt like they were out by nightfall even if they were in the middle of the day. On each side of the gates stood tall concrete walls topped by barbed wires and at regular gaps, were light spots. The walls seemed to go on and on for miles. He wondered how long it had taken them to build such a facility. *When did this project start?*

He blinked the distracting thoughts away and pressed the green button, bracing himself like it was going to explode. Nothing happened for a moment until a loud siren wailed. Oliver almost jumped and looked at the driver sharply who rose his hand in an appeasing gesture.

“Relax!” he urged.

The siren stopped and soon the gates unlocked before, slowly, sliding open, revealing the inside of an open warehouse several yards ahead. “It's just the ring up. Don't worry.”

Oliver breathed out a sigh of relief as he put his cap back on and made sure his Green Arrow
costume was covered by the upper uniform he'd taken from Jorge. He pushed the cap down on his face to hide his identity and made sure not to look up too much as the truck moved inside the warehouse, stopping behind the closing gates.

In front of them, was another set of gates, closed ones. It was a checkpoint. They were now inside the building and could hear the rain pit-patting on the roof. A guard moved up to Truck Driver's door and climbed up to his window, inspecting him and Oliver who looked away for a moment, watching the other guard circling the truck in silence.

"Papers," the first guard asked. Truck Driver gave him his driver license. The guard's brow furrowed. "No authorization?"

"Ah.." the driver started. "I'm just here to take back some empty cans, you know? The ones that carried the... uh...phosphates?"

The guard looked confused. "The phosphates?"

Truck Driver swallowed nervously. "Yeah, the ones that have been sitting around empty for months. They're in here I tell you. We need them."

"Hold on." The guard said before climbing down and heading towards an office desk on the left side of the building where three more men stood. They chatted for a moment with their superior before one of them sat in front of a computer and spent long minutes looking at its screen as the others waited in a tense silence.

Oliver sent a questioning look to the driver who was starting to sweat profusely. The man gulped but gave him a comforting gesture. The vigilante wasn't reassured, though. He watched the last guard walking to and fro in front of the truck and wondered what he would do if he had taken a harder look at the back. Like, pushing open the dark green curtains covering the backside of the vehicle and fell nose to nose with the Batman himself. Or what would happen if the guards saw through their bullshit.

They almost jumped in surprise when the truck readjusted as a weight was added to it. Oliver saw out of the eye the second guard perched at his door window. The man was clean-shaven and oozed an air of fake superiority. He looked like a guard empowered by the fact that he held a gun. A dangerous kind of guard.

"So what are you transporting?" he inquired with a smirk.

The question was addressed to Oliver but the driver took the initiative and answered for him as the vigilante tried not to show too much of his face. "Nothing," Truck Driver explained. "It's empty, as I said we're looking to fill up, not to drop something."

The guard sniffed, as if it made him more imposing. "And that guy here," he prodded Oliver's shoulder. "Can't talk for himself?"

Oliver still kept his eyes firmly fixed under the dashboard, making sure his half-opened coat hid his crossbow and hoped the guard wouldn't spot his Green Arrow pants. "Mmh... tired." he mumbled.

"Tired?" the guard repeated. "It's ten past noon."

"Yeah, uh..." Truck Driver came at Oliver's help. "It was a long night-shift for him. He had to fill in for my mate, Jorge who wasn't feeling well."

The guard stared at them suspiciously for a long moment in silence. "I'm gonna check the cargo, if
you don't mind.”

The driver looked like a deer in the headlights but nodded. “Go right ahead.” he said.

“Right? Okay?” he nudge Oliver again.

“Sure.”

The guard remained immobile for a few seconds, looking at Oliver with an odd look on his face before climbing down and heading towards the back. Oliver cursed under his breath as the driver was starting to look properly panicked. Oliver had the urge to glance behind him but remembered he wouldn't see anything as the curtain between them and the back was drawn. He just hoped Bruce was ready to deal with the intrusion.

At the same moment, the other guard regained his place at the driver's window and handed back the driver's identification, the hint of a professional smile on his face. “So,” he started. “The twelves empty barrels that contained phosphate, that's correct?”

The driver took his papers with an uncertain hand. “Right.” he said.

“Hey you're doing alright, there?” The guard asked, almost amused as he noticed the beads of sweat on the driver's face.

“Ye... yeah... sure.” Truck Driver stuttered. “It's just that... uh... I kept my window open on the way here, it's just some spray.”

“Of course, of course.” The guard replied and eyed the gates. “Right so let's get these open.”

Before any of them could move a piercing shout echoed from the back of the truck, freezing the blood in their veins. It was quickly muffled and soon the silence came back.

“What was that?” came the question from the men by the table.

The guard who spoke to them eyed the two men in the cockpit suspiciously before starting to climb out and draw his gun. Oliver leaped from his spot and, past the driver, grabbed the guard through the open window and covered his mouth as he shot tranquilizer arrows at the group of guards.

Two of them fell down right away but the third one was protected by the table and, as the man who struggled in Oliver's grasp destabilized him, had gotten enough time to unholster his gun and aim at the vigilante.

Truck Driver yelled and braced himself for the shot. A quiet noise was followed by a pained cry. When he opened his eyes, he saw the dark creature from the back of the truck moving towards the writhing guard who caught some kind of taser shot.

“Oh...! Oh my god!” he breathed.

Oliver grunted and banged the last guard's head against the truck's door, letting him slip down on the ground, knocked out. He then grabbed Truck Driver by the collar. “We're gonna open you the gates and you're gonna drive out of here and make yourself forgotten, okay?” he told him in anger.

“Okay.” the man nodded frantically.

Oliver let him go and climbed out of the vehicle, bringing the radio with him. “I'll keep that with me.” he simply said.
Soon enough, the gates from which they came were opened and the vehicle backtracked then breezed out of their sights. The two vigilantes shared a look then both men let out an audible sigh of relief.

“Come on let's get these somewhere safe.” Bruce motioned to the unconscious guards.

The Green Arrow preceded Batman, weapons ready to fire, inside the mysterious Location X. The warehouse had led to a small door – unlocked – giving access to the facility's inner sanctuary. A notable difference to the previous facility they had sneaked into in Missouri was the lack of large rooms to accommodate the inmates. Location X seemed to be mainly constituted of small interweaving corridors giving access to countless smaller rooms behind closed doors from which came muffled cries and scream that chilled the blood of the vigilantes in this already sinister environment.

A second, and most important for them, difference was the utter and complete lack of video-surveillance equipment. Either the people in charge were terrible in managing the security of their installation or they had something more terrible to hide than what the last members of the Justice League had already seen.

“What do you think?” Batman asked as they stopped at a corner and examined the corridor's configuration.

Green Arrow could only think it looked like a labyrinth. Anybody could come out of anywhere at anytime. “I think we'd better stay together.”

“Safe decision.” Watchtower agreed, receiving the video streams from the vigilantes' in real time. “This place is a real stranglehold, boys. If you make one bad encounter it might turn pretty bad pretty quick. Be extra-careful.” she urged.

“Ain't she right?” Oliver winced. “And these screams, damn it! What the hell are they doing in here to provoke this kind of reaction?”

“We're going to have to find out, soon.” Batman decided. “The databases, first. We need proof to stop Luthor once and for all.”

Oliver nodded. “Yeah, let's do that quick, okay?” he asked, itching to set the suffering prisoners free from their jailers. “How long do you think we have before people start noticing no one's at the gates?”

“It's the lunch-break so we probably have less than an hour. At most.” Chloe informed them. “Let's make it count.”

Following her cue, Bruce and Oliver engaged themselves further into the corridors. Every ten doors, the walls were cut by another corridor perpendicular to the one they walked down. The latter were also connected to other alleys following the same pattern which resulted in linear blocks of 40 square meters and gave the vigilantes the impression of loosing themselves in an unending cobweb.

“Stop, stop!” Oliver said, looking around at yet another intersection. “How long have we been walking already? Maybe we're on the wrong path to find the computer room.”

Bruce looked irritated. “I'm starting to think there's no computer room altogether.”

“Go on.” the other man prompted.
“Look around.” he said. “Do you see any lifts? Any staircase or even any door leading outside?” he pointed to the square block on their left. “These seem to only house experiments. This place isn't about storage.”

Watchtower's voice came from the comm links. “They might have decentralized their data all over the facility.” she explained. “I'm guessing here but it's possible there's a terminal in each of these room and they're all linked together.”

“That would make sense.” Oliver agreed.

“There's no upper floor and nothing underground it seems.” Bruce exposed. “Your solution is most likely to be the right one.”

The bang of a door closing echoed through the alleys, pressing the vigilantes into a decision. “Well, let's find out.” Oliver approached the closest door and turned the knob. It sliced open, allowing them to rush inside at the surprise of the three scientists already there.

The Green Arrow shot one of them as Batman engulfed the rest in his cape, letting two limp bodies fall down a moment later, allowing the heroes to take in the room's layout. As predicted it was a small square room. The monotony of the white walls was broken by a bank of computers and scientific tools disposed on a desk pressed to the far wall as to the right of the door, an elevated medical bed was occupied by a seemingly sedated individual clad in only a white cloth. He was hooked to a breathing machine and his pulse was regular as the IV drip in his arm seemed to keep him alive and feed him chemical components.

Oliver noted with a touch of bitterness that the only thing that reminded him he wasn't in a normal hospital were the metallic cuffs restraining the patient on the bed.

“Leave him be.” Chloe told him. “It's better we don't interfere with his treatment. His life might depend on it.”

He nodded but remained silent as he watched the dark lines under the man's eyes as well as his pronounced cheekbones that reflected his malnourished condition.

“I've got something.” Bruce declared.

He was already sat in front of the computer, typing away at the keyboard. Oliver approached him. “Well?”

“Watch.” he said. Lines of informations ran down the screen. “It's the raw data of everything that's been happening here and in each facility of the project since its inception.”

A relieved smile broke out on Oliver's face. “Hear that, Tower? Watchtower?”

“I'm here.” she replied after a moment. “Don't waste time and start filling up the drives.”

“A problem?”

They heard her take a long breath. “The weather's getting better and I've just seen a small convoy leave the port. It's only a matter of time before I'm noticed and they realize you got inside the facility.”

Oliver sighed, resigned but Bruce disagreed. “I need more time, there's too much data the risk of missing the most incriminating evidence is too great. We need enough dirt to keep him away for good!”
“Time’s ticking, Bruce.”

“I know but we--”

“Shh!” Oliver ordered, reaching for his crossbow as footsteps echoed in the corridor.

They got closer, prompting the heroes to prepare themselves at the door as they waited in anticipation. The moment seemed to last an eternity. The sounds got louder and louder, almost echoing in their own heads until, at last, it started to decrease, slowly, until it faded away completely.

They breathed and remained immobile for a moment. “Boys…” Chloe's voice seemed uneasy as she pulled them out of their stupor. “It's a matter of seconds now. The trucks are starting to pull up to the gates.”

Oliver closed his eyes and activated his comm link. “Watchtower, I want you to get the boat out at sea. You're risking too much staying on the shores.”

“What about you?” she asked, outraged.

“Batman is going to send you the data through out wireless link. We’ll make sure it lasts until the end.” he explained.

“Oliver!” she exclaimed. “You're not going to sacrifice yourself for that!”

“That's not in my plan, honey, trust me.” he replied, his hand pulling a set of grenades out of his belt. “We’re just gonna give them their money's worth.”

“Don't do anything rash, please…” even through the radio he could hear her voice trembling.

“I love you, Chloe.” his answer was obvious.

“I love you too.” she cried through her labored breathing.

He nodded. “Now, go.” his whispered order was hardly what he wished he had said but he refused to keep the conversation going any longer for fear she might decide to get stubborn and join them in the field.

“Give them their money's worth?” came Bruce's inquiring voice. He pointed at the grenades in Oliver's hand. “What's your plan?”

He smirked. “It's a little too quiet for my taste out there, don't you think?”

Chloe did her best to calm her stomach. She had already barfed twice and the pitching of the boat wasn't helping. She didn't know if she got sick or if it was a bad case of seasickness that got hold of her but it was getting harder and harder to keep her spot in front of the computer.

Still, she forced herself to work through the uneasiness and pulled the fishing boat away from the shoreline. Chloe wasn't an expert at driving such a vehicle but Oliver had shown her the basics when they prepared the operation. She could manage to steer it back towards the continent at worst. The hard part was keeping the boat from drifting as it remained in the middle of the sea and also, to avoid a freak wave that might catch her by surprise.

Chloe shook her head, hoping to dissipate the haze away when she caught sight, out of the corner of the eye of a couple of guards on the coastline of the Island. One of them had his goggles set on the boat and the other was talking into his radio.
“Shit!”

The sirens blared off each side of the facility and shouts mixed themselves with the noises of people running around in the smoke, trying to find their way out of their predicament as the visibility became worse and worse all the while they screamed at each other, demanding answers about what was happening only to find other people sprawled on the ground.

Another group of scientists turned a corner only to be greeted by a harsh blow to the head.

“Now that's what I call a party!” Oliver claimed on the radio as he looked at the people he had just knocked out. “Hey the security guards are starting to come out.”

“Look out for them, they might get trigger happy.” Batman's raspy voice replied in his ear.

“How's the transfer going?” he asked as he came up into a room and unchained another inmate.

“I need to check again but we were barely at ten percent when I left it.”

Oliver bit his tongue. “Okay.” he answered, adventuring himself again into another alley and unpinned yet another smoke grenade into the section. It burst out loudly and started spewing more gray matter in the air.

“What's going on?”

“Are we under attack?” came voices from all sides, muffled by the sirens wailing their ears off.

The Green Arrow moved through the smoke into the direction of the closest voice, imagining he would find another group of running scientists until he fell face to face with a security detail of a dozen men. A few shouts and punches later and half of them were down. Things were going in the vigilante's favor until one of them started firing into the smoke.

Oliver took cover through another corridor and touched his ear. “It's starting to get crowded here! How are we looking now?” he yelled into the comm.

“Seventeen percent!” Batman shouted.

“Over here!” came the voice of a guard from another alley.

Green Arrow moved swiftly to tackle the man. His fist hit him straight on his nose, banging his head against the ground, knocking him out. The vigilante grabbed his radio and continued his progress, bumping into terrified inmates from time to time. “Keep to the walls!” he advised them.

“Arrow!” Batman's frantic voice made him freeze. “Arrow, I've found Dinah!”

Oliver knelt down. “What?”

“She's here, unconscious, I've got her with me.”

“Get to the transfer room, I've joining you here!” Barely a second after breathing the words, Oliver's arm was grabbed and he was lifted against the wall. He shouted in pain as the man pressed his forearm into his throat.

Nothing could have prepared to the sight that greeted him as he watched the face of the man in horror. “Batman!” he squeaked. “You won't believe it but I found Victor and he's not happy to see me!”
The cyborg's robotic eye blinked red as his other hand pressed against Green Arrow's face, willing to smash him into the wall. “Batman! Help!”

A hydroplane appeared on the horizon and set course after the fishing boat. Chloe put a hand on her stomach and let go of the wheel as she barfed again on the boat's floor.

Outside, the speedboat called out of a megaphone. “Surrender yourself, you are outrun! Surrender or we will use force!”

Chloe gripped the wheel to pull her aching body up even as the world started to spin around her. The voice from the megaphone seemed to echo through her skull so loud she was afraid it might burst. In a last effort, she pressed the accelerator and turned the wheel even as she started to fall down.

“Surrender!”
May 29th 2012. 01:28 PM UTC-6. White House, Washington D.C., USA.

Lex Luthor looked out of the oval office's window, his eyes unseeing. Ever since the attempt on his life, the president often found himself lost in moments where all thoughts evaded him. He was alone in front of his own image and, far in the background, the skeletons of the rest of the world.

Sometimes the eyes looking back at him were softer and more innocent. This Lex Luthor still had his pale red hair and the face of a teenager. Other times however, the man standing in front of him was older, sporting hardened features, a gloved hand as well as a nasty gash on his right hip.

“Reflecting again, aren't you?”

That sneering voice. Lex barely batted an eye anymore. He knew who was standing by his side, sipping on a single mat as he watched the sun still high in the sky at this time of the day.

“Don't you have other people to haunt, dad?” Lex demanded, his voice wary.

Lionel laughed into his glass. “Oh Lex, I doubt most other delusional people in the world hallucinate about me!” he earned himself a glare from his son. “Face it, Lex. You are delusional. I believe that's a result of this little scratch right there.” he pressed on Lex's right hip, making him hiss and back away.

“Don't you dare!”

“Ah, Lex, Lex, Lex....” the old Luthor shook his head, grinning. “What's the reason of gathering all this money and power if you can't even find good surgeons capable to fix yourself and get that alien bacteria out of your bloodstream?”

“Why are you here?” Lex barked.

“Well, it looked like as good a time as any to squeeze in some... father-son bonding time, I suppose.” Lex scoffed. “Spare me the lies, dad.”

Lionel watched him, a haughty look on his face. “I find it baffling that after all these years and all that you've done, there's still a part of you that doubts.”

“I have no doubts.” he replied quickly, too quickly by the look on his father's face.

“That's what I'm talking about.” Lionel pointed a finger at him. “Somewhere in here there's still the young Lex Luthor who tries to tell you what you're doing is for the benefit of all mankind. Do you really think they're going to praise you when it bursts out into the sunshine? You can't rely on their satisfaction, son. The people aren't able to grasp even the simplest idea of what you're trying to achieve. You need to rule them, rule them with an iron fist and never allow yourself to let their opinion influence you.”

Lex rubbed his temple and sat heavily into his stuffed chair. “Thanks for the lesson, dad, it's
refreshing, really.”

Before Lionel Luthor's ghost could take another dig at him, the intercom buzzed. “What is it?” The President asked.

“Sir, we've just received a message from Colonel Casey telling us Location X has been compromised!”

Lex rose from his seat so fast it fell back. “What?!”

Lionel started to laugh. “Oh Lex! Don’t tell me it comes as a surprise! You knew this was going to happen from the moment they broke into the first facility. It was only a matter of time, how could you be so careless?”

The younger Luthor's face twisted in rage. He grabbed his father throat and pushed him against the wall. “I have enough, ENOUGH I tell you of your mockery!” he exploded. “I will crush them under my boot like cockroaches and put the world on its knees without your help! I killed you back at Luthorcorp so I didn't have to deal with the weak-minded looser you'd become and I'll achieve what you've never been able to do without your HELP!”

He pushed Lionel on the ground and the bust of Thomas Jefferson crashed on the wooden tiles of the Oval Office as an uncertain voice came from the intercom. “uh... My President?”

“Prepare the helicopter and call the navy!”

May 29th 2012. 01:52 PM UTC-6. Metinic Island, Maine, USA.

Stars were invading Oliver's vision. His labored breathing and the pressure increasing in his head weren’t helping in his struggle against Victor. The cyborg's hold on him was growing stronger and in a matter of seconds he would be defeated against a man he once considered a friend.

“Vic... Victor!” he whispered harshly.

Oliver felt himself go and, in a desperate attempt to survive, trashed against his attacker in vain, trying to push him away until the last of his strengths gave up and his vision started going black.

He blinked when he felt the pressure being relieved and found himself sprawled on the ground, shocked to have survived what seemed to be an inescapable outcome. In front of him, through his blurry eyes, Oliver took notice of a small group of inmates sitting on Victor. These people, in terrible shape, professed an immense courage to risk themselves in going against such a powerful opponent. They may have been seven sitting on his back but the cyborg looked unaffected and almost effortlessly lifted himself up, forcing them to fall over themselves.

Victor’s focus was firmly set on Oliver and he ignored the rest of them as he headed back for the vigilante. The latter was well aware he had no chance in a fair fight, the cyborg being stronger and faster than him, so he decided to play his last card on him.

The Green Arrow waited for the last moment, his hand going to his back when the cyborg grabbed him by the collar and forced him up. Oliver's hand reappeared carrying a taser which he pressed against the mechanical side of Victor's skull.

He felt the electric shock and kept it short. The cyborg's systems being troubled let go of Oliver as he fell to his knees, shaking like a leaf. The vigilante, still recovery from the electric shock, wasted no time and tased him again, forcing his friend writhing on the ground.
“I'm sorry, Vic!” he called over the noise.

Victor Stone's entire body convulsed even after Oliver removed the taser and watched, unable to help him as he experienced a power crash, his entire system being forced off. Victor's cyborg eye stopped glowing and Oliver breathed out a long sigh, kneeling at his side.

“Arrow, are you okay?” came Batman's voice.

“Victor is under control for the moment but he might come back at any time.” Oliver retrieved a USB device from his pocket. “I may have something to help him.”

Chloe felt the ground moving under herself first. She winced, her eyes still closed when she smelled a foul odor surrounding her and wished it along with the pain in her chest to go away so she could sleep at peace when water sprinkles started raining down on her face and the noises she could pick up in the background started to get more real.

Another splash caught her attention close by and she groaned, wondering where she was and what had woken her up. Opening her eyes seemed to be an awful task. Her eyelids refused to cooperate as if it demanded too much strength from her and she was about to give up when cracklings started erupting in her back.

“...ower.... you... py?”

The undecipherable words got her attention and, curiosity being her greatest strength, she forced her body to pull her out of her comatose. The light was almost too strong for her weakened sight and she moaned, lifting herself on her elbow before shaking her head and taking another chance at glancing around.

The ground continued to feel unstable and the first thing her eyes noticed was a navigational wheel just at her face's level. Then the pool of vomit at her side which prompted her to roll over the other side to escape the smell. She took in the interior of a boat and her memories chose this moment to cut through the haze. The island! She was being pursued!

A blurry figure materialized itself outside her cabin and moving in the direction of the door. Chloe laid back down right as she heard the characteristic hiss of the hinges moving and heavy footsteps approaching. The person fumbled around as they stopped right above her, she could imagine them looking down in pity at her unconscious form.

A loud radio spluttering almost made her jump. “Captain, warn the boss I've found her.” a male voice spoke, she felt him looking away from her. “We might need medical assistance here, she doesn't loo-”

The man paused in the middle of his sentence as his eyes fell again on the young woman pointing a gun in his face. He looked like he didn't know whether to be embarrassed or afraid. “Back away.” she ordered quietly.

His face broke into an embarrassed smile. “Miss Sullivan, I assure you we mean no harm.” he said, raising his hands up and taking a step back

She grumbled, lifting herself on uncertain feet. “You weren't chasing my boat around just for a chit-chat, sailor.” she snarked back, keeping her aim on him.

The man didn't have time to react as the radio interfered again. “Bishop, this is King;” a new voice came. “Have you found Oracle, confirm?”
Chloe looked in confusion as Bishop pointed at the radio in his hand. “That's my boss, Miss. He's going to want to talk to you soon.”

Her brows furrowed. Bishop, King... she was having an idea of who these people were. “Who are you, people?”

Bishop nodded towards his back. “Look over the window,” he said as an answer.

Chloe bent on the side and immediately caught sight of the speedboat that had been following her out of the harbor. It was being stationed right behind her own boat, several armed men in dark military uniforms were walking on it as a little zodiac was making the journey from the hydroplane to an immense emerged submarine.

Her jaw dropped. She could clearly see the chess logo painted on its side at sea level.

“We're Suicide Squad – Checkmate.” Bishop confirmed. “Can I, now?” he pointed to the radio.

Chloe took a moment to pick up her spirits and nodded as she lowered her weapon.

“Sir, this is Bishop. I confirm. Oracle is here with me she's doing okay.” He grinned.

She could hear the hurrays on the radio. “Bring her over ASAP.” The Black King answered. “We're going to need her if we want this operation to be a success.”

“Copy, leaving now. Over.” Bishop ended the conversation. “We can get you to safety, Miss.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Wait, you're here to help us, right? My friends are caught in the facility on the Island, the alarms have been set off.”

He nodded, his face going serious once again. “We're aware and we share the same goal, Miss. Come with us, you'll have all you need back at HQ to help your friends.”

She was about to agree when another voice interrupted her. “Watchtower! Watchtower! Do you read me?”

It was Oliver's frantic tone calling her over the radio. She rushed at her equipment and picked up the microphone. “I hear you, Arrow. What's going on?”

“I need you to hack into the remote device you gave me, it's linked to Victor's system and he needs a reboot!”

“Wait, what?” Chloe blinked.

“It's a long story, Tower. I'll explain when we're done.” Oliver urged.

She nodded emphatically. “Okay, okay. Give me two minutes!” she turned towards Agent Bishop who was taking interest in her conversation. “What kind of computer equipment do you have in your submarine?”

The President's helicopter appeared in the sky of the Metinic Island followed by its security escort as they kept their altitude and circled over the facility which, from the outside, seemed unaffected by any of the ongoing drama.

Lex Luthor's goggles were glued to his eyes. He inspected every inch of the island, trying to find out what had happened. “Look over to the west,” came the pilot over the radio. “In the sea, Mr
President, there's some agitation going on.”

Changing direction, the helicopters found a point over the water and flew around it. The President first noticed the two boats drifting apart through the effect of the waves. His eyes almost got blown out when a submarine appeared in his sight.

“What is it?” he demanded. “There's a damn submarine over here!”

The pilot shrugged as another voice gave him an answer. “It's not government, sir.” an officer from the second helicopter replied as he inspected the ship. “Wait, I don't believe it, it's the Tucson! The Tucson, sir!”

Lex gritted his teeth together. The USS Tucson. The submarine Checkmate had stolen right under the nose of the navy months earlier. It only meant one thing: the battle for Location X was going to prove more difficult than he had anticipated.

“I want all of the bases in the area on full alert. Mobilize everyone.” Lex ordered through seething rage. “I want every ship, every plane, every destroyer around this fucking island. Right. Now.”

Inside the submarine, Chloe was caught in her work trying to reverse Victor's programming and bring him back to his old self. Her eyes ran over the lines of codes on the screen, she did her best to compare it, from memory, to the original code and find out was had been altered.

She was so caught up into her work that she wasn't noticing the men of the Suicide Squad watching her.

Back into the adjacent room, the radar operator rang the captain. “Sir! I get two signals right above us, seven more coming from the south!”

The captain approached and took a look. “These are aerial.” he said before grabbing the radio. “Get everyone back on board, we're diving!”

The alarm wailed, snapping Chloe back to reality. “What going on?”

The Black King, raised a finger and moved into the captain's lair as Rick Flagg shrugged. “Don't let yourself be disturbed. Whatever we do isn't going to hinder your work.” he said before joining his superior. “What is it, sir?”

The king nodded to the captain and folded his arms over his chest. “Governments helicopters, they've spotted us.” the captain explained. “I'm going to move the ship to the other side of the island in the Atlantic. It's safer in high sea.”

“Do it.” The king ordered.

“Dive!”

May 29th 2012. 04:00 PM UTC-6. Metinic Island, Maine, USA.

Everyone was relieved when Oliver found the circuit breaker and cut off the siren. They were supposed to stay for an hour at most, Bruce and Oliver were now counting close to four hours inside the facility and leaving anytime soon seemed to be an impossible task.

The atmosphere had quieted down once the last guards had been knocked out and the most shell-
shocked prisoners, calmed. With the adrenaline lifting off, a certain sense of gloom had settled over
the people inside when they realized all of the exits were surrounded by military personnel.

With Batman and Green Arrow’s help, the few able-bodied inmates had managed to seal off all of
the entries to prevent another assault just as the last bit of smoke finally disappeared. The news from
Chloe that the Suicide Squad was outside and plotting for their rescue had lifted up their spirits and
they were now organizing themselves to face the next couple of hours at the end of which, everyone
hoped to leave the island alive.

Oliver himself was itching to get his friends to safety on the submarine where Chloe was waiting for
them. He, however, wasn't sharing the current enthusiasm of the inmates around him who were
blinded by their thirst of seeing their predicament finally end that they were forgetting how many
people were waiting for them outside, ready to pull their triggers if need to be.

“How's she doing?” he asked as he pulled up at Batman's side. Dinah was laid down onto the
medical bed of a blockroom, still in a state of comatose.

Bruce pursed his lips. “I don’t know what kind of drugs they were giving her but she's caught in this
hybrid state between consciousness and a full blown coma. Also,” he traced the stitching lines in her
throat. “She's been operated on more than once. I don't know what that will do to her ability but it's
not good.”

Oliver remained silent. The woman behind the Black Canary had always been strong and able to
take care of herself. The Dinah now lying on this bed was as far removed from the memory he had
of her. She'd lost a lot of weight and looked a lot more fragile than he was sure she wanted to be. If
someone like her was suffering this way, he didn't want to imagine how the other inmates unable to
help make a stand were doing.

The ones able to stand on two legs without wincing had been busy setting free their comrades and
giving them first aids with the Batman's medical knowledge while Green Arrow, flanked by ten
other men and women had circled the entire facility and jammed each door and window.

Bruce turned to him, he still kept on his mask while Oliver had pushed back his hood and taken off
his glasses. “And Victor?”

“Still out.” Oliver grimaced. “The programming done on him seems to be pretty hard to undo.
Tower's been at it for the past two hours.”

“At least he's alive and as long as he's not waking up in the process to attack us, it's a good thing.”
Bruce summarized before setting his eyes back on Dinah. He seemed to hesitate. “What do you think
about this Suicide Squad? Can we trust them?”

Oliver made a face. “I don't know how much we can trust them but the thing is... they're the only
ones on our side at the moment.” he said. “I can put up with them even if we don't see eye to eye on
everything as long as Lex is out there.”

“Hum, Mr... Green Arrow? Batman?” A young woman draped in the medical cloth of the facility
was wringing her hands by the doorway. They waved her in. “What can we do now?” she asked.

“Now?” Oliver repeated. “We wait. Right now our fate's out of our hands.”

May 29th 2012. 10:02 PM UTC-6. Metinic Island, Maine, USA.

The sun had given one last burst through the clouds and was starting to set, starting the slow process
of giving over the reins of the easing weather to the night. A light breeze was blowing over the island as the waves were now gently rocking the submarine.

On its deck, the Black King was looking over the island's horizon through his goggles, spotting two groups of his agents on the land, he watched them progress closer to the facility before he turned around and set his sights on the two frigates that had set anchor a couple of miles on the submarine's tail.

Luthor hadn't lost time calling over half of the east coast's military harbors for help. The federal army was now slowly but surely setting a blockade around the Expandable. The king didn't know if the president would dare targeting the submarine in a direct hit but if he did, the Suicide Squad would have one last card to play. And nobody was going to like it.

On the island, Rick Flagg led twenty combat-experienced men and women through the uneven land in the facility's direction. The distance from the Atlantic coast to the building was closer that way but the sloped terrain was making up for it by forcing them to advance blind, making them more vulnerable from an ambush.

“We're halfway there, people.” He said over the radio. “Keep stealth and everything's gonna be okay.”

The darkening skies were helping the squad even with their lack of night vision equipment. They had a mutant part of their team who was able to guide them through the darkness thanks to his ability to map the area through sound waves.

Operating in darkness was where they excelled. Their training was tailored for it, it was the entire reason for Checkmate's existence.

“Halt!” Flagg ordered. They'd stopped at the base level of the last slope on their way separating them from the facility. As usual, he sent one of his men ahead to scout over the area and check if the land was clear above the slope.

They watched the scout escalate the steep curve of land before them and peek on the higher plain. The woman ducked and called over the radio.

“Contact!”

A second later, an entire battalion appeared and started firing on the squad from above. “Take cover!” Flagg yelled. Out of the corner of the eye, he caught sight of his scout rolling down the slope and catching a bullet before she could hide in a bush.

“Man down!”

His second-in-command grabbed his shoulder and shouted over the fire. “We need to fall back, it's going to be a slaughter!”

Rick ran a hand over his face. “God-fucking-damn it!”

The Black King saw his men fall into a trap in real-time. He jumped from the deck inside the submarine and precipitated himself to the radio room. An operator was waiting for him, holding a device up for him.

He took it immediately. “Report, Flagg!”
The deafening shots made it difficult to understand the agent over the radio. “We're caught in a dead end, sir! Can't fall back or we'll be taken down one by one before we get to the beach!”

The King cursed. “You hold on, kids! I'll get you out of here, do you understand?”

“Copy, over!”

He handed back the radio and flattened his hands on the desk, shaking his head. Around him, everyone was silent and he could feel their expectant gazes on his back. “Captain!” he called from his position.

“Sir!” came a voice behind his back.

“What's the range between us and the building?” he asked, facing his men.

The captain hesitated. “2.8 miles, sir…” he didn't say it but the King could hear the question: why?

He smirked and passed by them on his way back to the deck, goggles in hand. “Lock target on the facility and fire without confirmation. Two rounds of air missiles.” he glanced at the radio operator. “Get me in contact with Luthor over the wireless waves.”

His men knew better than to question him and the King went up just in time in the deck to see the first missile taking off high in the sky before crashing down on the white building in the horizon. The two blasts were enough to take down a wall and waking up anyone inside. The echo of the explosions seemed to reverberate on the water.

“Line established, sir!” came the radio operator's voice on his device.

The Black King kept his eyes on the facility as he brought the radio up to his mouth. “I know you can hear me, Luthor.” he spoke up. “This was a warning shot. I've got a full store of them if you want to see it.”

“What are you trying to achieve?” came the president's unnerved voice. “All I see is you gunning down your allies.”

The king's eyes thinned. “I'm sure you won't miss the tons of data gathered in this place.” he challenged. “This project's your baby, isn't it? What would it feel to see it die before your eyes?”

Luthor took a long moment before answering. “I'll have your skin.” he seethed before ending the call.

Minutes later the government forces backed down from their position and Flagg's squad was able to make it back to the beach. The Black King descended in the Expandable to request a zodiac for himself and the ship's surgeon when he fell face to face with an agitated Chloe Sullivan.

“Who's the idiot that decided it was a good idea to bomb the facility?!” she yelled into the control room.

“Calm down, Miss.” he motioned for her to back off, an option that had the opposite effect as she looked him dead in the eye.

“It's you isn't, it?” she went on before he could answer. “Pull that move again and I'll hack into your systems and take control of the ship myself, am I clear?”

The King realized the precarious position he was in, being yelled at in front of his men. He licked his
lips. “I'll run it by you before I take the decision, is that good enough for you?”

She nodded and backed away. “Don't underestimate me.” she said before disappearing back into the computer room, leaving the king a little shaken up and the crew amused by the scene.

He cleared his throat and bellowed in his most commanding voice. “Get me a zodiac and prepare to set foot on land!”

By the time the night had fallen, all sides knew they were at a stalemate. Lex Luthor couldn't afford losing the facility and, more importantly, the database inside which took years in total combined with the results of Luthorcorp's various projects to amass. Going after the Suicide Squad meant threatening the facility's integrity. His only solution was to find a way in the building without attracting attention which proved to be an impossible task so far since Green Arrow and Batman had made sure to seal every entry.

Meanwhile, the Black King's only positive point was the fact that he ensured the Expandable's safety and managed to take control of the eastern beach where the Suicide Squad had set up a small camp to supervise the operations. It was a massive advantage to have a safe path between the land and the submarine.

The other side of the coin wasn't so bright unfortunately. His audacious move – bombing the facility – may have ensured his men's security but it also made the situation into what it was at the moment: a dead end.

Trying to send another team in the facility would be like taunting a wounded bull and risking everyone's lives in the building which, Oliver and Bruce were keen on. The two vigilantes had nothing to do but tend to the sick and wounded while waiting for whatever would come next and try not to think about it in the meantime.

The hours passed. The stars sailed through and the situation remained the same. As Lex Luthor alternated between feats of maddening rage and desperate military planning, the Black King sat in his tent, lost in thought. Chloe was determined to find a way out through virtual simulations and Oliver and Bruce took turns trying to sleep. They all had the same question in mind: How to end the stalemate and turn the situation to their advantage?

They thought, they waited and waited some more...

May 30th 2012. 04:34 AM UTC-6. Metinic Island, Maine, USA.

Oliver was shaken awake to a bottle of water being handed to him. He didn't hesitate taking it and drank half in one go as Batman sunk down into a kneeling position against the wall his partner had slept against.

“At least we have that.” Bruce said pointing to the bottled water that came from a large stock which wasn't the case for the food.

“What time's it?” Oliver asked, still shaking off his sleep.

“Five-thirty five. It must be dawn outside.”

The two men sat in silence, watching the inmates around him either sleeping, guarding the area with the staff's weapons in hand or doing just the same. “By the way, the transfer's finally over. Chloe's got all the data.”
Oliver turned a bleary face towards his companion between erupting in laughter. “What's funny?”
Bruce asked, taken aback.

“S'nothing,” Oliver shook his head. “It's just you're telling me this like you just remembered you
ordered a pizza!”

Bruce may not have laughed but Oliver could at least take pride in making the Batman crack a smile.
He took his breathing back under control. “Ah sorry, buddy. It's the nerves I guess.” he said while
stretching his arms above his head and yawning.

“It's been a long day.” Bruce agreed.

“Come on,” Oliver said, standing up. “I'm taking the shift, get some rest.”

Every step he made in the middle of these dark corridors stemmed with people was a painful
reminder of their predicament. Oliver's light mood was soon forgotten. All of this suffering was
going to end one way or another and, even if the odds were stacked against them, he still kept a
sliver of hope in his heart that all of these people would walk out of their prison unharmed.

What would happen next was a mystery. Checkmate's submarine might have been huge but it would
never, ever, in a million years be able to host almost two thousand people on board. Oliver didn't
even count the time it would take to get them all on board. They would all be exposed for an
incredible amount of time, it would be similar to walking on a thin rope above a sea full of sharks.

Oliver could rehearse things over and over again as he circled blocks after blocks, he couldn't see a
way out. The situation was entirely out of their control and that was something he hated.

He knelt by a young boy who was staring at him through the warm blanket wrapped around his
body. He looked barely old enough to be a teenager. “Hey there,” Oliver whispered. “Can't sleep?”

The boy shook his head. “You think we will live?” he asked in a timid voice.

The vigilante stared at him. What could he say to this child? Could he lie? Did he even have the
strength to lie anymore? He had done his best to give these people hope since the first minutes of the
siege but with each passing hour, he found his own assurance to be losing place against the sense of
gloom that now reigned over his mind.

“I... I don't know, kid.” he croaked out, looking down as if he were ashamed of himself.

“So they'll kill us all?” There was no fear in his voice, just the curiosity of youth.

Oliver put a hand on his shoulder. “We'll do whatever we can to get outta here in one piece. That's
all I can promise you, kiddo.”

The boy smiled and sat back, closing his eyes. “Thanks.”

He didn't know how long he spent looking at this child sleeping but it was enough to throw him off-
balance when a small detonation resonated above him. The vigilante looked up to the air vent, his
heart picking up pace when he saw white smoke slowly spreading inside the corridor and felt his
eyes stinging.

Reacting on instinct, Oliver grabbed a blanket and stuffed it far enough into the air vent to seal it off.
Another detonation happened further away followed by another, and another.... and a lot more.

Oliver taped his ear. “Batman, we've got a problem. Get up, get up now!”
The entire facility was beginning to be filled with the gas and he could hear people start to cough and shout. “Put on your gas mask.” he told Bruce, doing so himself before calling up to everyone's attention. “Get on the ground, they're pumping tear gas in here!”

“They're preparing their assault.” Bruce warned.

Oliver started running towards the stock of weapons they'd amassed from the guards and waved people on. “Watchtower, they're coming at us! We need help now!”

A yell caught everyone's attention from the other side of the facility and firefights started erupting by the far-end on the opposite side. *This is it*, he thought. *It's the final hour.*

At the beach's camp, the Black King strapped on his bulletproof vest and grabbed an automatic rifle. The facility was half a mile away and yet they could hear the firefight happening inside. It had been going on for ten minutes already and he wasn't about to watch by the sidelines.

Rick Flagg came in the tent and nodded at him. “Troops are ready, Commander.”

The King glanced at him and set a radio device in his ear. “Captain, do you read?”

“Loud and clear, sir.” came the reply from the Expandable.

“It's time.” he said. “Light them up.”

They had had to make up a plan in barely five minutes after the first signs of assault started to make themselves clear at the facility's side. It was going to be hit or miss but there would be no second chances. The king hoped Luthor was still as arrogant and sloppy as his reputation predicted, otherwise, he didn't want to think about the consequences.

He trotted out of the tent to meet his squad in full gear under the deafening noises of the air missiles being fired from the Expandables and landing violently a hundred yards or so west of the facility where his scouts had spotted the place chosen by the government's forces to settle their own camp.

“Let's go!” he shouted, leading his men over the exposed land that separated them from the facility as they used the distraction from the submarine as a cover-fire.

“Contact, nine o'clock!”

“Flagg!” the king called. “Take five men and cover us.”

His second-in-command wasted no time following his orders and sprinted ahead of the troops to secure the path towards the facility. The king ran faster, spurring his men to do the same. “When you get inside,” he spoke into the radio. “Don't wait up and go in but be careful not to shoot up the wrong men.”

They knew from Sullivan's intel that Location X had become a hellhole and telling Luthor's forces from the armed inmates in the dark would be no easy task. There was also the added difficulty of said inmates firing at them if they mistook the Suicide Squad with the government's staff.

“No more ammo, Commander.” the captain announced over the radio. *We're diving now, good luck.*

The king blew out of breath and leaped against the building's walls. “See you in a few, captain. King out.”
Oliver grit his teeth together as his ears were ringing. He figured Bruce was feeling the same headache threatening to knock him out. The two of them had refuged themselves into a blockroom and pressed the desk against the door when they realized they were surrounded and the people against them weren't in it to take them alive.

It had been a real slaughter so far.

At the moment, the soldiers were emptying their magazines against the door in hope to break it down. The two vigilantes were forced to sprawl themselves on the ground to avoid the bullets. They'd been incapacitated for a good twenty minutes and outside, even when the men after them stopped shooting to reload, they could hear other firefights happening at other parts of the facility.

Oliver tried to talk to Bruce but it was useless against the noise. He tapped his friend's shoulder to get his attention and tried to make his plan comprehensible through hand movements. The Batman pulled a flashbang from under his cape and showed it to him. Oliver nodded.

The shooting stopped. “Now!” The Green Arrow yelled at the top of his lungs.

Both men jumped on their feet and Bruce punched a hole into the weakened door before slipping his grenade outside. The explosion caught the men unaware outside and found themselves blinded by an intense ray of light, allowing the vigilantes to move the desk away and spill into the corridor.

The soldiers offered no resistance and were easily overcome when they lost their sense of vision. However more men appeared from a corner and Oliver grabbed a rifle from the ground, aiming it at the new arrivals.

“Don't fire! Don't fire!” the men yelled and rushed to cover. One of them waved an arm behind the corner. “Friendly! Friendly!”

Oliver couldn't hear them, the constant whistle that filled his ears kicked away any other sound but he noticed the unusual behavior of the troops ahead of him. “Who's there?” he yelled as Bruce moved to his side and looked as surprised as him.

“My Suicide Squad!” he could hear they'd said something but the sense of their words couldn't reach him yet.

“Show us!” Oliver replied, hoping they weren't being played for fools.

When the logo of a chess plate was being waved at them, he let out a sigh of relief. The nightmare was over.

Chloe couldn't wait for the airlock to open itself. The divers had just come back from the facility, carrying with them Oliver, Bruce and the wounded Dinah and Victor. They were all inside, waiting for the water to be pumped out.

Her breath caught when the door emitted a metallic noise as it opened and the men emerged. She leaped on Oliver, feeling his arms wrapping around her as she buried her face in his chest.

“I'm okay.” he whispered in her hair.

Oliver tightened his grip around her. Both of them knew how close they came to be ripped apart in the last twenty-four hours. It wasn't a feat they were willing to repeat anytime soon.
Two stretchers carrying Dinah and Victor were moved past them to the infirmary. They would join the injured scout who received a bullet as she was looking ahead of Rick Flagg's team.

"Tell Agent Bishop we've arrived safe and sound. He makes one last sweep before joining us." The Black King ordered to the radio operator.

"Wait," Oliver interrupted. "What are you going to do about the inmates?"

The king nodded. "We'll make sure they are seen by the army on the island. That's their best chance of survival."

"The people shooting at us were soldiers. You're going to send them to their death!"

"No, Mr. Queen," the king calmed him down. "The soldiers going after you were all affected to the facility since the project's birth. They were trained as part of the program. Most of them are dead now," he explained. "There's another garrison on the island that came after the attack and these ones aren't aware of what's going in there. Luthor won't be able to do anything once his army sees what he's been up to."

He paused and smiled. "But please, you've been in a high-stress situation for several hours, you need to rest." he said. "I'll have a room made for you."

"Commander!" the operator called. "A call for you."

Location X remained the theater of gunfire for another couple of hours, the time needed for the Suicide Squad to check every room. They'd split in smaller groups to cover more ground in less time and often reported back to their leading officer the presence of dead or dying inmates caught in their rooms. There were those who'd been killed during the assault, of course, but a large part of them had died before the vigilantes of the Justice League had got in.

One of them, a group of three Suicide Squad agents were finishing their last section when they came up to a blockroom with a door locked from the inside. The leading officer, a battle-hardened woman in her thirties received the call to wrap up her task, prompting her to pick up the radio.

"Roger that, sir." she acknowledged. "We've got one last room to check and we'll be on our way."

"Copy." Flagg replied. "Make it quick, you're the last ones and the king's in a hurry to leave."

Yep, so are we. She thought before turning to the two men she commanded. "Come on let's push that one open."

It took all of the strength of the heavy brute under her command to break the lead-door and rush into the room. "Clear!" the second man shouted.

"Clear!" the giant echoed.

The officer's eyes fell on the man laid on the medical bed. "I've got something."

The two subordinates went by her side, inspecting the unmoving dark-skinned inmate strapped to the bed. His eyes were still open, staring at the ceiling while his mouth was parted as if in shock.

"He's dead."

"Wait a minute, Ben." the woman exclaimed, taking a closer look at the inmate's face. "That's the Manhunter, isn't it? You got your picture?"
“Sure,” Ben Turner replied, producing a piece of paper from his pocket and comparing the two faces. “Fuck, you're right, it's him.”

The officer sighed. “We're too late for him. Come on let's get back now, they'll leave without us otherwise.”

Turner looked back when he reached the doorway. “Come on,” he said in his growling voice. “Let's go, Clyde.”

The third agent remained rooted at the Manhunter's side. “You go ahead,” he said quietly. “I have to pay my respects before I leave.”

“Make it quick.” Turner shrugged and went after his superior already walking down the corridor and making sure there remained no hostile on their path.

Clyde Philipps holstered his gun and took off his gloves before touching the alien's face tentatively. The Manhunter's skin was turning grey, he must have been dead for a long time already. The agent stared at him for a moment when a strange phenomenon happened.

Clyde's irises were flooded by a wave of black liquid filling up his eyes before a red dot appeared in the center. His inhuman gaze looked over the martian as his ungloved hand touched the alien's skin. The corpse started to produce a light of its own which became brighter and brighter until it engulfed the entire room and Clyde himself.

There was no Manhunter, no Clyde, no bed and no walls. Just an intense white light and nothing else. It seemed time also disappeared in this moment as everything stood still until the light, eventually, started to fade, leaving the room into its earlier state.

Clyde touched the martian's throat before pulling away and slipping his gloves on again when his companion came back in the doorway. The red dots disappeared and his eyes came back to their normal state.

“What was that?” the officer asked, her eyes wide.

“There was some light coming from here.” Turner sported the same expression. “Thinker, you okay?”

Clyde Philipps looked nonplussed by the experience and nodded towards J'onn J'onzz' body. “It was him.” he said. “He's alive.”
May 30th 2012. 06:56 AM UTC-6. Off the coast of the Metinic Island, Maine, USA.

Aboard the Expandable, everybody stood still. The Black King watched the screen ahead of him indicating the depth the submarine reached. The numbers were going down at a fast rate, he started rising a hand, his eyes never leaving the indicator as the rest of the crew stood about the control station.

Everyone had spilled towards the middle section where the captain's lair was located. There were so many people standing around that some were forced to wait outside of the room and wait, anxiously, their ears picking up the first signs of the intense pressure exercising itself on the ship. Crackling sounds were peppering on the bodywork outside. These strange and menacing noises heightened the crew's anxiety.

The Black King gave a quick flick of his hand. “Now!” the captain ordered. Back on the screen, the numbers stilled.

DEPTH: - 1124 ft

Satisfied, the king looked up to the ceiling as if he could sense the destroyers floating above them on the surface, frenetically trying to detect their presence. “Turn off the reactor, the life-pump, everything. We'll live on the air we have now for a couple of hours.” he said quietly. “I want everyone to be silent, now.”

“What the plan, Commander?” Chloe whispered from her position a few feet on his right.

Everyone had been expectant to know what was going on in the king's mind ever since one of Rick Flag’s teams phoned in to declare they'd found the Martian Manhunter – J'onn J'onzzz alive in the facility. Leaving such a asset on his own wasn't an option but exfiltrating him in his condition took too much time and the Expandable had to sink down and wait in the depths of the ocean close to the island.

To most, it had seemed they had left Flag's men to deal with the fallout on their own but the commander wasn't worried, he hadn't been since that mysterious call he'd received hours earlier the same day.

The man smirked, watching the petite woman who hadn't left Oliver Queen's side since he'd come aboard. “All in due time, Oracle.” he replied, almost amused. “I guarantee Luthor won't see that one coming.”

May 30th 2012. 07:29 AM UTC-6. Metinic Island, Maine, USA.

Rick Flag had made his troops regroup at the eastern exit of the facility. Location X was quite a walk away from the ocean but the eastern side was the closest and would provide the safest route into the water.
“Eden, where are you now?” he asked to the radio device strapped on his shoulder.

A female voice answered an instant later. “I already see your lights, sir.” she replied. “ETA 20 minutes.”

“Copy. Hurry.”

He looked over the twenty-six men and women under his orders. They were stacked against the inner wall of the facility, hidden in the dark and listening for any movement outside.

“You placed the explosives on the other end?” he asked.

One of the team leaders, a young officer, nodded. “As per your orders, sir. They're set and ready to explode.” he said. “I'm guessing we'll have to soon because we were already hearing the military trying to get in half an hour ago.”

The doors were well-sealed by the efforts of the Green Arrow, Batman and the inmates but they wouldn't hold forever.

“Do it now.” Flag ordered. “We can't afford to have them take an alternative path and we'll have enough time to outrun them.”

“Yes, sir.” the team leader grabbed a remote and activated the bombs. Faint detonations were heard on the opposite end of the facility, blasting the blocked doors open and giving a free-way in for the soldiers.

Rick Flag wasn't worried about them. The facility was big enough that they'd have to spend at least forty-minutes reaching their position, by that time, the remaining members of the Suicide Squad would be long gone. Besides, the military would have another matter to take care of once it discovered the pitiful condition of the inmates, questions were going to be asked and Luthor would be in trouble with his officers then.

“We're here, sir.” Eden's voice caught his attention.

They watched as the team of three carried the heavy J'onn J'onzz on a stretcher out of the dark corridors. Flag moved by the martian's side. “Medic!” he called. “Check him up and make sure he's ready for transport.” he ordered before looking up at the officer. “You did good, Eve.”

She smiled. “Thank you, sir. What's next now?”

Rick Flag mimicked her expression. “We've got twenty minutes before the leaving call.” he said. “You'll see then.”

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May 30th 2012. 07:30 AM UTC-6. Close to the Metinic Island, Maine, USA.

The Vella Gulf, a military cruiser, was halted at safe distance from the Metinic Island. On board, president Lex Luthor was mulling over a map of the northern Atlantic ocean surrounded by his generals advising him as he watched over the situation of Location X, determined not to let the Suicide Squad escape.

He ran his gloved hand right over the american east coast and circled the position of the Metinic Island. “They disappeared some two miles off the eastern side.” he said, pointing to the right of the island on the map and tapped his chin. “Where could they go from there?”
“Well,” Colonel Casey spoke up by his side. “If we take into account their oxygen autonomy of 90-
days underwater and the relative speed they're going to have to respect if they want to keep their
engines safe, which is...” he turned towards a navy captain also bent over the map. “Herald, would
you know that characteristic of the Tucson?”

“It should be about 25 knots, Colonel” Herald, turned to the president with a polite smile. “About 30
miles per hour, sir.”

“Right,” Casey continued, tracing his finger across the ocean towards Europe. “That would make
that road safer in the beginning but they would need to come up after some time and risk being
spotted, so... improbable.” he dismissed the hypothesis. “However, if you take another route towards
the south, for instance, they could reach Cuba in a matter of weeks if that was their destination.”

Lex shook his head. “I don't see these terrorists being in bed with the Cubans,” he put his finger to
the starting point and moved up slowly, towards the Canadian coast. “What about this way? To the
north?”

“Well...” Casey seemed uncertain. “Why would they try to reach Canada? Their governments has
always collaborated with us it would be quite gamble!”

“Which is,” Lex interrupted. “probably why they would do it. Remind me, Colonel, what's the status
of our naval surveillance in this area?”

Casey rubbed his forehead for a moment until his eyes widened. “Inexistent, sir.”

“Exactly.” the president grinned. “Where are our closest submarines, Captain?”

The navy officer looked taken aback, a bit fearful of the answer he was going to give. “Mr.
President,” he gulped. “The closest would be at Gibraltar.” he admitted. “You had ordered most of
them towards the Middle East and the rest of the float is around the sea of China in the Pacific. None
of them are in range.”

A gloved hand hit the table. “Send them new orders!” Lex barked. “I want every last one of them on
the tail of these terrorists!” His face was reddening even as he felt his anger rising up again. This time
it was Casey's turn to face the president. “You call up the Air Force, have them bomb the waters off
the Canadian coast over a 100 miles radius--”

Casey stuttered. “B... bomb the...? That's not how it works, Mr. President!”

Luthor glared at him. “Are you discussing my orders?”

“I would dare telling the president...” The colonel swallowed his fear back. “If I may, sir, I'd advise
you to send our destroyers to that area, we have plenty of these in station waiting for orders...”

“Do it.”

“Sir?”

“Are you deaf, Colonel?” Lex said quietly. “I said: do it.”

Casey lost his voice and could only nod as he did his best not to run out of the room, leaving the
atmosphere cold behind him as the president ignored the presence of his remaining officers as he
grabbed a pair of goggles and stared at Location X.

“What's the status of the second assault, General Damartin?”
Luthor's voice broke a long uncomfortable silence, taking the officers by surprise. Damartin cleared his throat and approached the president by the window. “Well sir, they're progressing slowly.” he started anxiously. “We've been receiving a lot of calls reporting the existence of a great deal of unarmed people looking like inmates. To be quite honest, sir, I don't kno--”

“And the hostiles, where are they?” Luthor cut him off.

The general hesitated. “All evidence tends to show there would only be a few still on the site, perhaps even none.” he said. “I have to remind you sir that our intel is highly unreliable. Perhaps if we had access--”

“Bring on more cruisers, set up a blockade of the island from all sides.” Lex once again ignored his officer's requests. “Have one of them carry a regiment to the eastern coast and send them inside to meet the first team in the middle.”

“That's an order that should have come hours ago.” Herald mumbled by his spot at the table.

Lex's head whipped around. “I'm sorry, captain?”

“It's nothing sir,” he backtracked under the president's dark tone. “I was just saying the tide was turning, the cruisers will have to be careful with their navigation.”

“Of course... of course...” he handed his goggles to Damartin and started towards the exit. “Make sure to tell your men I want the undesirables mounted on a boat, Damartin. Send them to the nearest port and contact General Slade Wilson. He'll take it from here.”

“The... undesirables, sir?” Damartin asked.

Lex looked over his shoulder, a glint in his eye. “The 'inmates' as you called them.” he said with the same amount of underlying danger in his voice, leaving the two officer sharing a glance full of confusion and doubt.

**May 30th 2012. 07:50 AM UTC-6. Metinic Island, Maine, USA.**

Twenty minutes later, the blockade sealed off the island. From whichever way he looked, Rick Flag could only see military cruisers with the exception of a USS frigate coming their way. He smiled when his radio came to life and a familiar voice called.

“*Reaching land in thirty-seconds, Bishop now's time to move your ass!*”

A moment later the facility's eastern doors were kicked open and the daylight hit the Suicide Squad agents. “Go! Go! Go!” Flag yelled, prompting his soldiers to run towards the sea. “To the boat, board in, don't ask questions! Don't ask questions!”

**May 30th 2012. 07:51 AM UTC-6. Close to the Metinic Island, Maine, USA.**

Lex stormed on the front-deck of the Vella Gulf, joining a group of men looking over towards the island. “What's happening?” he shouted, catching General's Damartin attention.

“It's the frigate, sir.” Damartin started, he looked almost shell-shocked. “It's not carrying our soldiers, it's taking hostiles aboard!”

The president snatched Captain Herald's goggles from his hands and grit his teeth as he watched the
boat in question as it finished letting Suicide Squad agents run on board before turning around, preparing to sail away from the island."

“Goddamn it!” Lex threw the goggles out at sea in anger. “What are you waiting for? Gun it down!”

The frigate was already heading out east at full-speed towards the ocean. “What's it doing?!”

“It makes no sense.” Herald breathed. “It's heading into the Atlantic, it's going to hit the blockade!”

“It's a suicide attack?” Damartin exclaimed.

Lex turned towards the sailors on the deck. “Gun it down!” he shouted.

Back towards the island, the couple of destroyers that were taking place at the blockade aimed their canons towards the rogue frigate and started firing. One shell missed the boat by a hair and detonated in the water. A second one hit its target dead center. The boat was torn in two until more missiles started raining down from the sky, finishing off any hope the people inside may have had. It blew up into a picture of warm colors above the dark-blue tone of the waters before the remaining pieces started sinking.

Damartin inspected carefully the wreckage. “No sign of any life”

“You don't find that suspicious?” Lex spat. “Not a soul trying to escape a certain death? That's the stupidest thing I've ever seen.”

On the president's other side, captain Herald shook his head. “I don't actually believe there was anyone on that boat, Mr. President.”

“Come again?”

“Well...”

“Are you saying they just vanished all of a sudden?”

“They... they might have dived underwater just after getting on the frigate.” Herald licked his lips. “The rest might have been a distraction.”

Lex fell to his knees, holding his head in his hands as he yelled to the skies. Somewhere, he knew it, in the back of his mind, there was his father laughing at him.

May 30th 2012. 08:02 AM UTC-6. In the waters around Metinic Island, Maine, USA.

The Expandable's crew was waiting for all of the divers to get into the airlock, hoping for a quick pick up before they would be detected. The submarine had, per the king's orders, started rising up from the depths it was hiding into so the divers could reach them, letting themselves be vulnerable in the process.

It was only a matter of time before the enemy's radars found them out. “Come on, come on...” the king muttered, staring at the red light above the airlock's door. Once it turned orange, that would be the signal the outer door had closed and everyone was aboard then they would be able to move.

“Contact!” the radio operator called. “Destroyer moving 7-7-1, incoming ping!”

The king growled. Everything rang around them as a single note engulfed the submarine and emitted a strident ping which would reverberate towards the destroyer and indicate their position. There was
a murmur of panic going through the crowd while the king gritted his teeth and waited.

The color changed.

“Now!” he yelled.

The submarine winced, its ballasts started filling up with water to accelerate the ship’s process of moving deeper into the waters.

“He’s right above us!” the operator spoke again.

“Faster!” the captain ordered just when another sound could be heard from above.

The radar operator looked horrified when he picked up the plunging noise. “Depth charges!”

The king looked at the captain in surprise before he was sent stumbling down, catching a pipe at the last moment as everyone cried out in horror when the explosions shook the entire ship.

“Report status!” the captain called.

“One-thousand feet and going down!” another man replied.

The operator jumped again. “Two more!”

The mix of fear and confusion along with that feeling of helplessness was amongst the worst ones the Black King had ever had the displeasure to feel when the ship shook again, violently setting people off-foot crashing into one another and rattling the metal of the outer structure, letting everyone fear the worst.

If one of the charges burst through the metal....

“We can’t die now!” A desperate cry came from Sullivan.

“Get us out of here, damn it!” Queen, who had his arms wrapped up against her as he laid back against the wall, yelled at the captain who was already shouting orders.

At this moment, Rick Flag’s people came tumbling out of the airlock in panic. “What's going on?” Agent Bishop demanded.

The Black King pushed himself up. “Grab something and let the professionals ride it out.” he said nodding towards the captain and his men.

“Two more!” the operator detected again. This time, the explosions had lost their previous violence and their intensity faded as the hurl of the engines started to let themselves be heard. “They're following us!”

The captain held up a hand and addressed himself to the navigator. “Steady bar, give the propulsor full power and get us deeper.”

A sailor turned around on his seat, his eyes wide. “We're already past the thousand feet mark, captain!”

The older man's face gave nothing away. “I know, push it down to the limit.”

The crew could sense the discomfort of the captain’s men as they executed his orders. Already, on the radar panel, the destroyers on their tails were losing speed but kept their course after them. The
Expandable was heading north, towards the cold waters off two hundred miles away from the canadian coast.

“Turn off the engine, and life-support!” the captain ordered all of a sudden. “Steady the depth!”

The reactor went silent, leaving the people’s ears buzzing and soon after, the first cracklings could be heard. The Expandable was still going down and the pressure increased, producing the uneasy noises that followed as the metal shrank and adjusted to the water's weight outside.

“Stop! Now!” The captain whispered just as the indicators hit the depth of 1475 feet, the absolute limit of the ship.

They all looked up when a series of sounds started rolling over above their position. The water was being disturbed by propulsion engines on the surface. Some people glanced at the radar operator whose eyes were rived towards his screen as his hand held the audio device on his head. He listened carefully the destroyers moving over a thousand feet above them.

Everyone held their breath.

The noises became stronger and, for a moment, it seemed to be constant. In that unending second, a tense chill became contagious and everyone trembled. Nobody wanted to know the outcome if they were to be detected again. It must have been the instant even the most enthusiastic of the crew members started realizing how small the Expandable truly was.

A formidable war machine stranded in the depths of the Atlantic, hoping the american destroyers wouldn't bomb it to death. Suddenly, the war machine felt more like a floating casket. One little metallic box lost in the vastness of an ocean.

The operator sucked in a breath. “It's fading!” he squeaked.

Indeed it was. The engine noises were going past their position and moving ahead, never once stopping. It seemed they still thought the submarine was moving north. “They're out of range!”

A collective sigh of relief took over the crew. Some of them laughed, a few cried but they were all glad to have survived.

The Black King went up to the captain who was wiping his brow and patted him on the back. “You did good, Francis. You did good.”

The cafeteria was a large, well-lit space in the middle of the submarine. People sat at the tables, their plates before them as they chatted, laughed and enjoyed their meals. Hours earlier, they were on the brink of death, now, they were relaxing and letting away the pent-up emotions they'd bottled up from the first second of the operation on Location X.

The life-support system had been reactivated even though the Expandable hadn't moved from his last position. The chances of being detected now that the destroyers had lost their tail, were close to impossible. Even the healthy hubbub of the cafeteria wouldn't help them.

These matters were out of everyone's minds at the moment and especially Chloe and Oliver's as they laughed listening to Slade Wilson tell his version of their escape from Location X. They shared a table with the captain of the ship, the Commander, Wilson and Tess Mercer. Both of whom came aboard with the divers.

“You should've seen Luthor's face when he saw us waving at the window!” Wilson spoke up,
excitement filling his tone. “He must've gone bonkers just from witnessing that scene!”

The table laughed as Tess smirked. “Yeah, I think you're going way off-script, sir.”

“Ah, forget the formalities, Mercer!” Wilson said before taking a sip of his beer.

“What? You're telling me you didn't actually wave at him through the window?” Oliver grinned.

Chloe nearly strangled herself with her drink and they all laughed again. “Can you imagine the picture?”

“Seriously, though,” the captain said. “How did it really go?”

“Bah! You know...” Wilson exclaimed. “Once Mercer saved my ass, we called up Max and he put us up to speed with the situation.” he explained. “I wasn't about to be benched so I used my rank to take command of one of the navy's frigates at DC's harbor and we rushed to Metinic Island. We waited there and surfed the radio channels until we heard the call for a boat to approach the facility while transporting troops.” he shared a glance with Tess. “We decided to make up the lie and volunteer for the task. You know the rest. Rick and his guys got in, we immediately dived underwater through a hole we made in the cargo and we send the boat gunning towards the ocean to get their eyes away from us.”

“That's what I call getting out from under the nose of the enemy, right Slade?” The Black King – Maxwell Lord nodded in the other man's direction.

Wilson smirked. “We got them good on that one.”

“Well I say...” Maxwell rose from his seat, glass in hand. “It calls for some more beer! Listen up everyone!” he called over the noise, catching everyone's attention. “The last forty-eight hours have been hellish for all of us, I know. At times we came so close to lose everything but we held on! We can all say we've been to hell and back, together, all of us.”

Chloe felt Oliver slipping his hand in hers. She gave him a light squeeze as Lord continued his speech.

“We've managed to do that without leaving anyone behind. A little thought to Izzy who's recovery at the infirmary but the bright side is that we lost no one and that, as your Commander, couldn't make me prouder. So...” he rose his glass as a toast. “I thank you people, for your courage, I thank the Justice League,” he turned to Chloe and Oliver the only two members of the organization in the room as Bruce – who refused to take off his mask – was watching over J'onn, Dinah and Victor by Izzy's side.

“for helping us take down that scum of Lex Luthor, and I finally, I thank the captain for doing a damn good job at saving us all by the skin of our asses!” The room exploded in a wave of laughter. The king himself, grinned from ear to ear and toasted them. “Salute!” he shouted.

Everyone imitated him. “Salute!” A collective gulp followed as everyone emptied their glasses.

“Come on, chief!” The king shouted. “Let's get these glasses filled up to the brim, that round's on me!”

People whistled and cheered. “Best commander in the entire fucking world!” an agent claimed, prompting his peers to whoop their approval as the King bent over in salutation.

At that precise moment, Chloe could say as she leaned into Oliver that it was the first time in months
that she'd felt so happy and light.

Bruce was fast asleep when the couple showed up at the infirmary. He was sat on a chair by the door's side, his arms crossed over his chest and face looking down. He had taken off his cape, the piece of tissue folded and neatly put on a desk but the man had kept his mask on, unwilling to reveal his identity. Chloe and Oliver couldn't blame him. They might be sharing a submarine with allies but trust wasn't entirely established between the League and the Squad.

Though he did look funny, being the only man on board to be wearing a mask.

The Batman, however, may have aged but he remained a light sleeper and woke up when his friends appeared in the doorway. “Meal was good?” he yawned.

Oliver smiled. “You missed something back there buddy, I tell you.”

“I'll stop by when everyone's off to their rooms.” he replied, purposely avoiding the meaning of Oliver's words.

That had Chloe smirking before she glanced at their bed-ridden friends set further into the room. Izzy, the squad’s injured scout, seemed to be recovering well and had asked to be moved to her own room. The ship's doctor, a long-time military officer, wasn't a man to linger by his patients' side. He did his job well and that was it.

He had no doubt the woman would recover to fight again by her peers' side. The man was more concerned about the League's people and Bruce shared his opinion.

“How are they?” Chloe asked, nodding towards the beds.

Bruce sighed and rose to his feet, approaching Dinah's side. “She's still fighting off the drugs she has been given.” he said. “She should wake up in the next ten hours or so.”

“What about her voice?” Oliver asked.

“The doc doesn't know,” Bruce admitted. “She's going to need a scan and there's no such equipment on board. The good news is that she should be physically well. The psychological side, however...”

Chloe pursed her lips. “There's no telling what they'd put her through.” she finished for him.

Oliver put his arm around her shoulder, pulling her closer. “We'll help her get better. We'll help all three of them.” he promised.

“Yes, well...” Bruce chimed in. “I'm glad you're there because nobody knows what to do with that one,” he pointed towards Victor's still form. The cyborg's eyes were open, staring off in the distance but there was no glint in them. They looked, for lack of a better word, dead.

Chloe touched Victor's arm and waved a hand over his face. “He needs to be at Watchtower when we get back. I suspect he might be on power-saving mode. He won't wake up until we change his batteries and check him up, his systems may have been damaged in the fight.”

Oliver looked away. “I didn't want to, trust me.”

“You have nothing to be ashamed off, Ollie.” she smiled. “He'll be alright.”

He nodded and pointed to J'onn. “What about him?” he changed the topic. “I heard he's a bit of a miracle.”
Bruce grunted. “The martian's even worse.” he said. “The doctor won't touch him, he has no idea what to do on his alien immune system and I think he's afraid he might harm him if he tries to do something.”

“J'onn is a fighter. He'll pull through.” Chloe was confident the manhunter would find the strength to get back to the land of the living. “If he doesn't, I'm sure he'll be happy to finally be reunited with his family. Whatever the outcome, he'll be okay.”

“At least they're here.” Oliver's hold on her tightened and she rubbed his arm.

“Yeah. I'm actually more worried about Arthur.” she admitted. “He likely wasn't at the facility and I'm afraid Lex might act his revenge on him.”

“We'll find him.” Bruce assured them. “I promised to be there until you find all your friends and they're safe, I'm not going anywhere until that's done.”

Chloe smiled. “That's sweet but I sincerely hope you're not going to bail on us when we find AC.” she went to hug him.

A small laugh escaped Bruce. “I'll always be around if you need me.” he promised. “After all you kids will end up making mistakes again you'll need my experience to fix them.”

Oliver snorted, pulling Chloe towards him. “Get back to bed, Grandpa.” he smirked, making the three of them chuckle.

“Well that's a good idea, it is late anyway.” Bruce humored him.

“Yup, I'm pretty beat.” Chloe yawned.

“Come on, you.” Oliver dragged her towards the door, waving at his friend. “‘Night Batman.” he winked.

“Sleep well!” Chloe said from the corridor.

“Get some rest, you two.”

At night, once everyone was in their rooms and the noises of daily life aboard the ship stopped, one could realize a submarine wasn't ever entirely silent. There was the constant and faint hush of the life-support system extracting the oxygen from the oceanic waters, the humming of the nuclear reactor powering the entire ship that could be heard even in the Expandable's nose if you strained your ear.

And then there were the external factors. A colony of fishes swimming around the submarine, a whale singing nearby, hunters tracking down their preys... No, life aboard the Expandable wasn't ever silent.

The crew had to make do with what they had. They were used to it after living in the ship for months. The new additions however, hadn't even needed an adaptation period. So exhausted were they that they fell asleep the second they laid down.

Oliver had complained about the small size of their cabin and the presence of only single beds. Chloe had rolled her eyes and found a solution. They had pulled the two mattresses out of the beds and spread them on the ground side by side, covering every inch of free space so they could lie on it.
After the demanding experience of Location X, they were set for a long dreamless sleep. For however long they were to be caught in their healing rest, the outside world was going be ignored. There, in the depths of the Atlantic ocean, they were invisible.

The alarm roared up, snatching them from their sleep and waking up the entire ship to a blaring tune that could only mean trouble. Chloe and Oliver met the King and his officers on the way, they all arrived in the control room in time to see the radar operator looking up from his screen, a terrified expression on his face.

“Torpedo!”

The torpedo struck the Expandable head on. A terrible sonic wave traveled through the metallic ship, the impact sent it careening back from its sheer strength. Chloe felt the vibrations through her bones, Oliver was there to catch her but he himself lost his footing and they both crashed the floor in a movement everyone imitated.

The submarine’s audible wince filled their ears like the call of a dying whale. She knew the ship had taken a fatal blow. It wasn’t anything like the explosions of depth charges around them. This time, the structure had been pierced open and the front compartments were filling with water at a great speed.

Chloe and everyone else felt the balance shifting towards the front, threatening to send the ship deeper into the abyss.

“We're hit!” the operator shrieked. “Section A and B are drowned, sir! Section C is filling up in no time!”

The captain grabbed his desk and fought against the gravity to stand upright, holding the operator's shoulder as he looked at the screen informing him of the damages. If anything, the look of alarm on his face would have convinced Chloe they were on the brink of death.

“We're tipping downward, captain!”

This time the panic started invading the rest of the crew and she could feel the fear clogging up the atmosphere in the room.

The captain snatched the radio device. “Full-power, reverse! No restrictions!” he ordered to the mechanics in the reactor room at the back of the ship before turning to the navigator close-by. “Empty the ballasts, seal off section C and activate the pumps!”

“Aye, captain!” the navigator kept a cool head and did as instructed while everyone watched him.

Chloe tightened her grip on Oliver, both of them were still on the ground along with the King and his men. Come on, come on, come on! She thought, her heart pounding.

The navigator let out a cry of frustration. “We're not moving up, sir!”

“Blast off the content at the front, for god's sake!”

Sections A and B were dedicated for storage needs and heavy baggages were filling the rooms to counteract the weight of the nuclear reactor at the back. Section C was the kitchen which, thankfully was empty when the ship was hit.

The Expandable couldn't move up or down as the front was loading up water and thus gaining more
weight. The captain's order to empty the water-ballasts, the system which helped the ship move upwards or downwards, had had the effect of canceling the added weight at the front, stabilizing the submarine in an even balance.

Albeit, a fragile one. Section C was still filling up with water and adding more weight which would eventually send back the ship plunging to the depths of the seas. Expelling through pressured air the content of these sections would lighten the front which would automatically go looking towards the surface.

They all felt that moment when the entire ship started pulling up. The navigator smiled as the captain spoke up into the radio once again. “Correction, full-power and forward course!” he ordered, canceling his previous order and giving the engine's strength to help the ship towards the surface.

It was going to be a long and perilous journey to the surface. The King stood up, along with everyone else and approached the captain whose concerned demeanor told him everything wasn't as encouraging as some might have thought.

“What is it, Francis?”

The captain was almost surprised by the question. “It wasn't an explosion.” he referred to the torpedo. “The ship was hit but there was no detonation. A real torpedo would have blasted open the entire nose of the ship and we'd be having waters up to our knees in this room right now.”

“If it wasn't a torpedo, then what was it?” the king wondered.

“I'm not sure.” Francis shook his head. “Maybe it was a torpedo and it didn't detonate but that's an extremely rare occurrence....”

“Huh, I don't know what it was but I know for sure, torpedo or no torpedo, that thing hit us, alright?” Oliver chimed in. “And right now I couldn't care less what it was, I just want to make sure you're gonna get us to the surface, okay?”

The captain turned to the operator. “Report status, officer!”

“Depth: five-hundred feet and going up at thirty-three knots speed!” the radar operator said, his eyes glued to the screen.

Another officer went on. “Section C is full and sealed up, captain. From section D onwards, we're dry, sir! Contents of sections A, B and C have been expelled and the reactor's temperature is still in the safe zone!”

The captain nodded and looked back at Oliver. “We'll be able to breathe fresh air in two minutes.” he assured him.

The king turned to Flagg. “Round up everyone to get their weapons ready, prepare some divers in the airlock and set up the rest of the men at the deck exit.” he ordered.

“On it, Commander!” Rick replied, already trotting out of the room.

“If they fired at us underwater, then we're gonna have company up there.” The king told Chloe and Oliver.

“What are you going to do?” she asked. “Surely they will have destroyers aiming their canons at us the moment we peek an eye out. Your rifles aren't going to help.”
The king's face remained closed, almost as if he hadn't heard her. “We'll make sure you and your friends get out before any of my men fire a single round. Remember to take the data, leaving it here is too dangerous.”

“Whoah, okay wait up!” Oliver said. “It sounds like you want to go down with a fight. Wrong?”

“I'm prepared for every plan of action, Winch.” The king replied. “We're not afraid to die in order to accomplish the mission but between us, that's not my preferred option.”

A siren rang up. “Hitting the surface in fifteen seconds!” the operator shouted.

The King suddenly turned to one of his men. “Get me Wilson and Regina over here to coordinate the action with me. Flagg will lead people out, we'll watch over things until it's our turn.”

“Yes sir!” the man saluted him and ran out.

“Go,” Maxwell Lord nudged Chloe and Oliver. “Put on your jackets, and get your friends out, we'll prepare a rescue lifeboat out there. You are the priority.”

“Yeah well, let's just hope they don't shoot us when we get there.” Oliver muttered, guiding Chloe out of the room.

“Don't we all?” the king whispered.

“Surface, now!”

May 31st 2012. 04:50 AM UTC-6. Somewhere in the northern part of the Atlantic ocean.

The Expandable surged out of the water in a seizing roar. A wounded monster of over six thousand tons emerged in a terrifying and yet fascinating sight. At the surface, the ocean had calmed and it was a quiet and unending land of water that greeted the machine.

Inside the submarine, there was a gripping tension as the crew became agitated in the control room. The radar operator double-checked his screen and was tempted to rub his eyes when the report came that there was no ship waiting for them at the surface.

“Well?” The Black King demanded, intently watching the captain who was spinning in the middle of the room with his periscope.

He turned, watched on every side, shook his head then repeated the process. “Confirmed.” he said after a few rounds. “We're clear.”

The King grabbed his radio. “All units, evac now. The way out is clear, I repeat: the way out is clear.”

The ship writhed again, off-footing its crew even as a loud bang echoed from the front. Slade Wilson grabbed a pipe to stabilize himself. “Okay now... what the hell was that?” he wondered quietly.

“Sir?” came Tess's voice by their side, drawing Lord's stare off the dark corridor.

He blinked and gripped his radio and was about to speak when the ship shook again. “Speed up the evac, Flagg! We've got trouble!”

Rick Flagg's soldiers, a dozen men and women wearing assault rifles strapped on, had stepped on the
submarine's deck and saw with their own eyes the static spectacle that greeted them. The first tremor caught them by surprise and a couple of men had almost fallen into the water before they could throw out the lifeboat.

“Speed up the evac, Flagg! We've got trouble!” came the Commander's voice on his shoulder.

“Copy!” he trotted towards the airlock and extended his arm. “Hurry up, we ain't got all day!”

Batman was the first one to be helped out and, as another tremor upped their sense of urgency, both men did their best to drag out the stretchers carrying J'onn, Dinah and Victor in the best conditions possible.

“What's going on?” the vigilante's rasping question wasn't one Flagg was willing to answer.

The lifeboat was held close to the ship by his men and they slipped the stretchers one by one in the middle of it so as not to upset the balance and tip it over.

“I honestly have no idea.” Flagg answered once they were done.

Batman nodded and leaped on the lifeboat. “Let's not waste time then.”

The next one to poke his head out was Oliver Queen. “What's happening?” he asked, barely out of the airlock himself. He was extending a hand inside to help Chloe towards the surface.

Rick huffed. “I don't know and if you could keep --”

The Expandable roared, a jolt of incredible force sent everyone on the deck flying to the water and a terrible wince started to echo dangerously from the ship. Rick Flagg struggled for a moment in the water, unable to process what had happened.

He coughed out the water he had absorbed and almost strangled himself when a horrifying sight painted itself in front of him. Just a few yards away, the Expandable's rear was carried up out of the water as its front was tipping downward and the entire ship started to sink.

“Commander!” he coughed and shouted.

“Chloe!” Oliver yelled somewhere close. “Chloe!”

Flagg saw the man try to swim desperately towards the submarine. He rushed after him, getting closer to the dangerous ship.

“Chloe!”

Oliver struggled against Rick’s grip, almost causing both men to drown. “Stop! Stop it!”

“Let me go!” Oliver fought harder.

Rick cursed and glanced back at the lifeboat which was already starting to drift away. His eye was caught by a blur of colors falling from the sky. Oliver eventually saw it too and they watched, aghast as the thing plunged underwater towards the front of the submarine before reappearing out of the airlock a moment later, carrying Chloe out towards the lifeboat.

“What the hell.” Flagg's jaw dropped.

It was a man, hovering above the lifeboat as he dropped Sullivan onto it gently. His blue uniform was standing out over the gray skies as his red cap floated with the wind. The savior waited for a
moment as he exchanged a word with Chloe before he sped back towards the submarine and dipped underwater once again.

Oliver was already out of Flagg's grasp and heading towards the lifeboat before the latter could come back to reality. He was still struck aghast when loud splashes pierced his bubble. The crew was starting to spill out of the airlock in a frenzy as the ship kept on sinking.

The Expandable's tower was about to be drowned when Tess Mercer appeared out of the airlock and jumped into the water. Flagg swam towards her. “Are you okay, Regina?”

She spit out water and grimaced. “I'm alright, sir.” she said. “But I'm not sure the Commander will be able to make it out.”

Flagg glanced back towards the submarine and was shaken to find it had already sunk entirely underwater. Geyser of bubbles were proliferating at the surface when two men were propelled out of the water and into the sky, leaving behind a trail of red and blue.

The savior seemed to be fighting off a blond man and was having trouble containing him as they both fell back into the ocean a mile or two away.

“Now, what's that?” Flagg couldn't help asking.

Tess regained her breathing. “The torpedo.” she said, drawing his attention. “What hit us wasn't a missile it was a man.”

“A man?” he repeated. “Like a mutant?”

She nodded. “Yeah and we'd better get out of here because if he ever comes back... we're all dead.”

The lifeboat erred over the waves in silence. The survivors had been lost at sea for several hours when the weather started to change and the waves became more perilous. Neither the Expandable nor the land were in sight and the two super-powered men had taken their fight underwater since the submarine sunk.

Oliver held Chloe close to him as they both shivered. Most of the people on the lifeboat were drenched and the cold-weather of the northern Atlantic wasn't helping. There were over fifty people around them and yet, only a few words had been pronounced after the initial adrenaline high was ridden out.

Rick Flagg had been informed that the Black King and Slade Wilson, his two superiors were still in the submarine when it sunk, thus making him the next in line for taking command of the Suicide Squad. Nobody was taken these losses very well within the rogue organization.

Oliver was starting to wonder if they weren't about to meet the end of the journey lost in the middle of the ocean when a voice rose among the people. “Hey! Look!” one of the agents pointed at a point in the sky.

The unidentifiable dot soon grew and Oliver could make out the red and blue of the savior's uniform.

“Over here!” People started to wave at him.

The savior flew above them at the speed of sound, leaving behind a deafening roar as he headed straight to the west where the hum of a siren came from. “Oh my god!” Tess exclaimed.
The man was headed straight towards a destroyer approaching their position. They knew they were spotted when a missile squeezed past them underwater, missing the lifeboat by a mere couple of yards.

“They're going to kill us!” someone shouted.

It wasn't unfathomable that Luthor had ordered his men to shoot on sight in order to end his troubles without getting too much coverage by the civilians.

“No, watch him!” Eve Eden replied. The savior circled over the destroyer for a moment before setting foot on it and disappearing from sight. They soon saw the boat getting closer and, as it blew its horn with enthusiasm, everyone rose to their feet and let their relief explode in grand waves and hoots.

May 31st 2012. 05:19 PM UTC-6. Watchtower, Metropolis, Kansas, USA.

The Watchtower had an austere feel when the Justice League crossed its threshold. The faint light filtering through the grand window was only illuminating cloaked figures hidden under a layer of dust. It felt like the room had been waiting a long time for people to come greet it again. And greet it they did.

Chloe walked towards the circuit breaker and turned on the power supply. Immediately, the ventilation system started humming and the lights went on. She smiled. “We're back now. All of us.”

Bruce took off his mask and inhaled deeply. “I can breathe easy now.”

Oliver chuckled. “Not so fast, buddy. Help me get them upstairs.” he nodded to the stretchers in the entryway.

The covers were lifted off and the computers turned on as the Watchtower, finally, came back to life once again. Chloe was already typing on her keyboard with her usual fervor when a whooshing noise came about behind her.

She couldn't quite contain her grin when she turned around to see the savior standing in the doorway. “Don't you look handsome, Clark.” she went to hug him, a teasing note to her voice.

“Thanks,” he replied, engulfing her in his arms until she was swallowed hole in a maze of red and blue.

“Hey!” Oliver called from the stairs. “Damn, buddy it's good to see you!”

Both men shook hands as Chloe found again her seat again. “I'm happy to be back but I actually didn't expect to find such a different world.”

“It's been over two years, Clark.” Oliver raised his eyebrows. “A lot of things changed, and not for the best.”

Clark was about to ask a question when Chloe interrupted him. “Things are changing right now, actually,” she transferred a live video feed to the main screen. “Watch.”

It was a live communication from the White House. Cameras started to go off when Condoleeza Reiser, Lex Luthor's right hand started walking down the stairs leading to the stage set up in front of journalists. She looked quited uncertain of herself as she cleared her throat and addressed the crowd.
Reiser seemed to look for words for a moment. “Earlier today...” she started, skipping the formalities. “A place called the Metinic Island, a small atoll on the east coast of America, was targeted by a group of terrorists.”

The crowd froze as she took a breath. “They infiltrated a government research facility in order to steal classified information which are critical for the safety of our nation. These terrorists are now at large. They managed to take control of a United States Navy destroyer and we believe they are planning a large-scale attack on the country.”

There was a long moment of silence. Reiser's hand shook on the podium until she gripped it firmly. “Our intelligence tells us these terrorists are acting on Iran's behalf under the joint influence of Russia and China in hope to undermine our economic prosperity and threaten our existence. The President decided these unacceptable actions would be answered by force. He called our army's highest ranking officers an hour ago to let them know he decided to bring our DEFCON alert state to its second highest level and he is at the moment, supervising the retaliation operations on the Sino-Russian alliance. American troops are deploying in the Pacific and the Baltic seas.”

She took a long deep breath. “We are asking everybody to remain calm and stay in their homes. We are doing everything to ensure your safety and that of our great nation. God bless us all and God bless America.”

Oliver was at a loss of words as he watched Reiser climb up the stairs and disappear into the White House as the feed cut to frantic journalists trying to analyze the situation. He put his hands on his head and blew out a breath as if the air had been knocked out of him.

“Madman...” he muttered. “A fucking madman!”

Chloe looked shell-shocked as she whispered. “We're one step away from nuclear war.”
Fall From Grace

'This is the moment your life changes forever.' – Brainiac, Season 1, Episode 4: “Homecoming”.

[SHARP GINGLE] - “Breaking News here in D.C.” [VISUAL CUE – SWITCH TO PICTURES], there have been reports of a flying caped man all over the city.” [SWITCH TO JOURNALIST]

“It was first believed that this superman was touring over the city to provoke fear or fascination but he then stopped at the Capitol – interrupting a vote of the Senate with an astonishing declaration, listen!”

[VISUAL CUE] The screen switched to a video of the superman standing in the middle of the chamber, branding around a pack of hard drives. “I hold here in my hand,” the man's charismatic voice captivated the elected senators. “The proof that the Luthor administration has been perpetrating crimes against humanity.” A hubbub of surprised exclamations came over the chamber. “I put these documents in the hands of the Congress, trusting your judgment to do good by the constitution of this country.”

[SWITCHING BACK TO JOURNALIST] “Yes you heard him right the first time: President Lex Luthor and his government are being accused of crimes against humanity. As of now, the Senate and House of Representatives have been called into an emergency session to look over the documents and make a decision on the future of this country. The president's whereabouts are currently unknown and the White House has declined any comment on the situation. Stay tuned, you're witnessing history in the making!”

[CUE AD SEGMENTS]

May 31st 2012. 07:31 PM UTC-6. Watchtower, Metropolis, Kansas, USA.

J'onn J'onzz felt like he had woken up from an unending nightmare when he opened his eyes. The Watchtower wasn't supposed to feel warm or particularly welcoming to any normal person and yet, as he sat up on his bed, J'onn found a reassuring vibe in these steel bars and industrial styled complex. For months, he'd been strapped to a medical bed and lived these times in short but painful experiences. The cold white light of the projectors, the stone-faced surgeons experimenting on him and the pain of the operations... all of this was over.

The door wheezed opened and J'onn smiled with great enthusiasm at the sight of a frantic Emil Hamilton rushing to his side. “John? You're up? How are you feeling? You really should lie down, your vitals weren't looking good.”

J'onn laughed and shook his head. “Actually, Emil... I'm feeling great! I don't know what happened but I feel no pain, no fear and no sadness. It's... quite incredible!” It was puzzling to be in such a joyful mood after the harrowing time he had endured at the hands of Luthor's scientists when time and time again all he ever felt were negative emotions and the feeling of an inescapable, miserable death.

Emil couldn't quite believe his eyes. “Don't move, John, please!” he put his hands on the martian's arms as if the other man was going to escape at any second. “I need to draw your blood and do some tests, I can't understand your sudden recovery.”
“Why my friend, please do.” J’onn presented his arm. “Have you got any news about the others?”

Emil nodded, his eyes staring at the special needle inserting into his patient's arm. “Yes and I'll have to tell you they aren't as overjoyed as you seem to be.” he said gravely. “Chloe is doing her best to communicate with Victor.”

“Communicate?”

“His mind is trapped inside his body.” Emil explained. “His internal computer sustained damage and that sticks him into passive mode. It's a long story really.”

The martian had no doubt of that. He was missing quite a bit of information at the moment and he still hadn't quite realized it was the first time in months he'd been in the presence of a person who was meaning him no harm, and a friend, no less. “What about AC and Dinah?”

Emil pursed his lips, slipping the vial of blood into his pocket. “Dinah woke up yesterday and it's not looking good. She's been crying non-stop since then, the shock, no doubt and she has trouble talking.”

“Dear Hezza, what terrible things had they done to her?”

“Well... I have no certainty but if anything the scars on her throat are a dead give away they've been messing with her vocal cords but I'm more worried about her mental state at the moment.”

J’onn stood up. “Can I see her?”

Emil was still looking at him as if he might break and he seemed to hesitate for a moment before he made an almost nonchalant shrug. “Why not? I'm sure the sight of you might help her. She's downstairs in the bedroom, Chloe's with her at the moment.”

“Thank you.”

“Oh, wait!” Emil stepped in his path. “I'll go with you, I don't want you out of my sight until I've examined your blood and made further checks.”

J’onn smiled. “As you say, Emil.” he acquiesced and followed him down the stairs. “So you found Dinah and Victor, what about AC?”

Emil paused mid-step and gave him a grave expression. “Trust me, J’onn, you don't want to know.”

“Back with us live on CNN and the super-man who accused the president of crimes against humanity is being questioned by the Congressmen at the moment while data experts have been summoned to the Capitol to parse through the data brought about, the first reports should be made in the next couple of hours.

Also in parallel of all of this, the Congress has put out a communiqué demanding the White House to suspend any activity for the rest of the day while the investigation is ongoing. Congressman Kenvald, representative of the congress, has cited the unique demand to be motivated by the recent events as well as the importance of the accusations brought against the government.

Indeed, as the president and his staff have yet to appear on camera, the entire world is standing on the brink of destruction while the american people are waiting with batted breath the decision of the Congress which could change the fate of the planet.”
Chloe turned down the TV’s sound and watched Oliver, Bruce and J’onn talk together, their conversation being at turns serious, gloomy, even and turning lighter at times. It summed up the general dichotomy in the atmosphere surrounding the Watchtower at the moment.

They were still dazed from the quick successions of event that brought back their friends and defeated the government’s forces on direct confrontation with the Suicide Squad’s help. With J’onn’s mysterious come back to form, Chloe had seen her friends sport genuine smiles for the first time in a long time.

Even as the world seemed to be facing it’s first major crisis since the cold war, the League felt almost disconnected from this reality. Holed up in their secret hideout, the well-being of their friends took precedence over everything else, as selfish as it might feel, after the difficult events they all had to live through, Chloe knew it had strengthened their bond. They were a family and family came over everything else, even the world.

The Watchtower's doors slammed open and a storm almost came knocking Chloe down as Lois rushed to hug her. “Oh my god, Chlo! You're there, you're alright!” she squealed.

“Aw, Lois.” Chloe tightened her hold on her cousin. The two women hadn't seen each other face to face since the FBI had kidnapped them at Oliver's penthouse. Even after Bruce had gotten them out, they had decided to stay apart so as not to bring Lois into Lex's radar since she remained their last link to the world.

Lois pulled back watching Chloe in awe. Her eyes were wide as if she couldn't quite believe she was standing here. “I really, really, really missed you, cuz! God, don't make me go through that again!”

Chloe felt her eyes filling with tears. “I missed you too, Lo.” she couldn't trust herself to say more or she might cry. Lois wasn't faring much better either as when hugged her cousin once more, gripping her as tight as she could so to make up for the months she couldn't do it.

“What, no hug for me?” came another voice behind them.

Lois laughed. “Believe it or not, Queen but I love my cousin more than I love you.”

“Hey it's okay, I feel the same.” Oliver winked at Chloe, his expression softening when he caught sight of a young woman still standing in the doorway, looking almost afraid to step further inside.

He opened his arms and whispered.“Come here.” She came running into Oliver with such force he had to take a step back when she hugged him. “You alright, kiddo?”

Mia nodded, sighing in relief. “I'm okay...”

“Yeah? You don't sound okay.” Oliver appeared concerned and took her by the shoulders so he could look at her face. “I take it living with Lois has been hell.” he smirked.

The young women chuckled while Lois snapped her head around to scowl at Oliver. “Nah, it was alright. I mean... more than alright.” she corrected at the sight of Lois's playful glare.

“Careful, there Missy!” she warned.

Mia rolled her eyes. “So, yeah okay, the food was terrible.”

Chloe and Oliver laughed as Lois looked dejected. “What happened to take out, Lois?” he asked.

“What did you expect me to do? You'd taken my cousin away, I had no one to rant to about my job,
men and--"

“Well, Mia was there.” Chloe interrupted her.

“It's not the same!” she insisted. “She's underage!”

With another shake of her head, Mia looked down and bit her lip. “I really missed you, though.” she admitted. “Both of you.” she added, glancing at Chloe.

The latter gave her a watery smile and wrapped an arm around her. “You're sweet, Mia.”

“So it's over know? You're free?” she glanced up to their faces looking almost innocent.

Oliver pursed his lips. “Let's just say we bought some time.” he wasn't willing to lie to her. “What happens next doesn't depend on us.”

“Oh!” Lois exclaimed, making the rest of them jump. “You won't believe the masses of people that are gathering around outside!”

“Outside?” Chloe started, alarmed. “You mean--?”

“I mean everywhere!” Lois answered with grand gestures. “People are taking to the streets since Clark came to the Senate. It was Clark ,right? I can't believe he didn't tell me!” she started to rant. “The guy goes off the grid for two freaking years then comes back supercharged messiah style and he doesn't even find a minute in all of this to stop and call me!”

Her excitement had everyone else grinning and shaking their heads. “I mean, can you believe that? Clark Kent, a super-hero? THIS IS CRAZY!”

Someone cleared their throat behind Chloe and Oliver. “When was the last time you ate something, Lois?” a warm voice came into the conversation. “I'm asking because I seem to recall you saying something about hypoglycemia and I have these doughnuts, here...”

“John!” Lois shrieked, precipitating herself towards the box of doughnuts presented to her by the martian. “You're my favorite person in the world right now!” she said with her mouth already stuffed full of food.

John grinned. “I'm happy to see you haven't lost your energy, Lois.”

Mia crossed her arms over her chest. “Can't say I'm surprised either.” she started, wryly. “That woman has enough energy to rival a nuclear plant.”

Chloe chuckled, glancing in amusement at the younger woman. “Ain't that right...”

Lois looked up from her box of food. “What's that? I can't hear you over all these DOUGHNUTS!” she went to take another bite but paused mid-bite when her eyes set on another figure standing apart from the group. Her eyes widened and she let go of the doughnut – which hit the ground with an unequivocal *splat* - to run a hand through her hair quickly. “Oh, Bruce, hi! I didn't know you were there!” she smiled, uncertain of herself.

Bruce Wayne too was hesitant. He hadn't been sure what to do when the woman came in earlier and had compromised to stay in the same room but apart from the group that had gathered. He swallowed, crossing and uncrossing his arms, moving his dark cape in the process.

“Lois.” he said finally.
“Have you witnessed the government's crimes first hand?”

The unnamed savior stood at the testimonial spot in front of the Congress' commission, well aware of the countless pair of eyes rived on his blue and red uniform. “No.”

The congressman readjusted himself in his chair. “Where do the hard drives you brought us come from?”

“They are a copy of the database in a government installation settled on the Metinic Island.”

“Did you copy the data yourself?” the congressman insisted.

“No.” the savior admitted. “They were given to me.”

“By whom?”

He hesitated. “I cannot tell you that.”

The congressman sighed, sitting back in his chair. “If you are going to withheld such critical information, how could we trust you? How could we trust the data if the source isn't verified?”

“I understand your concerns, sir.” the savior replied calmly. “The sources wish to remain anonymous and – I've already said it – their identity isn't necessary to the investigation. Everything that you need to know has been brought to you.”

Another congressman chimed in. “Well we could have the police give a visit to the Metinic Island's facility, couldn't we?”

The savior rose a hand. “Sir, with all due respect, that would take too much time. Wait for the reports and watch the data. There are pictures, videos and detailed proof that Lex Luthor and his administration are guilty of crimes on an industrial scale.”

“Let's hope for yourself that you are right, son.” The chairman said. “At the moment, we have your sole testimony to corroborate with your accusations and without any indisputable proof we cannot stop the government from leading to us to a war not even Russia and China seem to want.”

He hammered down on his desk. “Audition is over. We will resume this session once the experts have made their reports in half an hour.”

Oliver's indications had been extremely precise, especially about the way to get into the building. Tess was almost apprehensive to step out of the elevator when it reached the final floor. She felt like an intruder in what was the League's headquarters.

She had decided to move when a noise came from the lit up room on her right. A man wearing a white blouse and small glasses came into the corridor, carrying a heavy piece of medical equipment in his arms. He managed to turn off the light and close the door clumsily when he noticed her standing by the elevator.

“Oh,” he froze and cleared his throat. “Hello?” he started tentatively.

Tess looked like she'd been caught hand in the cookie jar. “Um... hello.”
“Are you Tess... Mercer, is it? Tess Mercer?”

She felt stupid for even hesitating. “Yes, yes that's me.” she nodded emphatically.

The man grinned and stepped closer to her. “Oh well, hi, I'm Emil Hamilton, the League's physician.” he said. “Oliver said you would come by.”

There was a moment of awkward silence. “I take it, things are moving on your...er.. side?”

Tess licked her lips. “Why yes, my superior sent me here to act as a liaison agent.” she replied. “We're tracking down Luthor and he wants you to be informed in real-time.”

“Ah the infamous Lex Luthor... any luck yet?”

She shook her head. “No, but we have been told there's some unrest in the army bases stationed close to the capital, he might be giving orders remotely.”

Emil's brow furrowed. “This man isn't going down without a fight, is he?”

She smiled. “Of course.”

“Thank you.”

“Excuse us for the interruption, we are back live on CNN!

A wave of panic have seized the crowd gathered in front of the capitol when US military troops tried to surround the Congress and demanded the congressmen to renounce the investigation being conducted on the government. Several Television Networks were visited by soldiers and we were forced off the air for an hour.

The Congress denounced a coup and demanded the army not to interfere with a constitutional process. Everyone feared the worse when the troops drew their weapons and a bloodbath may have been averted when a garrison of soldiers led by General Samuel Lane arrived at the Capitol, and demanded the coup to be aborted.

After a tense standoff, the rebelling troops received the order to return to their barracks by their leading officer, Colonel Riccardo who presented himself to be arrested by General Lane. He admitted following orders emanating from the Joint Chieffs of Staff's chairman – General Revson.

Samuel Lane had been evicted from the JCS's command a year earlier to be replaced by Revson and advised the Congress to issue an arrest warrant for General Revson who is believed to be following the president's call.

It's getting clear President Luthor tried to get control of the situation by force through Revson while he is leading an attack on the Sino-Russian alliance who, in turn, declared to be prepared for war but said to be ready to back down if the U.S. aborted the attack.

It was with an electric mood that the Congress voted a preemptive decision to cancel the attack and demanded the President's return on national soil. The message has been transmitted to every
leading officer' declared General Lane. 'We hope they will listen to their common sense and stop this madness.'

At the moment, there have been no public answer to these calls by the military and the attack on China and Russia is believed to still be programmed. Stay with us for more!"

Bruce found a moment to subtract himself from Lois's attention and make a call. He was watching the woman's every move as the phone's tune echoed against his ear and a familiar voice picked up. “Hello?”

He smiled. “Hi, Alfred.”

“Oh, Master Bruce! Have you seen the news today?”

“Of course, Alfred!” he smirked. “Who could have missed it? It actually reminded me of a conversation we had.”

“Which one, sir?” Alfred's querying tone replied.

Bruce kept his gaze on Lois who was discussing with the group about Mercer's intel. “The one where you urged me not to don the mask again.” The butler knew when to remain silent. “I've been thinking about that Italian café and... it's... Well I feel it's time for me to retire, for good this time.”

For the longest time, Bruce could see a life for himself after the Batman and the old man's words had been in his head ever since he uttered them. After witnessing the horrors Luthor was capable of, after helping Oliver and Chloe get their friends out of trouble, he felt like a chapter of his life was closing and, seeing as the League was going to get stronger again, maybe it was the time to end the Batman's return and let them take care of things.

“Alfred?” The butler had been silent for too long.

“Master Bruce,” Alfred paused. “Have you truly been watching the news?”

Bruce was confused. “Why yes, the Congress, the coup--”

“Forgive me, sir,” Alfred cut him off. “I should have been more precise: Have you been watching Gotham's news?”

“Has something happened?” he asked in alarm.

“Well...” Alfred's british drawl couldn't conceal the healthy dose of irony in his voice. “There's a bright sun shining down on the mansion, you wouldn't believe it! Oh and Commissioner Gordon has been calling on your computer in the cave, I hear there are rumors about a – what did they call him? - a big guy, I reckon they said, a big guy who seems quite adamant to take over the city.”

“I'm on my way.”

“I wouldn't want to disrupt your activities, Master Bruce,” Alfred conceded. “You might be needed at Master Queen's side more than you are at Gotham now.”

“No,” Bruce shook his head. “They will manage fine without me. If Gotham is in trouble then I'm going.”

“Anyway,” Alfred breathed. “Whichever direction I look, our caped friend is needed.”
“And you're fine with that?” he asked, testing the butler's take on the situation.

Alfred made an amused noise. “I feel it would be selfish of me to tell the Batman not to do it when he's so obviously needed.”

“Your opinion matters, Alfred.” Bruce insisted.

“My dear child, the decision is yours.” The butler replied. “And I will support you regardless of your choice.”

Bruce smiled. “Prepare the Batmobile, I'll be here in two hours.”

“It's ten to five here in D.C. and the sun is still a long while away from setting but it's already been a crazy day!

Just ten minutes ago the Congress decided to issue a statement, breaking the confidentiality of their investigation since they decided to continue their session in private. The Congress' speaker announced that General Demasson is tasked to arrest any government staff at the White House while Samuel Lane is leading an expedition to arrest the JCS' Revson.

On her way towards Rikers Island, Condoleeza Reiser declined any comment, as did every other member of the government.

At the same time, we have been told there are factions of the army defecting from the President's command. Lex Luthor is rumored to be the leader of only a fraction of the initial forces, some say he is already fleeing some of his officers who are trying to capture him.

The net is getting tighter against the President and his followers! Stay with us, we'll keep you updated.”

Oliver yawned when the elevator's doors closed. He worked out the kinks in his neck, stretching his arms above his head. “Sorry,” he said. “I guess I'm starting to feel the lack of sleep now.”

Chloe rubbed his arm. “You've been up for almost two days straight, you really should lie down.”

“You say that like you weren't the same,” he smiled. “What do you say we lie down together?”

“Hey it's not the same, I had a nap this morning, unlike you!”

“You looked really tired though.”

She looked up at him. “Just like you do now. Come on, after this visit, we'll find a quiet spot to sleep in.”

“Deal,” he kissed her forehead. “Though I'm not sure we'll be able to catch a break if Lois keeps hooting for her father to catch the bad guy.”

She couldn't help grinning. “Uncle Sam's back in business, what's not to love? He looked pretty proud of himself on TV.”

“I still feel we owe him for getting the information of KUDEVIANT on his own, he's a pretty stand up guy.” Oliver said. “I'll be happy to meet him.”

“You need to meet my dad first.” she reminded him.
“Right,” he smiled. “And you need to meet Dayton.”

“Hey, I've been wanting to do that for years, Ollie!”

He wrapped his arms around her, turning her around. “We'll do all of that when we're done with Lex.”

Chloe nodded, putting her head against his shoulder. “He has to go away for good now,” she said. “He's been hurting us and the world way too much and I have enough of living like a fugitive!”

“Shh, it's gonna be okay,” he whispered into her ear. “Lex's going down for a long time once we catch him. Then, we'll take a long, very long and very deserved vacation. Okay?”

She sighed. “Mmhmh. Ollie?” she asked after a moment. “What if I... if we... I mean--”

The elevator tinged, its doors drawing open to reveal an underground level.

“Yeah?” Oliver asked.

She gave him a tight smile. “Nevermind, we'll talk later.” she tugged him into the room. “Come on.”

The Watchtower was an old building that had been made over an abandoned underground parking composed of two levels. Level one was the garage and secret entry, it was a path often used by the League's members when they wanted to get into the building incognito.

The second underground level had been unused until today. It was there, behind a column of storage boxes that Emil had setup a temporary laboratory dedicated to Arthur's condition. The poor seaman was shacked up to the wall and being kept away from water since they discovered the treatment inflicted on him had convinced him his friends were dangerous people who ought to be arrested and tried for crimes.

He had single-handedly almost killed them all when he attacked the Expandable with them onboard. Hadn't it been for Clark's intervention and things would have tipped in Lex's favor.

“How is he?” Chloe asked.

Emil looked back from his equipment, his face grave. “It's as bad as I thought, unfortunately.” he said. “He's been subjected to intense brainwashing and his brainwaves are entirely disrupted.” he pointed to the encephalographic results. “I'm afraid that any treatment I might give him now might do more damage than good.”

Oliver sighed, glancing at his sedated friend on the medical table, wires stuck against his skull linking him to several machines. “Can you do something?”

“I need to do more tests.” Emil said. “A scanner will be a good start but I'm afraid we might have to do behavior treatments to try to reverse the process.”

“You mean psychological exchanges?” Chloe asked.

“Yes, electroshocks might prove more useful but there are too many risks and no guarantees. He might end up being catatonic.” Emil admitted.

“How long is this going to take?”

Emil struggled to give him an answer. “The only honest answer would be: years.”
Oliver's shoulders deflated. “So be it.” he declared. “We'll help him become his old self again, no matter how long it's gonna take we can't let Lex win.”

The intercom buzzed, forcing their minds off AC's fate for a second. “Yes?” Emil answered.

J'onn voice came over the device. “Are Chloe and Oliver down with you?”

“We're here J'onn!” Chloe announced, approaching the device on Emil's desk.

“We found him.”

Oliver's head perked up. “Where?”

“He's hiding in South America.” J'onn explained. “There's this patch of amazonian forest marking the border between Colombia and Panama. The Suicide Squad found a rehabilitated facility right in the middle of it, they traced Lex's presence in there.”

“... the forest between Colombia and Panama, you said?” Oliver's head was twirling.

“Yes, it's called the Darién Gap... Why?”
The Hunt

'My ego is firmly in tact thank you very much. If you'd release your pet monkeys here I'll be happy to give the wicked witch a personal demonstration.' – Oliver Queen, Season 1 0, Episode 1 9: “Dominion”.

[GINGLE] “And we are back on CNN and the Congress has finally taken a decision, listen!”

The screen switched to the Congress' spokesman standing before cameras as his peers and the Superman stood behind him in a solemn wall of support. “The Congress has unanimously decided that the accusations brought against the Luthor administration are too important to be ignored.” the man declared.

“Following the review of the first elements of proof brought to our attention we have voted for the impeachment of the President Lex Luthor and his administration. These people are no longer in charge of our country and are summoned to present themselves to Washington DC's trial court immediately. The prosecutor has been seized on the matter and the Congress will ensure the role of interim government until a date of elections is fixed and a candidate is chosen by the people.”

The spokesman squinted, distracted for a moment by the waves of flashes invading his sight as the cameras clicked with fervor in front of him. “Lex Luthor is now a wanted fugitive.”

June 1st 2012. 10:05 AM UTC-6. Darién Gap, Panama.

Rick Flagg watched an helicopter fly over the jungle of the Darién Gap. It hovered low above the trees and started its decent into the clearing where the soldiers were stationed. The renaming members of the Suicide Squad were gathered, waiting for the new arrivals to join them in the forest and take part in a large-scale manhunt operation.

The aircraft lowered its altitude, the pales of the rotor almost scratching the leaves of the palm trees surrounding them. The pilot managed to hold it straight when the wind blew, threatening to send the helicopter and its people against the trees.

It was a danger they had to deal with. The revelation that Lex Luthor was hiding in the Darién Gap may have been a surprise to most but it was clear this part of the world was one of the best if one wanted to disappear.

Totaling almost a hundred miles of hostile natural environment, dense forests and war-experienced militias, the Gap was the last place any sane human being wanted to go to, unless they had a good reason.

The helicopter touched ground, everybody fought against the air blowing around as its lateral door was pushed open. Flagg noticed the Justice League marching through his troops in his direction. J'onn J'onzz the walking miracle and the Superman were key additions to this hunt, their skills were a necessity if they wanted to find Luthor and capture him. These powerful crime-fighters were intimidating in their own right but they didn't come close to the Green Arrow leading them.

Oliver Queen walked straight towards Flagg and his tent, his hood down and a determined glint in his eyes.

Flagg held the tent's fabric wide open. “We weren't expecting you so soon.” he greeted the
vigilantes. “Anyway, we're not gonna complain.”

Oliver gave him a glance as he walked past him. “We didn't want to be late for this party.”

J'onzz and the Superman were more agreeable and stopped at Flagg's level. “Admittedly, we could have been here in a matter of minutes since we both fly.” Jonn explained. “But we're carrying equipment.”

“Good point.” Flagg nodded. “Come on, let's get inside.”

The four men gathered around a table on which a map of the Darién Gap was spread out. Oliver was already bent over the piece of paper, entranced with the information laid out before his eyes. “Tell us.” he said.

Flagg pointed at a blue circle on the map. “We're here,” he started. “On the Panamanian side of the forest and that's one of the only clear spots of the Gap. And Luthor is...” his hand traced over the forest before stopping at a red cross on the other side of the border. “here.”

“That's Colombian territory.” Clark stated.

Oliver nodded as Flagg stared at Clark in silence. “Is that going to be a problem?” J'onn asked, glancing in confusion at the other men.

“Well...” Flagg cleared his throat.

“There are international treaties between the U.S. and Panama that extends American jurisdiction to this country – mostly because of the canal. That's not the case with Colombia.” Oliver explained.

“And the Colombian government hasn't allowed an American operation to take place on their ground, if I understand the situation.” J'onn guessed.

“Who cares?” Flagg shrugged. “We're not the U.S. army anyway.”

“I care!” Clark declared. “We are acting on behalf of our government, and it has to be a lawful arrest.”

The United States were being governed by a special commission of the Congress until the next presidential election. This commission had appointed Sam Lane as the new secretary of defense, thus giving him the reigns over the military and secret services. The nomination had allowed Rick Flagg to demand of Lane to let the Suicide Squad and the Justice League arrest Luthor. Lane had accepted, knowing any movement of american troops could revive the international tensions that the former president had set off.

“the Darién Gap is dense and deserted enough, it's going to be a piece of cake to make people think we've arrested him on the Panamanian side.” Oliver countered. “Besides, we can always play the card of 'we didn't know we were in Colombia' it's not like there's a line painted on the ground back there.”

Clark shook his head, taking a step back. “I can't agree with these methods. I'm sorry, I can't.” he insisted when Oliver sighed. “If he's to be arrested, it has to be done by the letter of the law.”

“Look, Superman,” Rick Flagg intervened. “He's the only president of our country to be accused of crimes against humanity, everybody back home wants him caught and tried. Nobody's going to argue if we have to break a few rules to do so.”
“No, no!” Clark insisted. “I won't be part of this,” he turned to J'onn. “Come on, it can't be done that way!”

J'onn looked almost pained as he breathed out a sigh. “A year ago I would have agreed with you Kal-El but...” he shook his head.

“What changed?”

“I experienced Lex's torture.” J'onn replied. “It's one thing to be empathic with his victims but even with my abilities, I would never have thought this ordeal was so unbearable.” He evaded Clark's gaze, as if he felt guilty. “Lex Luthor needs to be arrested, even if we have to take a few liberties with the law.”

Clark looked at J'onn as if he saw a stranger. “I never would have thought you could change so much.”

“Neither would I, Kal-El, but there are scars even we can't get rid of.”

The two men stared at each other for a moment Oliver felt went on for too long. He glanced at Flagg, impatient. “Back to work.” he declared aloud. “Show us the route you've mapped.”

Rick obliged, sharing Oliver's anticipation. He detached his gaze from the two aliens and focused on the map. “So as you said, Queen,” he started. “The Gap is a dense forest and there are few reliable maps about the area so I decided to keep it simple and trace a way through the trees from our starting point...” his finger started at their base of operation and trailed over the jungle to reach a segment of road in the middle of the forest. “To this path which will lead us towards the villa.”

Oliver shook his head. “Let me stop you right there.” he took a pen lying on the table and started drawing patterns on the map. “Okay first things first,” he started. “The first part of the trip through the forest is impossible – except for those two of course,” he nodded towards Clark and J'onn. “There's actually a river crossing your way right here. It's not pictured on the map because as you said, there are only a couple of them reliable and even then, they don't show you everything. This river is hidden by the trees which, in that area, are the tallest of the Gap so you can't see much from above.”

He drew the river on the map. “Don't even try to cross that thing, the current is too strong and it's filled with alligators.” he warned. “Also, that road you want to join? Forget about it. It's nothing more than the old path of the Pan-American project. They started digging that section but never finished it. Nowadays it's a huge wetland and the snakes' playground.”

Oliver traced a large red X on the segment of road. “Now look.” he changed his pen for a blue colored one as the three other men bent down on the table. “Here's what I propose: we walk straight ahead for seven or so miles. There's the largest hornet nest farm around here” The blue line stopped and Oliver circled the dangerous place before tracing another path trailing towards the left side of the obstacle.

“We stay on that path until he hit the moving sands pit then it's just a little flick to the right, follow that line and we find the abandoned residential camps where Lex should be hiding.”

Rick Flagg scratched his temple as he stared at the map. “Is there something you're not telling us, Queen?”

“Just to you.” Oliver's smirk disappeared when he glanced at J'onn. “Hey, where is he?”

J'onn whirled around, looking towards the exit. “Kal-El? Kal-El!”
“Seems like he left on his own. Quite the boy scout, isn't he?” Flagg commented.

Oliver sighed. “Come on let's wrap this up and get everyone ready. Now that he's gone we can't lose time.”

The clearing became filled with noise when Rick Flagg came out of his commanding tent and ordered his agents to prepare themselves. These men and women, the surviving members of the Suicide Squad assembled their weapons, cleaned an adjusted them to make sure they wouldn't miss their targets.

The voices rose, excited at the knowledge of their imminent start. Oliver could see them becoming restless. Some argued, other shared the details of the special kind of torture they reserved for the soldiers they would catch and, a few were sitting alone by the trees. They twitched, looked left and right and scratched the back of their necks.

He knew. Oliver knew they were anticipating just as much as him the capture – if not the death – of the man responsible for their disrupted lifestyles and the pain of losing their friends. The hunt for Lex Luthor was about to begin and even in the thickest and most dangerous jungle in the world, the odds were firmly stacked against him.

For once, Lex was the fleeing victim and not the perpetrator. But even stuck at the bottom of the deepest pit, Lex Luthor wasn't a threat to be taken lightly.

By Oliver's side, J'onn tapped a foot against the grass in a rhythmic fashion. “Worried about Clark?”

The manhunter glanced at Oliver, as if taken by surprise. He stilled. “Do you think he could get past the militia and capture Luthor on his own?”

Oliver pursed his lips, looking back at the amassed troops in the clearing. “The FARC aren't gonna be a problem for him,” he replied. “But if Lex isn't stupid he'd have packed kryptonite with him and knowing Clark he's--”

“He's going to walk straight into a trap, I know. I know...” J'onn sighed.

Oliver couldn't quite concede his cynical smirk. “Even you aren't surprised,” he remarked. “In the end his training hasn't changed him at all, it's only made him more stubborn than he already was.”

“In many ways, you are right, Oliver.” J'onn looked at the sky for an instant. “But even if Clark only came back very recently, I can assure you he has changed.”

“Question is... has he changed for the better?”

J'onn's head whirled towards him. “Oliver!” he started in outrage.

“It's alright, buddy. I know what you're gonna say.” Oliver pacified.

Still, the martian insisted. “The differences you two may have had in the past do not give you the right to talk about him this way!” he put a hand on the other man's shoulder. “In the end we're all on the same boat.”

The Green Arrow wanted to push the conversation further, he was about to open his mouth when he caught himself. A voice in his head told him his companion wasn't ready yet to hear what he wanted to say. J'onn was a good man, and a loyal friend who wasn't about to use telepathy on him without his consent. Oliver simply hoped that if his assumptions were to be proven correct in the future, the
martian would be on his side.

Then again, it would be better if he was wrong entirely.

“You're right. You're right.” he smiled and patted J’onn’s shoulder then stood straighter when his ear buzzed. “Excuse me, a call from the boss.” he motioned towards his ear, prompting an amused smirk from the other man.

“What's up, honey?” Oliver asked as he moved to a less crowded area.

“Honey? Are we changing codenames now?” Chloe's voice filtered through the connection.

“Consider yourself lucky I didn't get more creative.” he smirked. “You know, I could have gone with something like...”

Chloe made a noise over the line. “Don't even think about finishing that sentence, Arrow!” she chided. “Besides, I'm not exactly alone on my end...”

Oliver grinned. “Say hi to Tess for me!”

Her laugh echoed in his ear. “She's not amused, I tell you.” Chloe chuckled.

“Okay, seriously now, what's new on your end?” he asked.

“Well...” she said. “For starters Lois went back to the Planet to work on a story so we were finally able to work quietly.”

“That's always a plus.”

“Yeah don't start mocking me,” she retorted in a dry tone. “Mia's been pouting for hours because you didn't bring her with you. It's not easy to get things done when a 17-year old keeps glaring daggers at your head, you know?”

He sighed. “It's too dangerous, she's not trained yet. She knows that.”

“She knows.” Chloe replied. “Doesn't mean she's happy about it, or with you for that matter... I'm guessing you'll have a lot of apologizing to do when you get back.”

“Yes, yes, yes, yes...” He shook his head and plopped down on the ground, his back against a tree. “So, exuberant cousins and angry teenagers aside, what did you find?”

“Nothing new, really.” she revealed. “Tess communicated all that we found to Flagg. Lex's still hiding in that old residential complex and it's heavily guarded by the FARC. They do have quite a lot of men, though.”

Oliver grunted. “They also happen to know the jungle like the back of their hand.” he said. “It's not gonna be easy.”

“You guys will win.” she whispered in his ear.

He felt a small smile pulling at his lips. “I like your faith in our capabilities, Sidekick.”

“Are you doubting, Arrow?” she asked. “The FARC may have been fighting in this jungle for decades but they're heavily outnumbered and the Squad isn't exactly full of amateurs either. Besides there's you, J'onn and Clark--”
“Nope, No more Clark.”

“What?” He could hear her confusion. “What do you mean?”

“Let's just say Boy Scout decided to try to slay the dragon by himself.”

“He left? On his own?!”

“Yup.”

She sighed. “Damn it, Clark! I swear his head got thicker than steel in that fortress of his. What was he thinking?”

Back towards the northern part of the clearing, a series of shouts erupted, prompting Oliver to his feet. “Hang on, Watchtower.” he said. “There's something going on there.”

Some of the men were forming a tight group at the far end of the camp. Oliver hurried towards them even as an officer yelled at an order. “Call the commander! And a medic! Medic!”

“Seems like someone's injured.” he breathed for Chloe as he jogged towards the scene.

He pushed his way through a few people, catching sight of one of Rick's men moaning on the ground. His partners were telling him not to move, an instruction the man had trouble following. His arms had to be pinned down to prevent him from touching his wound.

Oliver's breath caught in his throat when he noticed the source of his pain lodged in his right shoulder. An arrow. There was a piece of paper wrapped around it. Oliver knelt beside the wounded man.

“What are you doing?” Another soldier barked.

Oliver ignored them and carefully pulled the paper loose. The man didn't feel a thing. The letter's words looked blurry for a minute. Oliver's heart beat so loud he felt it in his ears, muffling his environment. The familiarity of the handwriting was a surprise he wasn't expecting. Neither were the words greeting his sight.

Oliver,

It's time to honor your oath.

-The Brotherhood.

He closed his eyes, blowing out a long breath. Ahead of him one of the soldiers became agitated. “Hey I saw something!” he shouted, cocking his weapon in the direction of the forest. “Who's there? Identify yourself or I'll shoot!”

Oliver jumped to his feet and forced the man's weapon downward. It was useless as he was soon imitated by his peers who all aimed at the figure hiding in the shadows of the trees. “No! Don't shoot!” he yelled.

“What's going on here?” came Rick's wary voice behind them.

“Flagg! Have your men stand down! Now!”

The new commander looked taken aback by the request, noticing the beads of sweat on Queen's face. He was silent for a moment, watching him in confusion. “Alright, hold your fire, boys. Hold
The soldiers lowered their weapons slowly. Oliver saw the hooded figure disappear behind the trees and blinked. “Oliver what's going on?” Chloe's concerned voice shook him out of his trance.

He touched his ear and faced Flagg. “Change of plans.” He announced and cleared his throat. “The shooter's after me. It doesn't concern you.”

Flagg narrowed his eyes. “What are you singing to us now, Queen?”

“Oliver, is it what I'm thinking it is?”

He huffed. “You,” he pointed at Flagg. “get everyone going, follow the plan as we decided but leave that guy to me. It's my business.”

“Splitting is not a good idea, Oliver.” J'onn intervened, appearing behind Rick.

“Ollie, don't do anything rash!”

He shook his head. “I don't have much a choice.” he said. “This guy? He's got me in his sights and he won't let go until I face him. This doesn't concern any of you and he won't get in your way if I do as he says.”

“Do you really want us to leave you behind?” Flagg raised an eyebrow.

Oliver took a deep breath. “I'm asking you, Flagg. Follow the plan without me. Let me deal with this on my own.”

The commander shrugged. “Whatever you say, Shamrock.” he looked at the wounded man. “Get that one in my tent. Everyone finish packing up. We're leaving ASAP.”

The leaves brushed him as he tried to make his way through the jungle. The light barely filtered through the tall trees that made a natural roof, maintaining a damp, heavy hue over the forest. Oliver felt the change of scenery through his bones as he remembered the times he spent hunting and training around the same trees.

Rick Flagg should have left by now, effectively leaving Oliver alone to face his past. Something that had been waiting, dormant, for over ten years.

His ear buzzed. “Oliver you have to think about the consequences. Why do you have to risk yourself like this?”

He paused and closed his eyes for a moment, hearing the birds singing from afar. “This is the consequence, Chloe.” he explained. “It was meant to happen from the moment I confronted him all these years ago.”

“But you could be killed, Ollie! Do you think about that?”

The catch in her voice had him swallowing. “I'm sorry.”

“It's not enough.” she sniffled. “Why do you have to do this?”

He shook his head. “It's a chapter of my life I have to close. I know you're scared, Chlo. I get it, but-"
“But why does it have to happen this way?”

Oliver sighed. He was hurting her. Worse, he was doing it knowingly. She would be wearing herself out worrying about him while feeling absolutely helpless about the situation. “Chloe... I...” It took a long moment for him to voice the feeling that took hold of him the moment he saw that hooded man in the forest.

“When I heard Lex was hiding in the Gap, I knew there was something sketchy going on. What happens now, it's not a surprise to me. I was expecting it.” he said.

“Don't tell me you're going there for answers, Oliver...” she countered.

“I need to fight him, Chloe. I can't lie to you, the answers to my questions are secondary.” he replied. “He's the Green Arrow's father. I may have been chasing criminals and saving innocent people in the streets these last few years but deep down, I'm still a member of the brotherhood... and he's still my master. I've been carrying this heritage with me for the last ten years. I need to free myself from it and I have to do so following the tradition.”

“A fight to the death.”

His heart skipped a beat. She sounded hollow to him even through the radio. “Yes.” he confirmed. “But don't worry.”

Chloe laughed in derision. “Oh really?” she asked. “Why shouldn't I? The man I love is going against common sense and purposely risk his life for an old feud that took place a full decade ago!”

Her voice rose with each word. Oliver licked his lips. “I'm gonna win, Chloe.”

“Ollie...you may have hacked his hand off but he would have time to get used to it.” she replied quietly. “You never stopped telling me about how strong of an archer he was, how he taught you every trick. What makes you think you'll beat him?”

“Because he groomed me to become his successor.” he explained. “He doesn't want me dead. He wants me to kill him.” She said nothing and for once, he knew she was at a loss of words. There was no humor in him and yet he smiled. “I'm going radio silent now. When I get back online... will you... uh... feel different about me?”

Her breathing was erratic. “No.” she whispered. “You are who you are, Oliver. There's always been a dark part of yourself and I've accepted it a long time ago. So long as you do good by your values, the way I feel about you won't change.”

His eyes teared up. I really don't deserve that girl, he thought. “Thank you.” he breathed in deeply. “Green Arrow, going out.”

“Ollie, wait!” she called over the comms. “Just... good luck.”

He smiled. “I love you too, babe.” His murmur was followed by the characteristic beep telling him he was now alone, for real, with the demons of his past. Oliver looked towards the crafted arrow on the tree sitting on his right.

He nodded to himself and set about to produce a fire by smoldering two dry pieces of wood together. When the flame came to life, he coated one of his titanium arrow in grease and lit it up. The projectile was surrounded by flames when he lifted it up in the air and drew back the link of his bow, aiming high enough to reach the skies.
He remained immobile for a moment, taking the time to choose the right spot, a patch of light flickering through the trees. The arrow shot up and disappeared in the blink of an eye.

There. The message was sent. The Green Arrow was coming home.

June 1st 2012. 11:12 AM UTC-6. The Brotherhood's camp, Darién Gap, Panama.

One step after another, Oliver walked closer to the place where he would meet his fate. He couldn’t miss it, the chants grew as he approached the Brotherhood's camp. He did not stop to take a calming breath behind the last trees still hiding him from their view. He didn’t need to.

Unlike his old self, Oliver had gained enough control over his emotions to prevent them from hindering him in crucial moments like the one he was about to live. Ten years earlier, he had left, a troubled young man trying to prove himself he still had some worth still left in him. Today, he came back, an accomplished hero.

The males voices singing Joseph's March rose again as he walked out into the open. The camp hadn’t changed at all. The same walls made of wood-trees stood as tall as ever and the towers in each corner of the perimeter looked as bare as the times he were in them. The gates were wide open, on each side the archers of the Brotherhood formed a line facing him.

They sang at the top of their lungs when they saw him coming. A fervor most of these young men had never known before in their lives seized them in that moment. Some heads poked up the walls, eyes widened and soon, the entire camp was at the gates watching him, their former brother, marching their way.

He stopped when the last verse was sang, its echoes giving way to a tense silence. Oliver watched each of their faces. They were young, some even, were teenagers. There was no anger, no ill-will on their faces. There was no joy either.

They knew his return could mark a change of paradigm in the camp, in their lives. Perhaps, even, in the entire region. And so they watched the Emerald Archer. Some were expectant, others, fearful but all knew the inevitable was about to happen.

When a tall silhouette emerged from the crowd to appear at the gates, everyone watched, still and silent as the man drew back his hood to reveal a satisfied smile behind dark facial hair. He watched Oliver from afar, laughed, then threw his arms up the air. One of them, a plastic prosthesis, sliced through the air.

“Archers!” he shouted in Spanish. “Your long-lost brother has come back, honor him!”

The men wailed a long-drawn yell rhythmically interrupted as they hit their right fist over the chests, a process they repeated seven times.

“Welcome back, Oliver.” The master addressed him in a quieter tone. “We've been waiting for this moment for a long time.”

Oliver narrowed his eyes. “You summoned me here, Vordigan. I only came to settle this once and for all.”

Vordigan laughed and motioned for one of the men by his side to walk up to the guest. “And we will, Oliver. After ten years, this Sereptia is long overdue, don’t you think?”

The Sereptia, an old celtic term used to designate a fight to the death between the leader of the
Brotherhood and one of his pupils who dared challenging him. One of them had to die, or both would be executed by the Brotherhood. Such were the rules.

Oliver said nothing. He watched the emissary, a tanned young man with two uncertain eyes fixated on him. The latter approached him and extended his hands. “Your bow, brother.”

“Give it to him, Oliver.” Vordigan called. “Forget your gadgets and fancy tools, today you will fight with your old bow. The one you carved from wood.”

The fight had to be fair. The two assailants had to use the weapons they'd made as per the brotherhood's rules. Oliver's light aluminum and electronically-equipped bow was forbidden to be used in the walls of the camp.

“Javier will take care of it and give it back to you, should you live.” Vordigan continued. “Come on! The sun won't wait for us, there's a fight to be had and we need to get prepared. Come with me, Oliver.” With these words, he turned back and headed to his cabin.

Oliver looked at Javier. “I trust you with it.” he said, handing his bow. “if anything happens to it, I'll come for you.”

The archer nodded, his eyes sweeping over the piece of metal with awe. “Si, hermano!”

Oliver walked past the gates and into the camp under everyone's eyes. He felt their gaze on him, they never stopped watching him even as he rejoined Vordigan who held his door open for him.

“They're all fascinated with you.” the master slipped as Oliver entered the cabin. “It's been a long while since the last Sereptia. For all of them, it's the first they will ever see.”

Once the door closed, both men went silent. Vordigan motioned for him to seat at the table by the center of the cabin and went to retrieve a bow and a set of arrows from the closet. The master's severed hand had been replaced by a prosthesis tailored for archery.

He hooked it to the bow and used his remaining hand to stroke the wooden arc, almost tenderly. Vordigan approached the table at a slow pace, his eyes never left the object in his hands. A small smile played on his lips.

Oliver watched him, uneasy. The conflicting emotions brought by his former mentor were not something he wanted to deal with at the moment. Still, there was an undeniable sense of sadness around the two men and it made the task ahead of them so much more difficult.

Vordigan set the bow and the arrows on the table, slowly pushing them towards Oliver.

“All this time I've kept it in here, hoping I could give it back to you one day.” Vordigan finally dared to speak. “Go on, take it. I took great care of it. You'll feel I kept the wood smooth, tightened the rope whenever it started to let loose. It's as good as new, like you only left it yesterday.”

Oliver looked down. “Stop it. Stop it.”

A small, sad laugh left Vordigan. “It's too much, isn't? Because of what happened?”

The younger man sighed. “I couldn't let you get away with what you've done. I hope you see that.”

Vordigan tapped his prosthesis on the table a couple of times. “And so you gave me this.” he nodded towards the piece of plastic attached to his arm.
“You sent me to kill a man.” Oliver stared at him, straight in his eyes. “You lied about the purpose of
the Brotherhood, you indoctrinated me into believing I was doing good but I was only taking part of
a criminal gang.”

“What I made you do was a good thing, Oliver.”

“Oh, come on!” he rose to his feet and started pacing around the room. “You turned me into your
personal hitman, do you think after all this time I’d have forgotten? Or that I’d be as gullible as I once
was?”

“Oliver!” Vordigan's tone held a warning edge. “You haven't changed on that front. You're still as
hotheaded as you used to be. You never let me explain why I did those things.”

Oliver scoffed. “What's there to explain? What? Echevarria was a terrible guy, I know that, you
know that but it doesn't make what I did better.” he said. “And Rafael, his son? The guy who comes
back into my life years later, calls himself Merlyn and avenge his dad by killing one of my closest
friends. This, is all, on you!”

“I’ve heard about that boy.” Vordigan pursed his lips. “I'm very sorry about what happened in
America, Oliver. I am truly sorry.”

Oliver smiled mirthlessly. “Oh so it wasn't you? You didn't sent him after me?”

Vordigan looked taken aback for an instant. “Oliver come on sit down, now. Sit down!” he ordered.

Both men froze and stared at each other in silence. Outside, the people had quieted down, they
probably heard them quarreling, their discussion so heated their words pierced through the walls.

The older man sighed. “Sit down and I'll tell you everything.”

Oliver's jaw was tight and he had half a mind to tell him to go to hell but he listened nonetheless. His
desire for answers outweighing his anger. He crossed his arms on the table, staring at him with a
harsh, unwavering gaze.

“I'm listening.”

Vordigan nodded, looking down and around to find his words. “When I arrived here from Ireland,
years and years before you even set foot past the Mexican border, the region was riddled with petty
thieves and drug addicts. The law was inexistent and everyday people would tell these stories of
whatever event happened recently. Each story was more terrible than the old one. There wasn't a day
that went by without an atrocity being committed, sometimes for no reason at all.”

“I get it, the place was hell.” Oliver interjected, having had his own experiences with crime in this
part of the world.

“These people needed order and stability.” Vordigan said with a firm tone. He waved a finger
around for emphasis. “They needed to feel like the future would be better. Since the authorities were
all corrupt, incapable and unwilling to change anything, I decided to do something, I founded the
Brotherhood. I made it a secret and closed society on purpose. That way, people would speculate
about us and distort the reality, giving us a reputation that would make criminals fear us.”

“Well, it worked.”

“It did. It was better than I had expected.” Vordigan agreed. “I started recruiting these lost kids
wandering around with no future ahead of them. I gave them values and discipline and in exchange,
they helped me set order around the place.”

“You had them kill, you demanded the villagers young girls in exchange for your protection. That was also meant to give them values?” Oliver challenged.

“You know what we're fighting against, Oliver.” Vordigan's brow furrowed. “On the other side of the border there's a civil war that's been going on for half a century and it's been spilling over to here for almost as long. These are lifelong endured criminals, monsters, psychopaths. No prison would accept them, what else could we do?”

“And the girls?”

“The girls?” Vordigan asked. “My pupils are all young developing men, I can't control them all the time and ask for more discipline. They'd blow up! Boys are like pressure cookers, you know. Sometimes they need to let out some steam to calm down.”

“So you set up a prostitution ring for their benefit, great.”

There was an cynical grin on Vordigan's face. “Oliver... call it what you want but most of these women are choosing this life on their own because they know life in the camp is much better than outside. At least here, they're safe, there are rules. Outside? Rapes, murders, torture are frequent. Especially for lone women.”

“Right, you have an answer for everything,” Oliver shook his head. “So I guess it's the moment you start talking about drug dealers.”

“Echevarria was the last criminal lord who stood in my way. I had you kill him to prevent a drug-war.” Vordigan started to work himself up. “You do want me to say it, don't you? Yes I became a criminal, a drug-lord just like them. I did it to control crime. It's easier than to eradicate it.” he explained.

Oliver snorted and shook his head but Vordigan pressed on. “Tell me something, Oliver. Since you came back, have you seen or heard of any crime or any act of violence in the area? You know why that is? Because you killed Echevarria. You heard me right. The region started to stabilize once he was dead. I was able to assume control of the market and regulate it. These days, kids are kept out of this system, I was able to redistribute the money we earned to the locals. They built schools, there's even one hospital a few miles from here. These things happened thanks to you.”

“If you walk in these villages, alone at night.” he continued. “You'll find nobody to attack you because all of the dealers you would meet are working for me. There is no one to fight and the quality of life is starting to rise. Slowly but it rises anyway.”

Oliver watched him, suspicious. “Are you trying to tell me that my killing the last drug boss standing up against you brought peace around the place?”

“Believe it or not, that's what happened.”

He looked down, uncertain whether or not to believe the older man's words. “And you want me to believe you didn't take anything aside for your personal gain?”

“I never said I was a saint, Oliver.” Vordigan laughed. “I won't lie to you, I'm no hero, I'm a hunter. I like the chase against crime and the reward at the end. I'm not like you, Oliver and I'm not a role-model but despite everything my teachings made you who you are today.” he gestured at his uniform. “Look at yourself: the great Green Arrow! The sound of your name makes the criminals shake in fear.”
“If I had the chance to do it all over again,” Vordigan continued. “I wouldn’t change a thing.”

Oliver raised an eyebrow. “What even that?” he pointed at his prosthesis.

“It's a testament of your strength and the bond between us. No I wouldn't change that either and you won't believe it but, I got used to missing a hand. It doesn't hinder my handling of the bow at all.”

“I'm not sorry.” Oliver said after a moment.

Vordigan nodded. “And neither am I.”

They looked at each other with newfound respect for, in that instant they understood their motives and their differing natures. Despite their tumultuous history, the bond between them resurfaced even just for that moment.

“Come on,” Vordigan breathed. “It's time.”

Oliver nodded and rose to his feet, following his former mentor. The older man grabbed his weapons and watched him do the same. When they reached the door, they shared one last glance before Vordigan turned the knob.

“Let's give them something worth remembering.”

When Clark Kent materialized in the middle of the camp, he faced a puzzling scene. A crowd of bowmen had gathered by the open gates leading to the jungle. They all seemed to wait for something in silence.

From time to time, a sound would come out of the forest, a crackle, a shout, people shouting to each other and everytime, they would perk up and listen intently to what was happening.

Unsettled, Clark stepped forward in the direction of the crowd. “What's going on? Where is Oliver?” he asked.

The people, young men and women, watched him quizzically and shared words in Spanish. Clark frowned.

“Do you understand me?”

One of them, a young man carrying a metallic bow with him, nodded. “A little bit.” he said.

Clark's eyes widened. “That bow, where did you get it? What happened to the man who carried it?”

“He is there.” the young man pointed in the direction of the forest where the shouts came from. “With our master.”

“What are they doing?”

The teenager smiled. “Deciding our future.”

A loud yell came from the forest, everyone gasped and speculated in the local language. Clark swallowed. “That's it, I'm getting him out of here.”

“No!” the teenager replied harshly. “One cannot put himself between them. There are rules.”

“But I cant...”
“This is their fight.” he said with an air of finality.

Clark was about to overlook the suspicious glances sent his way by the crowd and zoom past them to rescue Oliver when one of the young people erupted in a fit of shouts, pointing towards the forest. The crowd watched in awe as a figure emerged from the darkness of the jungle.

The man moved slowly and seemed to carry something on his shoulder while a bow poked out of his back. The figure got closer and Clark started to outline the man's features, he noticed him carrying another person on his shoulder.

“It's....”

“Green Arrow!” the crowd called.

Oliver Queen walked towards the gates at a slow pace, his eyes shining as they met with Clark's. The alien shook his head and watched him walk past him, the crowd tagging at his heels. “Oliver what's this--”

His friend ignored him, he headed towards the center of the camp where a flat rock had been put. He deposed the unmoving body of a dark-haired man on it with care. Clark saw an arrow protruding from the man's belly.

“What have you done, Oliver?”

His angered question drew the other man's attention towards him. “What are you doing here?” Oliver asked.

“I can't believe you killed a man!”

The crowd, however, seemed to have a different reaction. One of them started to shout the word 'master' and they all lowered on their knees, bowing in Oliver's direction. The man in question seemed less than thrilled by the situation and glanced at the dead body on the rock.

“Honor Vordigan as you honor me.” he said. “Without him we wouldn't be here. He is your leader. I am merely a second-in-command.” Oliver caught Clark's gaze and let the crowd to bow before Vordigan's body.

“What's going on, Clark?”

“You dare asking me this after what I've just seen?” the alien countered. “I should be the one asking what's going on because what I see right now isn't pretty and I'm not willing to involve you into yet another fight. Who knows what you're going to do.”

Oliver sighed, shaking his head before walking away towards a quiet part of the camp. He touched his ear.

“Green Arrow online.” he said. “I'm alive, Sidekick. Yeah I'm okay. I'm okay.” he pacified Chloe on the other end of the line for another moment before the next question left his lips. “Listen Clark's over here, did you send him? Yeah? Why? What's going on?”
June 1st 2012. 01:20 PM UTC-6. The abandoned residential area, Darién Gap, Panama.

Lex Luthor watched over the craters surrounding the villa he hid in. He wiped his sweating brow with the hand that still carried the detonator as he crouched to the level of the drilled hole in the wooden planks set against the windows.

Outside, some surviving Suicide Squad agents moaned and yelled among the remains of their peers. The gunfire had already dimmed before the explosions but there were still some shots being taken at the assailants who tried to drag their injured colleagues to safety.

Lex’s eyes flew from person to person until he noticed the bright colors of the Superman's costume standing back from the craters and the countless scintillating green rocks scattered in them. The alien's features were cold as he looked straight towards the villa for a moment before zooming away into the forest.

His gaze dropped and he started to slip down, only missing the ground when he put his weight on his knee. “It's good... It... is...good!” he breathed hard, a few beads of sweat slipped down his forehead to cover his face. He wiped them away before fumbling into his breast pocket.

The sound of pills moving around in a recipient filled the room. Lex frowned and cursed, putting more effort into his search for his meds as he moved back from the window, addressing the five soldiers standing in the room.

“Keep an eye on them.” he ordered, almost distracted. His hand was still stuck down inside his jacket and he stumbled towards the comfy chair that had been pulled in front of an old desk. He slumped down on it just when his hand emerged, having caught the offending object.

“Oh great.” Lex flipped the little box open and swallowed its content in one gulp, wiping his mouth with his sleeve for good measure when he caught the eyes of the people staring at him from the other side of the room.

“You'd better stop doing that, I'm not sure I'm liking these looks.” he growled. “Especially yours, invader.”

J'onn J'onzz was unfazed by the call. He watched in wonder the man before him until he felt the people by his side shifting. Their knees were starting to suffer. J'onn had tried to reason with the FARC soldiers acting as Lex's bodyguards to let him and the other seven Suicide Squad agents to at least sit on the floor. To no avail. They'd been forced to prone from the moment they got captured as they tried to infiltrate the villa.

The Suicide Squad had caught up with Superman when the latter revealed Lex had supplied kryptonite weapons to the FARC militia. He couldn't get close to the villa in which the former president was hiding at the risk of being killed himself.

Rick Flagg, knowing they were outnumbered had tried to send a team, led by J'onn J'onzz, to assault the villa while the rest of them distracted the mercenaries. The plan was basic and worked well in most situations. Unfortunately, this time it backfired terribly. When J'onn's team managed to get close to Lex, a series of explosions aborted the mission and the villa found itself surrounded by craters.
Kryptonite-filled bombs had been detonated in a desperate attempt to prevent Lex's capture. J'on could only imagine the terrible loses on both sides of the battle. He shook his head and winced when he got too close to comfort with the flaming torch held by a soldier. Lex may have been caught by surprise with the destitution but he had done his homework.

“How long is this going to last?” J'onn asked. “It's only a matter of time, Lex. You're surrounded and Flagg would have called the army by now. It's only going to get worse the longer you fight.”

Lex watched him in disdain. “I decide when it stops,” he said. “And I won't lay arms down and wait for them to slip the bracelets on me.”

“Why?” The genuine incomprehension on J'onn's end was clear. “Why all this madness? There's nowhere for you to run.”

“You know why, invader.” Lex replied quietly. He looked towards the window when a cry of pain was heard from afar. Some of the Suicide Squad members caught in the explosion had survived. He rose on uncertain feet and trailed against the barren windows, trying to look through the interstices.

“It's been your plan all along, isn't it?” he asked, his breath catching in his throat a few times.

“I don't--”

“You! You and Clark... and whoever else came to Earth with you!” Lex cut off J'onn's question. “You've always tried to hold us back, to make sure we wouldn't surpass you because you knew!” his voice started to waver and a few tears filled his gaze. “You knew we were capable of being greater than you!”

“What the fuck's he talking about?” an agent behind J'onn whispered. He was shushed by Eden, his team leader.

J'onn wished he could use his telepathic skills on Lex to try and understand his motives but the torch being waved in his face prevented him from using any of his abilities. He was reduced to asking questions and trying to judge the man's mental state.

“Humanity was promised to do great things.” Lex's gaze had left J'onn and there was an expression on his face that made them wonder if he was even in the room with them anymore. He was staring off into the distance, almost in trance as he continued his speech.

“We were always supposed to figure out the mysteries of this planet, of our condition, our origins...” a small smile suddenly appeared on his face. “What I would have given to know these answers,” he chuckled. “From the moment we looked up in the sky, at night, and saw the Milky Way staring back at us in all its sheer beauty... the backbone of the night.... we were destined to explore it, to learn its secrets and make it ours.”

“He's gone bonkers!” The same agent breathed.

“Shut up!” Eden muttered but it was too late, Lex's attention had been caught.

He sniffled back his emotion and glared at them. “You clueless guns for hire, you live in the bliss of ignorance!” he spat. “You represent the dead weight of humanity. 90% of all men and women on us doing nothing but slowing us down! It's always been the brightest minds trying to drag their fellow human beings out of their shitholes towards a greater destiny and you've always fought back to stay in your little miserable place of lies and complacency.”

He drew a gun from his jacket and started agitating it dangerously. “When the first men went on the
moon, it seemed we had found our footing but we hadn't. How many times had we gone back up there? Barely a handful! With all our technology, our intelligence we could have explored the solar system before the third millennium!” he shouted.

J'onn and Eden shared a worried glance and tried to crawl back from the man threatening them. Lex seemed caught in his own anger and preferred to pile on with his arguments. “Of course the common man preferred to feed himself lies and decide things were moving too fast for him. He decided to refuge himself in the comforting lies of religion! McCarthy, the greatest enemy of our species in the second half of the twentieth century! In God We Trust!”

He laughed.

“Do you think it’s always been our national motto? 1956! That is when it was officially adopted, that's when the regressive movement started for the U.S.!” he snorted. “Where the hell has our separation of State and Church gone? Do you know how idiotic it was for me to take a presidential oath on the Bible of upholding a constitution that clearly states our country is secular? Isn't a testament of our own stupidity?”

“Lex…” J’onn tried to reason with him until he had the barrel of a handgun pointed at him.

“Do not try to twist my words, invader!” Lex aimed at him. “Maybe you influenced the regressive movements. It did favor you, didn't it?”

“I'm not sure what your beliefs are but I can assure you I am not part of any master plan trying to take over your societies. I--” J'onn went silent when the gun's detonator was pulled back.

“Stop. Talking.” Lex whispered through gritted teeth. “All my life I've been trying to understand why so many people adhered to the ideas of religion and other anti-science movements.” he kept on exposing his delirium. “Then I learned of the existence of aliens, like you! And the mutants, hybrid beings children of our kinds. That's when I realized you had polluted our civilization.”

He nodded, staring at J'onn. “Yes, I know it all. Maybe you were just trying to spread regressive ideas, or maybe you were trying to replace us little by little. Who knows? The fact is, I couldn't allow it to happen. That's the reason I started 33.1. I needed to study your kind in order to destroy you and rid humanity of your plague. Then we could go back to finding our own path without your hindrance.”

“You were planning on committing a genocide.”

“I was trying to drag humanity to greatness!” he yelled. “To help it reach its full potential! If I had to sacrifice a few in order to benefit the majority then I would have done it with pleasure! Our species had to be kicked into action, our lazy and decadent lifestyles had left us vulnerable and letting it go on for too long would have destroyed us.”

“Well that's what you were about to do anyway.” Eden couldn't hold her tongue any longer.

Lex watched her, his eyes a picture of an unstable, explosive mind capable of going off at any moment. “If I couldn't have my fellow men and women to get on with the plan then no one else can,” he answered, his tone was barely above a whisper. “I'd rather have us all die now than see our species' suffering draw on for any longer.”

“That's why you triggered a nuclear incident.” Eden concluded.

“Yes.” Lex nodded. “And once the computers take control of the missiles, we will all perish and the planet will be able to start over. It's only a matter of minutes now. Any minute now. Any minute.”
Eden bent towards J'onn. “That's it. He's completely lost it. He's waiting for something that ain't gonna ever happen.”

J'onn preferred to remain silent, according a nod to acknowledge the agent. His attention was solely focused on the man holding them hostage who had his eyes glued to his watch as he strolled through the room, pacing back and forth waiting for the event that, in his mind, would end humanity's suffering.

Around them, the south-american guards hadn't done so much as bat an eye. They'd been quiet and ghost-like during Lex's entire monologue. Hadn't it been for the torch, J'onn would have forgotten their existence. The sum they had received must have been consequent enough for them to overlook Lex’s erratic behavior.

J'onn started to pick up pieces of information after watching him relentlessly. The man seemed to be caught in a world of his own, his healthy hand kept brushing over his right hip as if he was in pain. Lex was sweating profusely and often looked over his shoulder as if he expected to find something or rather, someone standing in his back.

Emil Hamilton would probably have quite a lot to say about his behavior and while J'onn may not have had the qualifications to make an accurate diagnosis, he understood that Lex was suffering in some way. What he had thought to be high-stress reactions could actually be the symptoms of a real illness. Physical or mental, the question remained.

“Why isn't it happening?” Lex screamed. “We should all be dead by now!”

Behind J'onn, the loud-mouthed agent couldn't hold his tongue any longer. “We avoided the war. Having a hard time getting that through your thick head, heh?”

“Turner!” Eden whispered but it was too late, Lex was already precipitating himself towards them.

He grit his teeth and pushed away the first row of prone agents, the artificial strength of his nanosuit making the task look quite easy. He grabbed Turner by the collar and started to lift him up at eye-level.

“I'm starting to think you've outlived your usefulness.” A vein started bulging out on the man's bald scalp, a testament of his anger. Lex's hand pressed on the agent's windpipe as he moved him around the room like he was a rag doll. “What's the bargaining chip for a loud-mouthed fool like you? Maybe there's none.”

Turner started to cough, his face changing shades. He was fighting back against Lex's superior strength without much luck until, after a minute, he went still and started emitting horrible gasps.

Eden, the agent's superior stood up against the order of her captors. “Hey stop!” she called.

One of the guard took a step towards her and started shouting in Spanish. She sent him stumbling towards the wall and went to jump in the direction of the desk where Lex had let the gun fall in his rage.

“Eden! No!”

J'onn's words were vain. The moment her hand wrapped around the weapon a deafening burst of noise echoed in the room. She slumped down, unmoving.

“Eden!”

In the commotion, Lex had let Turner go and turned back towards the woman who had tried to kill
him. Despite Turner's violent and uncontrollable coughs, everyone was silent as they watched Eden take her last breaths, her back full of bullets, a large puddle of blood already pouring beneath her.

Lex’s eyes left her dead form for the still-smoking assault rifle from the second guard in the room who had taken action when his comrade had been pushed away. Lex inhaled the scent of death and powder for a moment, then pried his handgun from Eden's hand. He took a few, slow strides towards J'onn, raising the weapon towards the alien's face.

“The nuclear war isn't going to happen, is it?” he asked. His voice carried that dangerous, quiet note that foretold of a terrible thing happening.

J'onn swallowed his fear back, all of his senses aware of the weapon aimed at him as he stared in Lex's eyes. The silence that followed had for sole consequence to increase the tension between them. Turner's coughs had stopped and it seemed no one dared to make a move, as even Lex's mercenaries watched them, uncertain.

Taking one strong breath that filled his chest up, J'onn broke the silence. “No.” he said, his voice firm. “You failed.”

People held their breaths when Lex’s jaw tightened and his finger touched the trigger, then released it. Heads turned and steps were made towards the barren windows. A cry, a loud cry from the forest had perturbed the execution of J'onn J'onzz. The martian could savor a few moments of respite and witness as Lex watched the villa's surrounding through the hole.

He scanned the forest when the cry echoed again, louder this time, and a silhouette took shape in between the trees. His eyes went wide and he was frozen by a sudden fright. *The beast! It is the beast!* Lex’s mind whirled with this information until he closed his eyes and shook his head until it hurt. *No, no it can't be. The beast is dead. It IS dead.* He tried to convince himself. Still, his old wound started to itch. Unconsciously, Lex scratched at his hip as he dared to take another look.

This time the shape wasn't surrounded by the blur of the distance and the shadows of the forest. Lex looked down, taking a calming breath. *It's not the beast.* He thought to himself but the fact was that he didn't know whether he should feel better or not.

Out there, a group of countless men approached the villa, slowly crawling through the grass and the leaves. They were led by the one man who had stood in his way since the beginning. “Oliver!” he spat out the name, his eye set on the archer moving towards the villa. The vigilante was accompanied by a troop of people that didn't belong to the Suicide Squad.

“La Hermandad!” someone shouted among the FARC ranks, provoking a commotion around the villa.

Lex let out a grunt and turned towards the guards. “Have them all shot down! What are you waiting for?”

The FARC mercenaries looked paralyzed for a moment until one of them said a word in Spanish and headed towards the backdoor at a quick pace. Hadn't the second man stayed behind, Lex would have thought he was fleeing.

“Y aquí, señor?” the guard in question asked.

Lex glanced at J'onn and the two other hostages at his side. He blew out a breath and turned towards a door leading to another room. “Kill them all.”

The mercenary pulled at his rifle's chamber. An agent at J'onn's side used the moment to barrel into
the man and send him sprawling on the ground. The two of them fought for the weapon just as Lex sent a glance back.

J'onn swore he saw a hint of surprise, maybe even a bit of fear in his eyes before he disappeared behind the door and locked it. “Lex!” he called.

A thump on the wall surprised J'onn. He looked up towards the arrow embedded against the wood just as it started spewing a green pressured gas. Everyone coughed and started to feel asleep. J'onn lowered himself down, his head feeling heavy when, through the slits of his eyelids, he noticed the torch on the ground and its fire starting to spread around.

“Oliver... Oliver...” he whispered.

Lex grunted and piled the last piece of furniture against the door. He stood back to admire his work and lifted a shaking hand to smear away his increasing sweat. The room was a small part of the villa that could have been a bedroom or a home office. As it was, it only had one little window which had also been sealed by wooden planks.

He heard footsteps under the floor and realized Oliver's men knew about the underground network under the villas of the area. His moments as a free man were counted. It seemed like an unending stream of footsteps went on under him and the increasing, rhythmic cadence pressured on him until he couldn't take it.

He drew out his gun and fired downward. “Die! Die! Everyone should die!”

Hands pierced through the floor, trying to grab his feet. Lex yelled in horror and carried on firing at the threatening body parts. It was only after a minute that he noticed the hands weren't human. They were dark and scattered with bright white bones just like...

“The beast!” Lex whimpered, shooting again at another hand. “Die! Leave me alone!”

Fingers dug into his shoulder, piercing his flesh. Lex shouted and whirled around. The hands had vanished, only to be replaced by the shape of Lionel Luthor emerging from the shadows.

“Dad?” Lex shouted, his voice shaking. “What is this?”

Step after step, Lionel Luthor approached his son, an uncharacteristic growl leaving his throat. The old Luthor had traded his human eyes for red, menacing pupils. His mouth was filled with numerous thin, sharp teeth that gave his smile the image of a gate to hell as his skin was spattered with bones growing out of his body.

Terrified, Lex stepped backward, beads of sweat falling into his eyes and blurring his vision. He let out another wail when his back hit something. When he turned, he fell face to face with Tess Mercer's apocalyptic double.

She shared the same monstrous characteristic of Lionel and seemed as intent as her father to get her claws into her step-brother's flesh before digging her hellish teeth into him until he succumbed under unthinkable pain.

Caught between the two creatures, Lex had nowhere to go. His back to the wall and seeing both Tess and Lionel spit their hiss that so reminded him of the beast, he remembered the weapon in his hand. Seized by a sudden relief, he brought the gun against his temple and cursed the monsters.

“You'll never get me!”
And he pulled the trigger.

J'onn came to when someone shook him with insistence. His blurred vision focused on a man with blond hair and a green tunic crouched to his level. He groaned, propping himself up from the ground.

“Oliver, what happened?”

The archer had a small, relieved smile on his face. “It's over, J'onn. We got him.”

Suddenly, J'onn remembered the green gas and the fire spreading about. He looked at the corner of the room, seeing the torch surrounded by a puddle of black suit and water. A few feet away, Suicide Squad agents were crouching by Eden's side, the woman's body yet to be taken away.

“You alright?”

He nodded. “I'm doing fine, Oliver. Fine is the right word.”

On the other side of the room, Rick Flagg came out of another part of the villa, preceding the squad's medic who, with another agent's help, was carrying Lex Luthor's motionless form out on a stretcher. The group passed by them on their way.

“What happened to him?” J'onn asked.

Rick stopped by their side and turned to watch Lex on the stretcher. “We found him like this, seating, his back against the wall.” he explained and nodded at his men, allowing them to carry him out. “At first I thought he'd offed himself because he wasn't moving and his gun was still in his hand.”

“What did he do?”

Rick shrugged. “No clue. He hasn't fired a single shot. My men checked his magazine, it was full. The chamber too. Full.”

“Seems like he's caught in this sort of coma.” Oliver chimed in. “I've got no idea what caused him to end up like that but at least it makes our lives easier.”

“He kept babbling about incoherent things. Trying to explain why he did what he did..” J'onn said. “He was caught in his own brand of delirium lately.”

Oliver shook his head. “Oh trust me, he always was like that.”

“Well...” Rick started. “Mission's over, I'm going to make sure we won't overshoot our stay. Lots of bodies to recover....”

“We've got to mourn our dead.” J'onn agreed. “He did a lot of damage.”

“That he did.” Rick nodded. “If it were up to me, he'd be hanging down a rope for the next three weeks but alas...”

“We know, Flagg, we know.” Oliver replied. “At least he'll be judged and in the state he's in now, he won't be able to hurt anyone else.”

“You're right, Queen.” Rick said, his voice louder. “Come on now, Superman's going to be impatient and we've got one bad motherfucker to get back home for his trial.”

J'onn and Oliver followed the squad's leader out of the villa. When they stepped outside, Oliver
paused and inhaled deeply, turning to J'onn. “You know what? Even after this terrible day I'm feeling pretty good, you know why?”

“No.” J'onn replied, the pictures of the multiple agents killed instantly in the explosions, Turner being strangled to the brink of death and Eden being shot down were still on his mind.

Still, Oliver carried this aura of relief and with him, a sense of renewal. He bent towards him and whispered.

“Because today's the day we finally took down Lex Luthor.”
Epilogue

Aboard the Expandable, lights had gone out. The electrical system short-circuited hours earlier when the submarine had sunk into the ocean. The captain had turned off the nuclear reactor, preventing a myriad of issues that would only have worsened the condition of the remaining members of the crew on the ship.

They were forty-two.

The unlucky ones who had to stay behind when the Expandable was hit. There was nothing to do but wait as the ship slipped deeper and deeper into the unexplored craters at the bottom of the ocean. Everyone had felt the pressure rising, bit by bit, the headaches started coming, some even had nosebleeds. One or two fainted, and the rest of them had settled themselves on the ground as comfortably as they could, feeling their strengths leaving them as the oceanic pressure worked against their muscles.

When the submarine hit the bottom, there was a collective sigh of relief among them. The situation had stabilized and, even if the ship was past its depth limit by a long mile, the captain and his crew knew they would die of asphyxia hours, if not days before the metallic structure of the submarine gave out and crushed them.

“Clyde!” Still, some of them refused to accept their death. “Hey Clyde where'd go? Come back here!”

The young agent ran up and down the tight corridors looking for his colleague, shaking the still atmosphere among the crew. His shouts got General Wilson out of his stupor.

“Clyde! Come on!”

Wilson saw him slip past their room and frowned. “Ah give it up, kid!” he called to the agent, a hint of annoyance in his tone. “Leave him be, some time alone won't hurt anybody.”

At his side, the captain had been woken up by Wilson's rant. He pushed against the wall to sit upright on the ground and let out a sigh of discomfort. “Everybody has a right to choose the way they're going to die.”

In front of them, Maxwell Lord was settled against the navigating console in the middle of the computer room. The three of them had chosen not to rejoin their own room and remained on the same spot hours after everyone became trapped in the ship. They spent time drowsing out and regaining conscience until then.

“We're Suicide Squad,” Lord spoke up, a tired grin on his face. “We ought to have our deaths planned out.”

“I don't know about you but I'm still expecting some miraculous rescue team!” Wilson's drawl caused them to laugh. The general himself cracked a smile. “You don't believe me.”

The captain chuckled. “The lack of oxygen is getting to your brain, that's what I think. I'm sure the Commander agrees with me.”

“Actually,” Lord replied. “I think he's gotten lucky for too long and thinks it's gonna happen again. How many times have you cheated death lately, Slade?”
Slade Wilson huffed and relaxed his position against the wall. “Twice in as many months.” he revealed. “Not bad, heh? So, I'm just asking... what's one more?”

Lord exploded in a fit of laughter, taking both men with him. Wilson was the first one to regain his breathing. “Boy do I long for a drink or cigars... cigars! I miss the old Brazilian ones I used to smoke. Don't happen to have some of 'em hidden somewhere, heh, Francis?”

The captain smirked and shook his head. “I don't have any cigars laying around, I never smoke.”

“Oh, where's your funny side, now?” Wilson groaned.

“I do have alcohol, though.”

“Hm? Where?” the general's spirit soared with the revelation.

Francis pointed at the dashboard on which Lord was laying against. “Commander, you're the closest.” he said. “Just check the compartment on the left side behind you. Look for a bottle.”

Maxwell Lord grinned and remained immobile. “I'm sorry guys, I can't move.”

“Sure you can, butterfly. You've just gotten lazy as hell. Move your ass, soldier, there's a reward in the end!” Wilson growled.

Francis raised his eyebrows, hearing Wilson order the Commander around, even in a joking way, would not have flown well with Lord if it came from anyone else. The interaction showed a special bond between the two men.

Lord rose his hands in a surrendering gesture. “Okay, okay, I'll do it but you do something back for me.” he negotiated.

“Oh hell no, Max.” Wilson frowned. “You get that bottle! Think of it as payback for all the times Sam and I played wingmen for you back in Nam.”

“Come on,” Maxwell grinned. “I just want to hear how you got out of Matthews' claws.”

Slade sat back against the wall, all emotion had left his face. Upon seeing Lord's growing grin and the captain's interest, he caved in. “Alright. But you get that bottle first!”

I'd gotten back home after a long day of looking over my shoulder at the White House. The hardest part of any agent is having to play along even if they think their cover's blown. Wouldn't wish that on anyone. Even after looking Luthor in eye and being debriefed about Iraq, I still wasn't sure if my skin was safe at the end of the day.

You can imagine how I felt when I walked into my house and saw someone inside standing in the dark. At that moment, I was done for. That was certain. So when I got a blow to the back of the head, I was convinced I was dead.

I woke up the next day tied to a chair in the middle of my living room. The wet bar was right in front of me, far enough to be out of reach but still close enough to be in my sight everytime I looked up. The bastards knew what they were doing.

“You do love your alcohol, don't you?” Francis laughed and took a gulp of out of the bottle, passing it to Wilson.

It's my elixir of life!
Anyway, That was the moment I saw that nut-case. Matthews. Regan Matthews. He was standing by the wet bar, staring right at me with that expression. He was proud of himself, I tell you. Never in my life had I wanted to punch anybody as much as I wanted to in that moment.

Hey Max, remember when you got into his head to try and find out where Luthor was hiding?

“Hard to forget.” Lord smirked. “It was child's play to get information out of him.”

You should have killed him that day. It would've spared me the sight of his face again. I'm sure I was red in the face when he started to speak, he was so clearly emboldened after capturing me, he thought he could do anything.

“Look at that! General Wilson's finally granted us with his presence!” he was gloating, and getting on my nerves by the same occasion. “How do you like our rearrangements to your place, General?”

The fuckers had turned my house upside down. Everything was scattered on the floor and broken. I was seething. “You may think you have the upper-hand, Regan but when I get out of these cuffs you better be far away from here or I'll make sure you die a slow, painful death.”

Regan smirked and bent towards me, my threats flying over his head. “You won't be living long enough to free yourself from me.”

Bad move, I thought. Now I knew he wanted me dead, that's not how you start an interrogation on a trained agent. I could have kept yelling at him but I was getting tired of him already. So I cut to the chase. “What do you want?”

He stood back up, grinning from ear to ear. “That's more like it!” That guy may have been stupid but he had balls. Balls, I tell you! “If you don't mind, I'll let my friend here do the talking.”

I hadn't sensed a presence in my back but there had actually been someone standing behind me. Probably the guy who knocked me out the day before. I think you'll be as surprised as I was, Max because that guy? He came over at Regan's side wearing a long trenchcoat and that big hat I've always seen him wearing.

I don't remember his real name, something like Dawson, or...

“Lawson? Floyd Lawson?” Max sputtered off the alcohol he'd been drinking.

Yes, that one. I just remembered his codename: Deadshot. Turns out he'd been the mole working for Luthor all along. He was staring me down, a hand on the ever-present gun strapped to his side.

“Who else has infiltrated the government?” There was no beating around the bush with that one, he just asked me this.

Now Deadshot wasn’t high-ranked enough in the organization to have had access to such information and I wasn't about to give him anything so I stalled.

“You'd be ready to betray your brothers and sisters in arms after years working with them?”

His nostrils flared and I knew I'd got to him. “You betrayed me first.” he said.

I raised an eyebrow, as far as I was aware we'd never attempted to get rid of him and I couldn't even imagine why we would have. He'd never been a threat and until that day, we had no idea he'd been working with the enemy.
“Care to explain?” I prodded. Thankfully, he was being more talkative than usual.

His finger twitched on the gun at his side. “You tried to assassinate me when I was working on an assignment. You sent someone after me.”

“And who would that be?”

“I never saw him before.” he said. “Some tall guy looking like a robot.”

“A robot?” I asked. That didn’t match any agent I knew.

Deadshot was starting to get agitated. “That guy cornered me into a dark spot and he tried to shoot me down with lasers coming from his eyes.”

By now I was starting to think he was making it up, after all, I've always considered him a bit of a nutjob. “And you thought it was us?”

“Who else? You people knew who I was, where I would be and when.” he explained. “It was you.”

There was no reasoning with him. To be honest I didn't really care, so I shrugged. “And so you decided to jump ship.”

He nodded and raised his gun to my face. “At least I know what to expect with them.” he told me. “Now, give us the list of all your agents in the government.”

Regan used the moment to pop into the conversation, I'd almost forgotten about him. “And the army. While you're at it, you'll want to tell us the location of every hideout Checkmate has in the country.”

I looked at him and smirked. “If I refuse?”

Stupid, I know. Deadshot plastered his hand over my face and I fell sideways, crashing into the furniture. That's when I realized they hadn't actually moved any piece of furniture in the living room, bare emptying their drawers and scattering their contents on the floor. There was a chance to take. Regan didn't want me dead right away, he needed information, proof that I was an external agent so he could explain to Luthor why he'd me killed.

Deadshot pulled me back up. He stood behind me and my legs hadn't been tied to the chair. I leaped up, using the chair to whip him towards the wall and then push him on the glass table a few feet behind. It was a risky move but fortunately for me, when he fell down, he missed the table but the side of his head hit the corner hard enough to knock him out.

Regan had watched the scene in shock and snapped out of it right when I was speeding towards him. He'd drawn out a pistol, too late I was already pushing him against the window. He was a little thrown then but not enough to make him lose the gun so I opted for a different strategy.

Still strapped to the chair, I saw on my right the door of the stairways leading down to the garage was open. When Regan started to grab me, I sent the both of us tumbling down the stairs. I got a lot of bruises because of it but the chair had been big enough to jam me between the walls of the narrow corridor a few times and it slowed down my fall.

I ended up sprawled over Regan on the garage's ground, knocking the wind out of him for a little while. He'd lost the gun in the commotion but I wasn't certain he didn't have another one, so I ran out of the garage towards the back door and bolted outside in the direction of that small barn I'd been using as a workshop when I wanted to do some woodwork.
I like to sculpt wood figures in my free time but lately I'd been cutting down large pieces of wood to for a roof-structure because I wanted to enlarge my house so I knew there was an electric saw on my desk.

It was still there when I got to it. The rope was halfway cut when I heard the door hissing. I upped my pace and managed to get rid of that damn chair just in time for me to hide in the room I use as storage.

Someone was walking around, they were slow and meticulous, I could imagine them looking into every inch of the barn until they found me. Then, the man started going up the stairs, probably to see if I wasn't hiding on the second floor.

I heard the guy, it sounded like boots hitting against wood. It was Deadshot. Regan probably was still out. I took the chance I was given and made a beeline for the door, as silently as I could. Of course, the door hissed again when I pushed it open. I cursed myself because I'd been thinking about oiling its hinges for months but I never did it.

The momentum was blown but I was so wound up already, I didn't stop and think, I rushed in the direction of the house, hoping to get my hands on Regan's gun and take them both out. Alas, Deadshot saw me running out in the open.

I'll always remember the sound of him cocking his gun. I stopped and turned around, seeing him standing on the second floor of the barn and aiming at me through the large opening. I thought I was done for.

So, when the shot rang out in the area, I was expecting the world to go blank. Instead, I saw him fall over the window onto the grass headfirst. Dead.

My hands went up my sides, I started touching around my chest. No wound.

Then I picked up the sound of a sniper ejecting a cartridge, except it came from the house. I turned around to see Mercer handling her rifle from the tiny window of the bathroom. She waved at me for a moment but I didn't reciprocate, she must've thought I'd gone stupid.

Anyway, she went up to meet me, my feet were still rooted in the middle of the backyard. I think I was still expecting Deadshot's bullet to hit me, I'd been so sure it was the end of the ride for me.

"Are you okay, sir?" she asked me.

The fog started to dissipate with her words. "You saved my life, agent." Nothing else I could say, just the bare truth.

She smiled and gave me a compassionate pat, I think she realized then I was still in shock. That's a good woman you'd recruited, Max, I tell you. We both relaxed and I accepted the fact that I came way too close to death than I'd wanted that day.

I was expecting it to be the end of the ride but there was still someone to take care of. We both heard a loud noise coming from the house. I looked up and saw Regan leaning against the large windows of my living room. He'd just gotten up from his forced trip to my garage.

He glanced out and our eyes met. Never in my life had I seen someone look so afraid and angry at the same time. Regan disappeared before I could say anything but Mercer picked up on the situation and realized there'd been someone else after me.

We ran after him.
I made a stop by my arm-cache in my office room. I could have gone back and picked up Deadshot's weapon but all I could think about was going forward, towards Regan. The idiot had refuged himself upstairs in the freaking toilets!

He was cornered and he knew it.

This time I had the advantage. Mercer let me walk ahead, she knew I wanted to settle this myself. By then, the adrenaline and the feeling of dodging a bullet was giving me a second wind. I started to taunt him.

“Give it up now, Regan.” I hollered. “You’re trapped, all three of us know it!”

I set foot on the second floor expecting a gunfight. Instead I heard a single shot, and that was it.

“What?” Francis leaned forward, confused.

Wilson took a gulp from the bottle, wiping his lips. “He shot himself.” he said. “I found him pissing blood all over my tiles, his brains blown against the wall. The idiot committed suicide.”

Lord exploded in laughter. “What an ending!”

“That story still cost me another one of my nine lives, heh.” Wilson shrugged.

“I do wonder, though,” the captain said aloud. “Who was the one who had tried to kill Deadshot?”

Wilson finished the last of the bottle and sighed. “Who knows? Maybe some things are better left unknown.”

The three men froze when the Expandable emitted a guttural groan.

“What was that?” Lord asked.

The submarine moaned again, louder. The noise grew to fill their ears until they couldn't hear anything else. They stumbled and held themselves against the walls when the structure started to move. Maxwell Lord asked if the ship was breaking apart but his question was muffled by the noise.

They rose and agreed non-verbally to investigate the source of the commotion. A task soon shared by the rest of the crew who, as anxious as they were about the situation, trailed after them.

A bright light came from the reactor's room. The captain tried to look at the porthole, in vain. The inside of the room was nothing but monochromatic white. He feared something had happened with the reactor and hesitated to pull the door open until his peers pressured him.

The metallic airlock was pulled open and they were bathed in a blinding light emanating from the inside. The ship moved again, they felt it rising up. The motion made some of them fall down but the rest were too entranced to even think about holding onto something.

Their eyes had gotten used to the light and they started to make out the shape of a humanoid figure standing in the middle of the reactor's room with its arms up in the air as if it were pushing the Expandable up, towards the surface.

The being's chrome skin reflected the light, making it seem god-like. It was a featureless face that stared back at them through two small, red dots.

So many questions whirled in their minds and yet only one cold, hard fact wiped away any doubt
they had. The Expandable was rising up, floating towards the surface. This being was their savior.

THE END

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