

Vandal Savage had spent years constructing his private office.

Everything was hand built, with his own hands over his incredibly long life. Shelves lined one half of the large, rectangular room, laden with the books, artifacts, and trinkets he had gathered through his travels and many lives. Well, the ones that were safe to display in that manner were, at least. He had a special vault, hermetically sealed and perfectly controlled, where he kept some of his older, less stable momentos.

The room was perfectly lit, with small lights illuminating the shelves, a warm light focused on his desk, with brighter options for when he was studying something small or examining an artifact's details. The desk itself was carved from one singular piece of wood, cut from a two hundred-and-fifty-year-old Brazilian Rosewood. It had been his magnum opus, his final proof that he had mastered woodworking some two hundred years ago.

The office itself was just carefully crafted, built in a geologically stable zone, with the plans for the original building modified to hide its existence. In fact, in order to get to the office, you did not enter through the building it was in, but rather a building several hundred meters away, the two structures connected by a tunnel.

The office was sealed inside a thick layer of concrete, perfectly soundproof, white noise provided should he require it. It was protected from prying eyes, both from magic and by obfuscation, as why would one office be strange in a building of hundreds, even if it was particularly well decorated.

At this time in the day, Vandal Savage would typically be settling down at his desk, penning a book under an alias, examining an artifact, or simply enjoying a small glass of scotch, which he himself made about forty years ago. He didn't usually drink much, as it clouded the mind, something that was particularly dangerous when your plans are measured in centuries. Sometimes, however, unfortunate things did happen, and he would occasionally admit that he *really* needed a drink.

Which made it even more annoying that his last three bottles of his own make were smashed to dozens of pieces, the golden liquid seeping into the dark hardwood floors beneath his desk. A desk that was also smashed to pieces.

In fact, his entire office, one that he had spent decades perfecting, getting just right, building, and preparing as the perfect place to unwind and plan, was completely destroyed. And by his own hands, no less.

"Decades of planning, centuries, gone!" He shouted, bringing his thick boot down on the last remnants of an intricately built clock that predated America by fifty years. "Gone! Destroyed! WASTED!"

The clock exploded with a twang, its inner windings released in an explosion of brass and wood. With another inarticulate shout, he reached out and tipped, almost threw, the last remaining shelf of books still standing to the floor, smashing, kicking, and even stopping his booted feet.

A century was a bit of an over-exaggeration, truth be told. While he had been accruing wealth for quite some time, and his disgust with the atrophy and contentment of the human species went back hundreds of years before that, he hadn't been planning this particular portion of the for nearly that long. He had been working from the shadows for hundreds and hundreds of years, but this portion of the plan was barely a few decades old. Still, even for an ageless, immortal being, spending two or three decades planning and scheming, only for the scheme to be unraveled into nothing before his eyes was... vexing.

And, worse still, by a simple fluke!

The deep workings of Cadmus had withstood the looks of the League, the charge of Queen Bee had been working as planned, and Ra's al Ghul was providing the needed violence and muscle. Oceanmaster had even directed the eyes of Atlantis to discover the Starro remains, and Lex Luthor continued to provide technological, political, and monetary support. Everything was going as expected, with more than enough room planned for the occasional setback.

And then, by random chance, Sportsmaster went to update the clone of Red Arrow's parameters at the exact moment that the clone's "allies" went to confront it for its strange behavior.

In one moment, everything came undone. Lex Luthor was sent to jail, one he had little hope of ever escaping from due to the sheer outrage and witness testimony to his crimes. Queen Bee was arrested as well and subsequently killed in her cell when the UN failed to realize that a close friend to one of the victims she... enjoyed was assigned to be her guard. Oceanmaster was imprisoned, and the vast majority of his purist movement soon joined him. The discovery of Infinity Island forced him to funnel an immense amount of resources into the relocation of the League of Shadows, only for Ra's al Ghul to pull out from the Light to focus on rebuilding. He even went as far as to find a magician to magically protect its location from him! He couldn't remember the island's location, even though he was sure it originally belonged to him!

Even Klarion, the bastard Lord of Chaos, someone who had listened and taken his advice for hundreds of years, had disappeared to parts unknown, refusing to be reasoned with or even answer his summons!

Everything had fallen apart. The entire Light movement had unraveled in the span of months! His influence in the criminal underworld was at an all-time low, and while his immense wealth was still safe under various identities, most of it was tied up in investment and general illiquidity.

With his office in shambles, his breathing rough and drawn, he surveyed the damages he had done. While he usually preferred to think of things as temporary and power as the only thing with true value, seeing so much of his work destroyed, so much of his personal collection shattered by his own hands did cut through the rage. It hurt in a way he was not accustomed to.

He took a deep breath, slowly letting it out, his rage gradually receding, though it still smoldered and sparked. He would have to start again, start building again. If there was anything he had learned throughout his long, long life, it was that time was the true equalizer. Given enough time, he would triumph over everything, even if he was simply forced to outlive his opponent, he would succeed. His mission was too important to fail, and so he would rebuild. It did not matter how many times he was forced to rebuild, time was on his side, and his victory was inevitable.

Vandal Savage took one more look around the room before making his way to the exit. He put his hand on the biometric scanner by the doorway, despite the door opening for him as he got closer. The pad blinked red twice before displaying a number pad, on which he entered a ten-digit alphanumeric code. He confirmed his actions twice before stepping through the door, which sealed itself behind him.

He was just stepping out of the tunnel and into the connected building when the explosives set into the walls and ceiling of his office went off, completely scouring any evidence of what it contained from existence and bringing the ten-story building constructed around it to the ground.

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Forming plans wasn't something Mauser was used to doing.

He could think ahead with the best of them. He could also cover his bases, be prepared, and even, occasionally, wonder what would happen next. But plan? Actually, sit down and come up with a cohesive, linear, step-by-step series of actions to achieve a goal? That was something new.

To say he was excited was a vast understatement.

That didn't mean he was a go-with-the-flow kind of person, either. He wanted what he wanted when he wanted it. And there wasn't usually any hesitation either. Baristas always loved him because he barely had to look at the menu to know *exactly* what he wanted and how he wanted it prepared.

Actually... Baristas might be a bad example.

"It's not that complicated, miss..." Mauser started, waving his sawed-off shotgun a bit and squinting to read the teenage barista's name tag. "Cerise. Oh, that's a nice name. It's not that complicated, Miss Cerise. Take the money, put it in the bag, and this nice gentleman only needs to get one knee replacement."

He gestured with his shotgun to the forty, maybe fifty-year-old man who had tried to charge him when he first whipped out his shotgun. He was clutching his leg, seething in pain as a woman held a red-stained rag on his knee.

The blonde Barista nodded her head rapidly, slapping the cash register, which opened with a slight jingle. She quickly started pulling out money and dropping it into the bag. There was a surprising amount in the till, which didn't actually surprise Mauser as he had chosen this location specifically. Depending on which direction you were going, it was either the last chain before a long stretch of road or the first thing most people saw after driving for a long time.

"Wow, you guys do well for yourselves, huh," He said when she took the last stack and put it in the bag, handing it back to him with a shaky hand. "Thank you very much!"

Mauser grabbed a twenty from the bag and stuffed it in the tip jar before turning back and walking out the door, a smile on his face under his harlequin mask. He hopped into his car, which he had parked not far from the entrance, put the bag of cash in the passenger seat, and started the car, calmly pulling out of the parking lot, making sure to look both ways.

As he pulled out into the roadway, a puzzled look crossed his face, still under the mask. He tapped his chin, trying to remember...

Oh, right! He had no experience making plans!

In truth, he did understand that kind of living wasn't for everyone. It took a certain level of narcissism to walk into a popular coffee shop, almost blow someone's leg off and rob the place just because he was sick of not having cash to buy a cheeseburger and some fries.

It was strange not having resources again. He had started from nothing a few times before, but it was still rare enough to be interesting.

He had spent the last thirty-six years in Central City, selling weapons under a few different names. That wasn't the most significant chunk of time he had ever spent in one place, but it was the largest he had spent on the lower level of things. Usually, if he spent more than fifteen years in one spot, it was because he was building something, leading something, or watching something unfold.

Central City had been different, though. For some reason, when he settled down there after his last life petered out into boring, mundane crap, it just kind of... stuck. He hadn't

intended to stick around for so long, hell, he hadn't even intended to be a weapons dealer. He was just selling his old guns, and when they sold quicker than hotcakes he-

“Hotcakes? Really?”

-he figured that was he to pass up a good idea. He took the money he made off his guns and bought three more. Soon he had contacts, business deals, suppliers, and repeat customers. Business was booming! After about ten years, the police got a little *too* interested in his business, so he faked his death and disappeared for a year before coming in and starting all over again. He did that two more times, hell, according to the police, his current had killed his previous look.

As he drove, he kept his eyes on the cars coming the opposite way, looking for one vaguely similar to his own. After about fifteen seconds, he spotted what he was looking for and quickly rolled down his window. He waved the driver down, slowing to a stop. The unsuspecting female driver, who looked to be about thirty, slowed down as well, stopping with their windows only a few feet away from each other.

“Is there-”

Before she could finish her sentence, the mouth area of Mauser's mask receded like flowing water, and he stuck his middle finger into his mouth. With a grunt and a bit of chew, he bit it off. Blood splattered on his face, though not nearly as much as there should have been for a normal person. The woman screamed, her eyes going wide and her face going a bit green. Before she could pull away, Mauser spit his finger into her car through her window. Her screams ratcheted up a few octaves, and she finally hit the gas, trying to pull away as quickly as possible. Meanwhile, Mauser slapped the side of his car as her tires screeched, leaving a red-black handprint, missing a finger on the driver-side door.

He chanted quickly in Russian, his voice a deep, bass rumble, speaking a spell he knew by heart. A useful little trick he had picked up in Russia from a nice kid who knew how to party. Before the woman could get even a dozen meters away, the outward appearance of her car, as well as her own, shimmered and shifted. After a moment, her car looked just as his did, and his like hers. A moment later and she looked like him as well.

With a smirk, Mauser pulled away, rolling up his window, his finger already mostly healed. In his rearview mirror, he watched the woman pick up speed, driving right towards the shop he just robbed. And towards the frantic incoming police.

After a few moments, his smile faded, his mask reforming to cover his face even as his smile fell. He had been satisfied with what he was doing, even occasionally enjoying the thrill of selling weapons in a world where heroes could fly around, bench press buildings, and form metal in their bare hands. He was comfortably in a rut, and those nice kids had broken him out of it.

At first, he had been furious, promising to get revenge for forcing him to leave Central City with his tails between his legs. But as he left the city limits behind, driving an unfamiliar stolen car, he could feel a weight lifting off his shoulders. He had let himself be content, barely enjoying life, letting so much time pass him by when he should have been out enjoying life!

He really did need to find a way to thank them.

Getting to enjoy the new sensation of coming up with a plan was just icing on the cake.