

2008

## Carpe noctum

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### Recommended Citation

Turnage, Mark Andrew, "Carpe noctum" (2008). *Honors Program Theses*. 45.  
<https://scholarworks.uni.edu/hpt/45>

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CARPE NOCTUM

A Project

Submitted

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Designation

University Honors with Distinction

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University of Northern Iowa

May 2008

## **Carpe Noctum**

In movies, there are certain conventions that identify a film with a particular genre: a typical western has cowboys; a superhero movie may star a gifted protagonist; or an adventure film could feature exotic locations. Such is also the case with film noir, a movement characterized by storylines featuring criminal elements and their tensions with the police, stylized black-and-white cinematography, and a seedy, nightmarish cityscape. But just as an audience can easily identify genres like these, an author can also demythologize a genre by providing original themes within a familiar setting or inverting those themes that currently exist within the genre to create something entirely different. Demythologization defamiliarizes an audience with a familiar genre; what was once predictable becomes unexpected, and if successful, captures an audience's attention with a unique perspective. With *Carpe Noctum*, my intention is to provide a creative work that demythologizes the genre of *noir* by authoring and illustrating a unique literary and visual approach in the form of an original graphic novel.

### **Literature Review**

I began by framing my own concept of film noir through cinematic examples to help me visualize the artistic style used in illustrating the graphic novel. The first films I analyzed were later films noir: *Touch of Evil* (1958), *Dark Corner* (1946), and *Crime Wave* (1954). What I learned from these films helped me shape the "basics" of film noir and provided a starting point from which I could identify consistent elements of the genre.

The consistencies I noticed in the storylines of these films noir included a focus on violent crime (with murder usually serving as a necessary catalyst), criminals and the police who investigate them, a hostile environment in which the protagonist's authority is severely diminished, and the major overlying themes of obsession, cynicism, nightmarism, and fatalism/nihilism. To create a work in the style of film noir, some of these basic ties to the genre are included in *Carpe Noctum* to identify it as noir.

Because the setting of *Carpe Noctum* is the present day, I also researched and reviewed "neo-noir" films such as *Collateral* (2004), *Sin City* (2005), and *Kill Bill Vols. 1 and 2* (2003, 2004) to gain ideas in this regard. While *Collateral* was incredibly useful in terms of its straightforward storyline and stunning color cinematography, *Sin City* and the *Kill Bill* movies were studies in storytelling methods and fragmented narrative, which gave me direction towards my own unique method of storytelling in *Carpe Noctum*.

To prepare for the graphic novel, I studied the artwork of Frank Miller's original *Sin City* graphic novels and Joseph Loeb and Tim Sale's *Batman: The Long Halloween*. Specific aspects that were important for me to scrutinize for this project include illustration of motion, mis-en-scene, "editing" of scenes into cels, and artistic renditions of the novel's characters. One major step forward in my project was procuring two "how-to" books that will aid in my novel's production: *Drawing Crime Noir For Comics and Graphic Novels* by Christopher Hart, and Prentis Rollins' *The Making of A Graphic Novel*, coupled with his own science-fiction graphic novel, *The Resonator*. Both provided artistic guidance in staging, scene composition, and developing a unique art style specific and conducive to my story.



## **Pre- and Post-Production**

In his book, Rollins discusses the cinematic term “pre-production” as applicable to the process of a graphic novel. The primary aim of pre-production is similar to that of cinema: making every component that results in what is seen on-screen work together to support the story. For my project, that entailed everything from researching the history of Las Vegas and organized crime to studying the architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright for the look of the fictional Diamonds Hotel and Casino. Anachronism is a major theme in *Carpe Noctum*: even though the story takes place in the present, elements of the past appear in its details, from the clothes characters wear and the weapons they carry to the art deco design of The Diamonds. Past and present merge and blend together, creating a deliberate distortion of time that contributes to its noir atmosphere.

Considering the volume of work pre-production entails, in consulting with my thesis advisors Grant Tracey and Jessica Moon early in the semester, I decided to divide my story into four installments or “acts,” with each volume functioning as its own story yet simultaneously flowing into the next act. Act I would serve as my thesis story: an originally written and illustrated work with the remaining acts to be composed, illustrated, and published independently following graduation.

With this process in mind, I began character designs. Characters drive my plots more so than external influences beyond their control; to form an intriguing plot, I needed characters with just as much depth. Some characters, such as Smythe and Roland, existed from previous fiction works I’ve authored. Others, such as Red, Shelby, and the majority of the cast are completely original to the story. Mannerisms, behavior, language, and most importantly appearance all factor into how these characters interact with one

another to further the plot. These completed character designs (in literary form) can be found in Appendix B of this reflection.

Next came the plot design. It was a struggle to finalize a plot compelling enough to encompass the cast of characters—a situation that created conflict on a large scale was needed to facilitate the beginning interactions between each person. The first thing that came to my mind, considering the subject matter of organized crime, was a threat to the existing order of the Aces in the form of a city-wide gang war. In order to do this I needed a counterbalance to the Aces, and I created one in the form of Mezzo Verte, head of a well-funded Italian-Hispanic gang. These forces had to be equal and opposing; though in the first act, tension is created through the existence of a truce that if violated, sows the seeds for a gang war.

Following the composition of the scene index and plot summary, I began to sketch rough drawings of the characters, which in turn were used to cement their appearance in my own mind as a writer so I could draw them more efficiently in repeated panels. From these initial sketches and the scene index, scenes were drawn and created. Depending on their complexity, I sometimes sketched a storyboard to illustrate how the action would progress.

More plot elements continue to be added to later acts following the finalization of Act I: most recently, the idea of staging a terrorist attack to incite riot and the incorporation of high-grade military arms smuggling. Both are allusions to a post 9-11 culture, and with the arms smuggling, a catalyst was created that metaphorically brings the violence of the Iraq conflict to an unlikely city, Las Vegas, to create a psychologically jarring effect.

## Demythologization in Context

The first creative decisions I made in plotting *Carpe Noctum* were its setting (Las Vegas) and the female lead as the “detective” character. Having a bright, wild city as its setting runs counter to the typical noir atmosphere of a dark, threatening cityscape, usually with strong resemblances to New York City or Los Angeles. Similarly, having a female lead as a detective is a step I haven’t seen in noir that I have studied. Other gender inversions that have been incorporated include a perversion of the *femme fatale* as a male, or *l’homme fatale*—a man who uses seduction and manipulation to accomplish his goals.

Sexuality in *Carpe Noctum* is more fluid and less narrowly defined than it is in the films noirs I have studied; to this end, homosexuality, bisexuality, and so-called “metrosexuality” are present with several main characters in *Carpe Noctum*. While sexuality is a theme of the novel, I intend for it to be a background component that shapes characters and their interactions more so than a social issue or a plot device, avoiding cinematic stereotyping as aggressively as possible. One step I have taken in this regard is with Smythe, a gay man characterized by his masculine attitude, mannerisms, and occupation as a intimidating hitman; as a masculinized gay man, he inverts the trope of the effeminate homosexual male.

With the study of the storytelling methods present in neo-noirs came the idea to begin *Carpe Noctum* “in medias res” to both engage the reader immediately and instill a feeling of mystery, uncertainty, and suspense. Narrative also switches between characters to further the story. As for the artistic style, the drawings are black and white with heavy contrast and minimalistic backgrounds; however, once the point of in medias res is

reached at the climax of the story in Act III, the novel will shift into full-color to reflect that a time has caught up with the present.

The superhero genre of films has also influenced character elements of *Carpe Noctum*. While it should be made clear that the four members of the Aces syndicate do not possess superpowers, they do have unusual abilities that set them apart from average people but are within the realm of human capability. These abilities include rapid reflexes and exceptional muscle control, acute perception and realm of focus, high resilience to pain, and “reading” people well enough to decipher hidden emotions or determine their deceptiveness.

### **Reflection**

With *Carpe Noctum* my intent was to provide as independent an approach to a genre as possible. An unfortunate trend among film criticism I have read is a heavy skepticism towards genre and its validity as an art form, seen more as fodder for the masses unlike independent cinema, which is typically praised for its deep storylines and contemplative, interpretive nature. These positive aspects of independent cinema, which I have studied and given serious thought, have been incorporated with the film noir genre so that my story becomes something contemplative and interpretive, similar to sui generis films. The purpose behind this is for my genre work to be taken seriously as both a noir and independent art form. My greatest result I have accomplished with this project is to author an original work of literary, cinematic, and graphic integrity and value that can be appreciated and criticized like any of the literary or visual arts.

## **APPENDIX A: PLOT SYNOPSIS/DRAMATIS PERSONAE**

### **Plot Synopsis**

A murder sparks a chain of events that lead to a gang war for control of the Las Vegas underworld. Detective Jack Shelby becomes embroiled in these events when she investigates Vic Cameron, a man on the run with ties to the Aces, an organized crime group. As the violence of the gang war grips the city, both cop and criminal must work together if they are to survive the escalating odds against them.

### **Dramatis Personae**

*Detective Jackie “Jack” Shelby, LVPD Homicide.*

*Victor “Vic/Slugger” Cameron, ex-driver for Felix mob.*

*Ben “Red” Carson, the Ace of Hearts.*

*Smythe, the Ace of Spades.*

*Naomi Maxx, the Ace of Diamonds.*

*Gavyn “Gav” Felix, the Ace of Clubs and estranged son of Erin Felix.*

*Morris Wexler, assistant to the Ace of Hearts.*

*Gabrielle Cyrus, assistant to the Ace of Clubs.*

*Senior Detective Dean Roland, LVPD Homicide.*

*Donovan, an arms dealer.*

*Erin “Aaron” Felix, mob boss.*

*Elena Felix, daughter of Erin and enforcer for the Felix mob.*

*Mezzo Verte, gang leader.*

*Officer Tom Holliday, LVPD.*

*Linda Holliday, his wife.*

## APPENDIX B: ORIGINAL SCREENPLAY

### PROLOGUE

*The Vegas strip, at night. Aerial view.*

**SHELBY:** *(box)* This city never sleeps. It dreams. This is the place where dreams are made.

*A figure lies on an abandoned street, next to a shattered motorcycle.*

Where some become broken.

*Close-up of a cracked motorcycle helmet visor reflecting the “Welcome to Fabulous Las Vegas” sign. In the next panel, the sign goes dark.*

And others die.

*Officer Tom Holliday washes his face in a restroom. His eyes are puffy. He stares at his reflection.*

Some have no dreams here.

*An interrogation room. Detective Jackie “Jack” Shelby sits alone. A cup of water on the table remains untouched, a lit cigarette lies in the ashtray.*

Only nightmares.

*Close-up of Shelby, bruised, bloodied, and battered, with a look of ferocity in her gaze, and Holliday. She is in an interrogation room. An untouched glass of water and an, ashen cigarette mark the table.*

I don't dream. I wouldn't know.

**HOLLIDAY:** *(off-panel)* The chief says you're free to go.

**SHELBY:** *(box)* Caught and cut loose. A fish on a line, released to the sharks.

*(dialogue)* I'm not going anywhere. Tell *that* to the chief.

*Holliday enters with a cup of coffee, but there is something sullen in his gaze.*

**HOLLIDAY:** You're always cranky without your coffee.

**SHELBY:** ... Tom?

*(box)* Out there, I'm a target.

In here, it's too easy for them. Like shooting fish in a barrel.

**HOLLIDAY:** Cream and two sugars, just how you like it.

Come on, I'll drive you home.

**SHELBY:** *(box)* There's plenty of things to kill me out there. In here.

It's just a matter of which one gets to me first.

**SHELBY:** *(dialogue)* Thanks, but I'll walk.

*(box)* The anonymous hitman while I get my morning coffee, just in time for the news at  
noon.

Some thug when I'm heading home, a random mugging and a knife to the ribs.

Or a friendly cop when he has your trust...

**HOLLIDAY:** It's OK, Jack. I can take you to your place, no worries.

*Close-up of Holliday's eyes.*

**SHELBY:** *(box)*... a bullet to the back when you least expect it.

**HOLLIDAY:** You're safe.

*Inside Holliday's squad car. Holliday drives, Shelby is in the backseat.*

**HOLLIDAY:** It's been a long night for all of us. Hell, it's been a long year.

*Shelby sits in the backseat, unresponsive.*

It'll be good to get some time off. Linda's been wanting a vacation.

She said we could stay here in town. That we didn't have to get away from all this.

There's a circus coming here. An old-school bigtop, with a ringmaster and everything.

You don't see those much anymore. Sadie's a big fan of the circus, she isn't scared of the clowns and freakshows like some other kids. She likes the lions. I bought her a stuffed lion last time. She named it Ryan. Ryan the Lion. God knows how many times she

attacks me with that thing...

*His upper lip stiffens. The weight of what he must do, what he must protect hits him in a rush.*

**SHELBY:** She's a brave little girl.

*The squad car stops in front of an apartment building. Holliday interprets Shelby's comment as a veiled threat, for he believes her to be the Ace of Hearts, who has ordered a hit on his family.*

**SHELBY:** Can you walk me in?

**HOLLIDAY:** Yeah. Sure thing, Jack.

*Holliday follows Shelby into her apartment. She fumbles for her keys. Holliday's hand moves to his pistol and grips the gunhandle, but he doesn't draw. Shelby notices this movement and reacts. There is a spray of blood against the wall. Black panel.*

#### CARPE NOCTUM

#### ACT I: A MURDER IN VEGAS

*I.i At a diner.*

*Zeno Verte, enforcer for the Verte mob, sits at a table. He holds a menu.*

#### ONE MONTH EARLIER

**ZENO:** I'm asking for a crepe.

*The waiter looks terrified. Zeno's routine is new only to him.*

**WAITER:** W-W-We don't serve steak until later, sir—I can get you some pancakes.

Free of charge.

**ZENO:** You know what a crepe is? Right?

**WAITER:** I... I can check with the manager...

**ZENO:** Just get one.

*Zeno gets up, brushes past the waiter and enters the men's restroom, passing a man at a urinal. Zeno enters a stall, drops his pants and sits on the toilet. The man at the urinal*



*zips up his pants, and turns on the sink faucet. Instead of washing his hands, he draws a gun and fires three shots into Zeno's stall, killing him. The murderer picks up the shell casings and leaves.*

*An order of pancakes is delivered to Zeno's empty table.*

*Four hours later, the pancakes are soggy and inedible. The diner is now a crime scene, populated by police and detectives, a couple witnesses still being questioned. Dean Roland is wrapping up interrogating a witness. Shelby arrives from outside.*

**SHELBY:** *(box)* Nights are always cold in the desert. It's quiet here. Dark. Not like the city. In there, it's a different kind of darkness. One that sometimes makes its way out here. A body had been found at a diner on the outskirts of town. Dispatch wouldn't give me the details, but they said it was ugly. The diner was slowing down when I arrived. If I had any sense, I should have backed out when I saw the kid who found the body.

*Close-up of Zeno's waiter. He is catatonic, face white as a sheet.*

If I had any sense, I wouldn't be a cop.

*(dialogue)* What have we got, Dean?

**ROLAND:** Another murder in Vegas. Got here about five minutes ago, so excuse the sloppy details. Looks like Zeno Verte had something to do with it.

**SHELBY:** *(box)* Dean Roland. Senior detective, LVPD Homicide. Specialist on gang violence. Verte and anyone like him was his turf.

*(dialogue)* The gang enforcer? Works for his brother Mezzo?

**ROLAND:** That's the one.

*Roland flips through his notebook.*

Witnesses say around 4PM, Verte entered the diner and ordered pancakes—excuse me, a crepe.

**SHELBY:** Doesn't seem like the type of guy who'd order a crepe and get pancakes.

**ROLAND:** Doesn't seem like the type of guy who'd order a crepe.

**SHELBY:** (*irritated*) Is there any coffee in this place?

**ROLAND:** Someone hasn't had their beauty sleep. And the staff's gone home, sorry.

*Shelby massages her forehead with the fingers of her right hand.*

**SHELBY:** A diner with no coffee. My kind of night.

**ROLAND:** It's all downhill from here, folks. After ordering, he heads back to the bathroom. No one sees anyone leave, but they hear his motorcycle pull out. My guess is, he did the deed then went out the backdoor.

*He gestures to the fire exit of the diner.*

There's supposed to be an alarm when you open it, but it hasn't worked for months, according to the cook. Busboy found the body while cleaning the bathrooms around 5PM. Poor kid nearly wet himself.

**SHELBY:** They told me it was ugly.

**ROLAND:** Forensics hasn't let me back there yet, but looks like they're just finishing up.

**SHELBY:** Guess we'll find out.

*Shelby and Roland approach the restroom.*

**FORENSIC EXPERT:** And you are?

**ROLAND:** Detective Roland, Homicide. This is my partner—

**SHELBY:** Detective Jackie Shelby. Let's skip the how-do-you-do's, shall we?

*They step inside.*

**FORENSIC EXPERT:** We've collected all the trace evidence, just a few fibers but nothing we can tell without further testing.

**SHELBY:** Have we got an ID on the body?

**FORENSIC EXPERT:** That's going to be a bit difficult.

**SHELBY:** Why's that?

*The Forensic Expert opens the stall door, revealing a headless and hand-less corpse seated on the toilet. Shelby and Roland wince.*

**FORENSIC EXPERT:** His head's gone. Hands, too.

**SHELBY:** Bad days all around.

**FORENSIC EXPERT:** We can check DNA, but that'll take weeks. Maybe you'll have better luck than we did.

*The Forensic Expert leaves. Shelby and Roland put on latex gloves.*

**ROLAND:** Christ. We come here to clean up Zeno's mess and instead we've got the Headless Horseman's handiwork.

*Shelby examines the bullet holes in the door, comparing them to the body and the wall behind it.*

**SHELBY:** Holes look like standard nine-millimeter bullets. Compact damage area, but one shot missed. Our shooter can handle a gun, but he's no marksman.

*She backs up until she reaches the sink, then raises her arm to mimic holding a gun. She checks the floor.*

**SHELBY:** He shoots from here.... no shell casings. No one heard the shots, so he can afford a good silencer. Definitely meticulous, though.

*Roland tentatively lifts the collar of the corpse's shirt.*

**ROLAND:** Our vic's got some inkwork on him—some kind of dragon...

*Roland stops in shock. Shelby moves from the sink.*

**SHELBY:** What is it?

**ROLAND:** This *is* Zeno Verte. I'm sure of it.

**SHELBY:** What makes you so sure?

**ROLAND:** That tattoo on his back. Check it against our file, 10 to 1 it's him.

**SHELBY:** If that's Zeno, then who walked out of here?

**ROLAND:** There's guys lined up around the block who'd want Zeno dead. But who'd just walk in here and blast him on the john? ...And who the hell would take a hacksaw to him like this?

**SHELBY:** Someone who didn't have the stones to shoot him point-blank. A dispassionate coward.

**ROLAND:** A dispassionate coward who takes heads. Makes sense.

*Roland's cell phone rings.*

Roland. *(reaction)* Jesus. Yeah. Yeah, I'll tell her.

*He hangs up.*

The station got an Ace of Spades card. Zeno's name was written on it. It... this... it's *him*. It's your guy.

**SHELBY:** *(adamant)* No. No, it doesn't make sense.

**ROLAND:** Hacking off a head and two hands after you've shot a guy to death doesn't make much sense either.

**SHELBY:** It all screams unprofessional. This was sloppy. *Hasty*. Spades doesn't take trophies. He didn't fire the gun, and he sure as hell didn't go Jack the Ripper on Zeno here. Assuming it's actually him.

**ROLAND:** Maybe he's gotten sloppy.

**SHELBY:** You know how many of those cards we have in evidence, Dean? Care to guess?

**ROLAND:** I don't know.

**SHELBY:** *One hundred and four.* Seven years and two decks worth of victims. And not one was sloppy. Messy aftermath, maybe. But never sloppy.

**ROLAND:** So why the card?

**SHELBY:** Maybe it's a copycat killer trying to up the shock value. A wacko trying to get headlines. Otherwise, no clue. I need a handwriting workup on that card. I can at least know it's not him.

**ROLAND:** I'll pay a visit to Mezzo. Maybe he knows something.

*He turns to leave.*

Dispatch said the card's from The Diamonds Hotel and Casino.

**SHELBY:** The Aces. Goddammit.

*Shelby leans against the wall.*

**SHELBY:** Just another murder in Vegas.

**I.ii** *The Diamonds Hotel and Casino.*

*The casino exterior resembles Frank Lloyd Wright architecture; very angular yet smooth, bearing striking similarities to the Sydney Opera House. The art deco style dominates the interior. The Diamonds should be simple yet relentlessly elegant in its grandeur.*

*Shelby enters the casino.*

**SHELBY:** *(box)* The Aces. Vegas' last real bastion of organized crime and simultaneously its best and worst-kept secret. Those naive enough to consider them a throwback to the days when guys with names like Bugsy and Lansky ran things choose to forget about the people they've killed. The lives they've ruined. Or the wreckage they leave behind. People don't care, so long as it doesn't happen to them. Now, just as then, lawlessness is novelty, a bizarre fashion statement. To the Aces, it's business. And nothing, *nobody* gets in the way of business for long.

*Shelby is escorted by casino security past reception and to the floor. From across the casino floor, she spots Naomi Maxx, owner of The Diamonds.*

**SHELBY:** *(box)* Naomi Maxx. Former showgirl turned casino matriarch. A loan shark who deals in expensive dreams, with all the warmth and personality of the animal. Her ties to the old outfits go way back. When her gangster sugar-daddies died and left her everything, she not only kept their empire going, she ran it better and more tactfully than they did. There are four Aces. One for each suit. She's the Ace of Diamonds, in control of their cashflow. I know this because I've testified in fourteen cases against her. It's what they call her. Court's laughable for Maxx. Her legal dream team could convince the most hardened skeptic the Easter Bunny was leaving eggs at their doorstep. Sometimes those eggs would be payoffs. Other times they'd be thugs. And if you'd really pissed her off, it'd be a playing card with your name on it.

*Close-up of Maxx, smiling.*

She smiles her shark-like smile at me and I smile right back.

**MAXX:** Detective Shelby. What can I do for you?

*Shelby holds up a plastic bag with a card, an Ace of Spades with "ZENO" scrawled on it.*

**SHELBY:** Recognize this?

*Maxx takes the card, not batting an eye.*

**MAXX:** One of ours. "ZENO"... The name doesn't ring a bell.

**SHELBY:** Try Zeno Verte. Enforcer for Mezzo Verte.

**MAXX:** Mr. Verte is a frequent client of ours.

**SHELBY:** You mean he's your main competition.

**MAXX:** If I'm not mistaken, Mr. Verte runs an automobile refurbishing business. I run a

casino. Quite the separation in career fields, I'd say.

**SHELBY:** He's a gang leader.

**MAXX:** My business is gaming, Miss Shelby. Not policing.

**SHELBY:** Then you can imagine how being publicly associated with criminals could hurt your business.

**MAXX:** No need for hostilities. I want to help you.

*Shelby points to the domed security cameras.*

**SHELBY:** Then get me the surveillance tapes from this week. Security keeps tabs on all this, right?

**MAXX:** We do keep records of our guests. Mr. Verte has been here the past three nights showcasing his street racers.

**SHELBY:** Are those tapes on record?

**MAXX:** In our security office, with the backup copies. Follow me.

*Maxx and Shelby head from the floor to the security office. Two guards accompany them.*

**MAXX:** Do you come here often, Detective?

**SHELBY:** Only when I have to.

**MAXX:** That's a shame. I'd make sure to have more alleged criminals here if it meant I could expect your patronage.

*Shelby gives Maxx a glare.*

Joking.

*In the security room, Maxx holds up several tapes.*

I'd be willing to send these over to your department right away. I understand how timeliness is crucial in these matters.

*The security camera footage is queued.*

Tell me if you see anyone you recognize.

*Instead of seeing a tape of Verte, Maxx is showing a tape of Shelby and Red in a Diamonds Hotel room, making love. Maxx smirks.*

**MAXX:** Whoops. Looks like the wrong tape.

**SHELBY:** *(box)* The shark strikes.

**MAXX:** Miss Shelby. I have been *so kind* to indulge your *egregious* claims I'm connected to a reputed gang leader. I would appreciate it if you apologized. *Publicly*. You can imagine how being associated with criminals could hurt your business.

*Shelby grits her teeth, furious. Maxx ejects the tape.*

**SHELBY:** Perhaps we should talk down at the station.

*Maxx smiles incredulously, as if hearing a joke.*

**MAXX:** Are you arresting me, detective? Because I'd like nothing better than to file harassment charges and see your badge given to someone a bit more respectful. Someone who doesn't sell out their colleagues for sex. You're a better whore than that.

*Shelby snaps and lashes out at Maxx, hitting her in the left side of her temple. Security forcibly restrains her. Maxx recovers and smiles smugly, adjusting her hairstyle to cover the fresh bruise. This new style makes her look more sinister.*

**MAXX:** Have a good night, *detective*.

*Shelby is dragged struggling to the casino exit, with onlookers watching. She passes Ben "Red" Carson, Vegas celebrity and media darling, and his entourage. Among them is Red's impromptu secretary, ex-pornstar Morris Wexler.*

**REPORTER:** Mr. Carson! Mr. Carson! About your green energy investments—

**RED:** Who is this kid, anyway? "Mr. Carson"? Is he new in town or something?

*The crowd laughs.*

*He turns to the young reporter and flashes a disarming grin.*



Call me “Red.”

*Red notices Shelby being dragged out. The two exchange a surprised, uncomfortable glance before Shelby is thrown out and Red, dazed but for a moment, shifts back to the crowd.*

**REPORTER 2:** Red, what does your decision to “go green” mean for Las Vegas?

**RED:** It means I love this town. I want to see it grow, see it thrive like it always has been. Me doing this is more than just being eco-friendly. It’s economical. When Vegas turns over to these forms of power, we’ll see more jobs, a better economy and less waste. That means more money for you to spend. Like here, for instance. My partnership with Maxx Casinos means that not only will you see *me* here, you’ll get the best gambling and adult entertainment experience in the world.

**REPORTER 3:** Is it true you’re considering running for mayor?

**RED:** One step at a time. Or in my case, one giant leap at a time. Am I right?

*The crowd chuckles. Maxx joins Red.*

**MAXX:** Our partnership doesn’t just mean a change in adult entertainment. We’ve endorsed a number of community children’s projects—including a new, tasteful, family-friendly casino opening next year.

*The crowd applauds.*

**RED:** Morris here will answer your questions and sign autographs. I’ve got a deal to close.

*Red motions to Wexler to handle the crowd. Maxx and Red walk across the casino floor to a back hallway. When the door shuts, Red lights a cigarette.*

Freakin’ sycophants.

**MAXX:** So says the Ace of Hearts.

**RED:** They like what I say. So I tell them what they want to hear. Doesn't matter who says it.

*Red leans against the wall. He exhales a cloud of smoke.*

Word on the street is Zeno Verte's dead.

**MAXX:** I heard.

**RED:** One down, one to go, as I see it.

**MAXX:** No. Unequivocally, *no*. We can't handle a war with them. Our funds are too strained.

**RED:** We won't have to if we cut off the head of the cacti snake. It's bad enough you let him parade his pimp-rides and crotch-rockets here.

**MAXX:** I've worked too long and too hard to know that's not possible. Verte's gang is a hydra. Cut off the head, three more take its place.

**RED:** They'd be disorganized without a leader.

**MAXX:** They'd be united with a martyr. The truce we've made is shaky at best. We lose that, we're fighting a war no one can win. Why are you so set on killing him?

**RED:** He looks at me funny. Like I'm some kind of joke.

*Red takes another drag.*

**RED:** They found Zeno in a diner outside the city. Said he didn't have a head. Who says it's him?

**MAXX:** Your flame Shelby showed me a card from my casino. An Ace of Spades with Zeno's name written on it.

**RED:** *Smythe* did this? So Spades has snapped. Huh.

**MAXX:** No. This isn't him. He doesn't use cards from casinos. Especially not this one.

They're too easily traced. Never mind the head thing.

**RED:** Work so long in a job like his and it's no wonder he'd start taking heads.

*Maxx's phone rings. She hangs up after a few seconds.*

**MAXX:** Security's spotted a felon in the casino. A "Victor Cameron." Former driver for the Felix gang, wanted for murder. You know him?

**RED:** No. But we need a driver for tonight. My guy's in prison.

**MAXX:** I'll ask Smythe about Zeno. If he killed him, he had his reasons.

**RED:** "Ask." Right. More like "he'll tell us," if that.

*Maxx turns to go.*

**MAXX:** No use arguing over dead men anyway.

**RED:** I couldn't agree more.

*Wexler enters the hallway.*

**WEXLER:** The 'alternative' you asked for has been arranged.

**RED:** Good.

*Red stamps out his cigarette.*

**RED:** No use arguing over dead men anyway.

*On the casino floor, Vic Cameron is losing at the one-armed bandits when he is approached by security. The guards escort him to Maxx's office.*

**CAMERON:** Usually they drag you up here when you're *winning* too much.

**MAXX:** You seem to be losing a lot lately, Victor.

**CAMERON:** It's Vic.

**MAXX:** Wanted for murder. *Double* murder. With a baseball bat. Sound like you, "Slugger"?

**CAMERON:** They deserved it.

**MAXX:** Well, attitude is everything. You work for the Felix family.

**CAMERON:** *Worked.* Past tense.

**MAXX:** Money troubles? Seems you like to gamble poorly. How does your sister feel about that?

**CAMERON:** *(darkly)* Tell me what it is you want from me.

**MAXX:** Work for us, or we turn you into the police.

**CAMERON:** Sounds like the fairest deal I've got since I came here.

**MAXX:** I'm told you can drive.

**CAMERON:** Ma'am, I can do more than drive. I get people where they need to go, no exceptions. But most importantly? I don't get caught.

**MAXX:** That's a good skill to have, Mr. Cameron. Let's hope you don't lose it.

*At the casino bar, Cameron has a drink. A tourist sits a seat away from him.*

**TOURIST:** Bad luck tonight?

**CAMERON:** You could say that. Been looking that way for a while now.

**TOURIST:** I can tell. Buy you a drink?

**CAMERON:** Sure.

**TOURIST:** What do you take?

**CAMERON:** Whiskey on the rocks.

*The bartender slides over a glass.*

**TOURIST:** Life takes you strange places.

**CAMERON:** Like here, you mean?

**TOURIST:** That too. It makes you question where you're going. What you're trying to reach.

**CAMERON:** Or what you're running from.

**TOURIST:** You visiting, then?

**CAMERON:** Just got here.

**TOURIST:** Staying long?

**CAMERON:** Depends, I guess.

*The tourist writes his number on a napkin and slides it to Cameron. Briefly, Cameron is surprised and flustered before he slides it back.*

**CAMERON:** I'm sorry, man. I'm not gay.

*The tourist looks disappointed. He slides the napkin halfway across the table.*

**TOURIST:** If you need anything, then. As a kindness. Your luck might change.

*Cameron takes the napkin, finishes his drink.*

**CAMERON:** We'll see about that.

**I.iii** *Shelby's apartment.*

*Shelby is drinking vodka from the bottle, leaned forward on the couch, toying with a Jack of Hearts playing card.*

**SHELBY:** *(box)* Just when you think you're solid, something comes to remind you that you're nothing more than a house of cards waiting to be toppled. I didn't expect him to be there. Red. I came home and hit the punching bag and the vodka.

*A series of still panels of Shelby and Red: eating dinner, making love, and holding each other.*

What were we?

*A still of Shelby standing before a gravestone. In the next panel, she impulsively takes a lighter and lights the playing card, watching it burn.*

Nothing. We were nothing at all.

*The phone rings.*

**SHELBY:** Yeah.

**FORENSIC EXPERT:** We compared the cards to the others in evidence. It's not foolproof, but we're positive the handwriting doesn't match.

**SHELBY:** Yes. OK. Thank you.

*Shelby hangs up the phone, then suddenly grabs a dishtowel and smothers the lit playing card. Half of it still remains.*

*(box)* I can't let go.

*The phone rings again. Shelby regains her composure and answers.*

Shelby.

*Shelby jolts up from the couch, knocking over her bottle of vodka.*

WHAT?

**DISPATCH:** The body's *gone*. The morgue just called here in a panic, someone must have stolen it.

**SHELBY:** Is everyone asleep over there?! Someone must have seen something!

**DISPATCH:** The morgue isn't guarded. There's---what the hell?

**SHELBY:** What now?

**DISPATCH:** We just got a page from one of our informants downtown. He says he just saw Zeno Verte at Club Volume in the warehouse district.

**SHELBY:** How long ago?

**DISPATCH:** Twenty minutes.

**SHELBY:** I need a car to meet me at the club. NOW.

**DISPATCH:** You can't take your own? Have you been drinking?

*Shelby throws on her jacket.*

**SHELBY:** I'll call a cab, then! Just get me that squad car!

*I.iv The Holliday residence.*

*Officer Tom Holliday, out of uniform, is eating dinner with his wife Linda and his daughter Sadie. Sadie attacks Holliday with Ryan the stuffed lion.*

**HOLLIDAY:** Aggh!! He's eating me, he's eating me!!!

**SADIE:** Rawr!!

**LINDA:** Settle down, you two. Sadie, maybe you should finish your schoolwork before letting Ryan finish eating your father.

**HOLLIDAY:** Ryan says, 'Rawr, Sadie better do what mom says, because lions are scared of mommies.'

*Sadie laughs.*

**SADIE:** No he doesn't!

*With a smile.*

**LINDA:** Oh yes he does. Ryan will have to go away if Sadie doesn't finish her spelling.

**SADIE:** Aww, man! But I'm not hungry.

**HOLLIDAY:** That's too bad, because if someone got their homework done, we might all go out for... ice cream!!

**SADIE:** Yaaay!! Ok, I'll get it done right now. Watch me run!

*Sadie runs out of the dining room as Holliday and Linda watch.*

**LINDA:** Ice cream, Tom? Honestly.

**HOLLIDAY:** What? She loves ice cream.

**LINDA:** Tom, the water bill came today. We'll be lucky to get groceries, never mind ice cream.

**HOLLIDAY:** It's just something for Sadie.

**LINDA:** You don't understand—we get ice cream and we can't get milk. We don't get milk, we can't have breakfast—

**HOLLIDAY:** I get it—

**LINDA:** This is how life is. This is what we've got.

**HOLLIDAY:** Linda, I get it. OK?

**LINDA:** We aren't in a position to—

**HOLLIDAY:** Linda.

**LINDA:** There's nothing, Tom. There's nothing out there. I keep looking and looking and there's no one hiring. McDonalds and Wal-Mart aren't even taking anyone.

**HOLLIDAY:** I can work more hours—

**LINDA:** Tom--

**HOLLIDAY:** Listen. I've been saving up some money for a while, and—

**LINDA:** No, you listen, Tom! You're not throwing away your hard-earned money just because I can't find work!

**HOLLIDAY:** That money is for *you*, Linda! For *us*. It always has been. *Let me help you.*

I can ask around, check in different areas...

*Linda is silent.*

**HOLLIDAY:** I'm sorry, honey...

**LINDA:** No, Tom. I'm sorry. I overreacted. It's just... so....

*Tom stands up and hugs Linda. They embrace.*

**HOLLIDAY:** I love you. So much.

*Linda smiles and coyly wraps her arms around Holliday's neck.*

**LINDA:** Read me my rights, Officer Holliday.

*Holliday grins.*

**HOLLIDAY:** You have the right to remain silent...



*He kisses her. The CB radio squawks.*

**DISPATCH:** We need a squad car at 2210 McClellan Street, Club Volume in the warehouse district. Anyone out there?

**LINDA:** Ignore it.

**HOLLIDAY:** I wish I could.

*Holliday looks at her, then answers his CB. Linda folds her arms, withdrawn.*

**HOLLIDAY:** Dispatch, go ahead.

*I.v Club Volume.*

*Shelby makes her way through the crowded dance floor. She spots a tall, muscular man in full biker gear and a motorcycle helmet. He turns to reveal his profile and a distinctive skull-like design on the helmet. Shelby tries to follow, but he melts into the crowd. A tall, lean African-American woman grabs a hold of her arm. She shouts above the noise of the crowd.*

**CYRUS:** Gabrielle Cyrus, I'm the owner of this club. What can I do for you, officer?

*While Shelby is distracted by Cyrus, a young club patron slips by and through a door marked 'Employees Only.' Winding down the hall, he enters a room where Maxx and Red are seated around a small sidetable with a phone on it. Red and Maxx don't react; it's clear he belongs here.*

**MAXX:** Glad you could join us, Gavyn.

**RED:** Just in time for the boogeyman to call.

**GAV:** He does what he has to. We're no better.

**RED:** At least we have faces.

*The phone rings. Maxx puts it on speaker. The voice that emerges is warbled and distorted.*

**SMYTHE:** I didn't kill Zeno Verte.

**RED:** Great. Now that that's settled, who did?

**SMYTHE:** Someone who wants to start a gang war.

**RED:** That's helpful.

**MAXX:** Zeno's killer framed you to set us up.

**SMYTHE:** Precisely.

**GAV:** You were following Zeno.

**SMYTHE:** To protect him and ensure the truce was finalized.

**RED:** And you don't know who killed him?

**SMYTHE:** If I knew, they'd be dead.

**GAV:** Verte hasn't retaliated yet. Does he know?

**SMYTHE:** His head and hands were taken to delay his identification, and the DNA samples will take weeks to verify. His body was stolen to confuse Verte's contacts within the police department after I learned of a compromising tattoo that would positively ID him. Zeno Verte may be dead. But becoming him is enough to seed doubt in that fact.

**RED:** You're impersonating him.

**MAXX:** That will only work for so long.

**SMYTHE:** Zeno Verte will die again when I can arrange the proper circumstances and I am certain my anonymity remains intact.

**RED:** When will that be?

**SMYTHE:** The weapons deal with Verte tonight is conducted through a dealer named Donovan. Our truce involves profit-sharing on the reselling of the arms we purchase from Donovan. Some of these weapons are experimental. Unpredictable. And there will be an accident where Zeno is the only fatality. We will not be blamed. I will call after the deal.

**GAV:** Why not explain the situation to Verte?

**RED:** Kid, it's a miracle Mezzo hasn't launched a drive-by blitzkrieg against The Diamonds and everyone else in this city just because he *thinks* his brother's dead. He's a

threat and a menace. Smythe should have taken care of them a long time ago.

**MAXX:** That's not for you to decide.

**GAV:** Killing him would only hurt us.

**SMYTHE:** Carson. Are you familiar with the death of John the Baptist?

**RED:** What?

**SMYTHE:** King Herod offered a girl one request of anything she wanted. She asked for the head of John the Baptist on a platter, and the king, bound by honor to his mistake, gave it to her.

**RED:** What does that have to do with anything?

**SMYTHE:** John was useful to Herod just how Verte is to us. Killing him wouldn't mean only his head on a platter. It would mean ours. *Yours.*

*The line goes dead.*

**RED:** Majority rules...

*Shelby is still distracted by Cyrus, until she spots Red and Cameron, who has just arrived, by the door. She shoves past Cyrus and out the fire exit to Holliday's waiting squad car.*

**SHELBY:** Follow them.

*I.vi An abandoned construction site.*

*Red and Cameron in their car. Cameron is driving, Red in the backseat.*

**RED:** I hope you like fireworks.

**CAMERON:** What's that supposed to mean?

**RED:** All I needed was a fairy on Verte's crew. They like guys like Wexler. Everyone does. He just got him in the sack a few times for trust, and bam. He gave him the keys to

Verte's car. *I had the keys to Verte's car.*

*Red removes a long, slender device from his suit coat.*

Now listen carefully, because all this will happen very fast. I'm told you're good with fast; I tell you this so you're prepared. There is a bomb in Verte's car. I push the button here, and it explodes. My men hidden around the construction site will take care of the rest of them. And you get a front-row seat.

**CAMERON:** No, wait. I didn't agree to this. This is not what I signed up for.

**RED:** Too bad. I'm not the best driver, but when it comes down to tooth and nail, I'm sure I can work something out.

*Red rapidly draws a gun and smoothly lifts it to Cameron's cheek.*

**RED:** I'm good with fast, too. Still feel like backing out?

**CAMERON:** I never said that. I just didn't know this was the plan.

**RED:** Now you do.

*Across the construction site, Verte sits with a shadowy figure.*

**VERTE:** My brother.

*Roland steps out of the shadows.*

**ROLAND:** Believe what you want. I know what I saw.

**VERTE:** Perhaps you were mistaken. No one does that to *mi hermano*. You said he was in that club.

**ROLAND:** Headless men don't get up and walk away. And he had Zeno's tattoo.

Someone's playing you, Mezzo. I'm just not sure who.

*An SUV pulls up to the construction site.*

Donovan's here.

*From some distance away, Shelby and Holliday watch the deal go down through binoculars. The objects being bought are black cylindrical objects, about the size of small*

*oxygen tanks.*

**SHELBY:** What are those?

**HOLLIDAY:** Hell if I know.

*Shelby's binoculars glimpse Roland and freeze.*

**SHELBY:** ... oh my God. Roland. He's with Verte.

*She hands the binoculars to Holliday.*

**HOLLIDAY:** Looks like he's providing protection.

*At the deal, just winding down.*

**RED:** Nice doing business with you.

**VERTE:** Pleasure's all mine.

*Red watches Verte get into his car. In his hand is the detonator. Once Verte has shut the door, he presses the button.*

*Nothing happens. Verte's car starts up normally. Red mashes the button again and again, but to no avail. Finally, Verte's car pulls up next to Red.*

**VERTE:** You look like you were expecting something.

**RED:** Just taking in the night.

**VERTE:** Sure you weren't looking for this?

*He tosses the disarmed bomb to the ground at Red's feet.*

Maybe you were expecting him.

*Popping the trunk, the mangled remains of Wexler's "contact" become visible.*

Or your friends.

*The cars of Verte's thugs all open their trunks. Inside are the bodies of Red's men, guns and all.*

*Red is utterly stunned. He's been had.  
Verte motions to Cameron in the car.*

Kill him. I want Mr. Carson here alive.

*Verte's men open fire on Cameron. Inside the vehicle, he ducks and throws the car in reverse, bullets slamming through the windshield, but he escapes. Red tries to run, but is pistol-whipped by Verte and falls unconscious.*

*Meanwhile, Shelby and Holliday hastily leave, calling in backup as they flee. They pull over Cameron and place him under arrest.*

*Red wakes up in a car, pinned down by three men. Verte peers over the passenger seat.*

**VERTE:** You Aces think you own this town? No. I can take everything you own and burn it to the ground. Everything you hold dear.

*He studies Red.*

You like looking good, si? I can tell a man who likes how he looks. You're not like the ugly people.

*Mezzo draws a large knife as three men hold Red down.*

But now your face will match your heart, *amigo*.

*Red screams as Mezzo leans in and slowly scars him with a large knife, carving the initials "MV" vertically into his face.*

Don't bleed out all in one place.

*Red is dumped out of the car and onto the street, in front of the "Welcome to Fabulous Las Vegas" sign. Red, covered in blood, shouts in anguish into the night.*

## APPENDIX C: CHARACTER COMPOSITES

- i. Detective Jackie “Jack” Shelby
- ii. Vic Cameron
- iii. Spencer Smythe
- iv. Ben “Red” Carson
- v. Naomi Maxx
- vi. Gavyn “Gav” Felix
- vii. Detective Dean Roland
- viii. Morris Wexler
- ix. Elena Felix
- x. Mezzo Verte
- xi. Erin “Aaron” Felix
- xii. Lyle Donovan
- xiii. Gabrielle Cyrus
- xiv. Officer Tom Holliday
- xv. Linda Holliday

### I. CHARACTER COMPOSITES

*Detective Jackie “Jack” Shelby.*

Height: 5’8”

Age: 33

Build: Athletic. Very in-shape.

Hair: auburn, shoulder-length but usually tied back.

Eyes: dull mahogany, dark circles beneath the eyelids.

Ethnicity: White/Caucasian

Affiliation: Las Vegas Police Dept.

~ A good cop marginalized by her colleagues due to her unpredictable temper and several charges of police brutality. To compensate for this treatment, Shelby is a workaholic, her spare time spent keeping her body in top condition. Perhaps the only item in her Spartan apartment that is revealing of her persona is a punching bag. Life for Shelby is a merciless routine, and her job is what distracts from her depression. It is rumored that she is somehow involved with Ben “Red” Carson, reputedly a member of the Aces, and that this association was somehow responsible for the untimely death of her mentor, Detective David Cassidy. Her work and her anger are her mask and her medicine. Shelby does not remember why she became a cop, nor does she want to, as much as that question may bother her. To her, all that matters is that she is one. Her language is characterized by procedure and empirical evidence. She owns a restored 1966 Shelby Cobra her father passed on to her.

*Vic Cameron.*

Height: 5'10"

Age: 35

Build: Thin. A nerd's body.

Hair: bald (shaved)

Eyes: olive, with faded specks of green. Glasses.

Ethnicity: Black/African-American

Affiliation: formerly Felix mob, currently none

Trait: Driving

~ Originally, Cameron's ties to the Felix mob in New Jersey were substantial: as the personal driver for Erin Felix, he was witness to and recorder of several incriminating events back East. Ironically, what undid him was a gambling problem. In debt to the same organization that paid him, the Felix mob grew impatient with his empty promises and torched his house, killing his handicapped sister inside. Enraged, Cameron found the two arsonists responsible and brutally bludgeoned them with a baseball bat, earning him the dubious nickname "Slugger." Wanted by the cops and the Felix mob, Cameron fled west to Vegas on the advice of Gavyn Felix, who he secretly helped escape from his controlling and sadistic family three years earlier. Though he often lacks assertiveness, there is ferocity within him if cornered.

*Spencer Smythe.*

Height: 6'2"

Age: 45

Build: Lithe, but imposing. Horizontal scar on left side of neck.

Hair: Black, jagged and short, graying throughout. Gray stubble across face and neck.

Eyes: Dark amber with spots of gold, yet almost black, like something spilled in them.

Ethnicity: Mediterranean-American

Affiliation: Aces (The Ace of Spades)

Trait: Physical Resilience

~ A professional hitman and former Iraqi War POW in charge of intimidation and executions for the Aces. His specialties include close quarters combat (CQC), with expertise in explosives, though he is most infamous for his sniping. Carries a scar on the left side of his neck from when he was nearly beheaded by militant Islamic jihadists during his tour of duty in Iraq. Though there is no official 'leader' of the Aces, it is Smythe who orchestrates the majority of its workings. His reputation as a 'boogeyman' is earned for his peculiar motus operandi: notifying the police of his handiwork by delivering an Ace of Spades card bearing the name of his victim to Las Vegas police headquarters. The Aces do not know Smythe's true face, or if that is indeed his real name. Meetings on his behalf are conducted via speakerphone and a voice modulator. Most often, he poses as a barhopping tourist, allowing him to observe, stalk, and eliminate his targets before disappearing into the crowd. The inhumanity of his reputation is only exceeded by the utter loneliness of his personal life.



*Ben “Red” Carson.*

Height: 5’5”

Age: 31

Build: Average

Hair: Red, gelled and styled.

Eyes: Jade green. Disarming.

Ethnicity: White/Caucasian

Affiliation: Aces (The Ace of Hearts)

Trait: High-Speed Reflexes

~ Wealthy playboy and black market information broker for the Aces. The darling of Vegas tabloid media and the social elite, he is a man whose charm, magnetism and good looks are matched by his cunning and manipulative nature. Arrogant yet justifiably so, he is the owner of the most profitable and exclusive adult entertainment venue in Vegas: The Loft, the highest landmark on the Strip. His recent investments in “green” energy and status as an outspoken environmental advocate have only vaulted his status further to talk of mayoral candidacy. A smooth operator, Carson’s dealings have resulted in many corporate scandals reaching the news—and even more that never do. Despite all this, his ego masks an inferiority complex that undermines his emotions with volatility. “Red” is an individual impossible to publicly side against and an opportunist in the extreme, who revels in his successes and effortlessly bounces back from his failures—by ruining and breaking anyone who fails him.

*Naomi Maxx.*

Height: 6’0”

Age: 45 (but looks 30)

Build: Gorgeous; Voluptuous.

Hair: Black, shoulder-length and sleek with long bangs in front.

Eyes: Ice-blue, just as frigid.

Ethnicity: Japanese-Hispanic.

Affiliation: Aces (The Ace of Diamonds)

Trait: “Reading” Emotions/Behavior Prediction

~ Former showgirl who used her ties to old mobsters to establish herself as casino matriarch of Las Vegas. The crown jewel in her empire, The Diamonds Hotel and Casino, is the base of operations for the Aces. Maxx herself is Vegas’s most notorious loan shark, though it is not always money she loans. Maxx’s clout is sufficient enough that it is said one with the right connections can ask her for almost anything and she will acquire it or make it so—in exchange for something more precious in return. Her savvy negotiations have resulted in an uneasy deal between the Aces and the Verte gang concerning profit-sharing on high-grade weapons trafficking. She is a cold and calculating woman, shrewd and to-the-point, whose second chances are as precious as the namesakes of her casino. Her cynical view of the world as something vain and superficial mirrors her phenomenal ability to cater to the vain and superficial, and anyone who wants to live like them. Her influence in Vegas is not to be underestimated.

*Gavyn “Gav” Felix.*

Height: 5’7”

Age: 25

Build: Average, with a couple ear/lip piercings and tattoos.

Hair: blonde, short & unstyled

Eyes: Blue, like the deep end of a swimming pool.

Ethnicity: White/Caucasian

Affiliation: Aces (The Ace of Clubs)

Trait: Focus/Concentration. Acuity of senses.

~ A prodigy skilled in business management and operation, in control of developing nightclubs and minor narcotics fronts for the Aces. Although he is the youngest member of the Aces by far, he is by no means naïve. Running his businesses through his loyal bodyguard Gabrielle Cyrus, he prefers to stay in the background, blending in with the nightclub scene as a patron rather than something high-profile and potentially hazardous. A free spirit, existentialist, and a deeply instinctual person by nature, he chooses to stay with the Aces simply because he has everything he ever wants. Though it may seem contradictory to his laid-back personality, he is incredibly detail-oriented, which could explain the unusual acuity of his senses. His position as Ace of Clubs offers him refuge from his estranged mobster family. Friends with Vic Cameron, the one person other than Cyrus who he trusts completely.

*Detective Dean Roland.*

Height: 5’10”

Age: 35

Weight: Somewhat heavyset

Hair: Brown buzz cut—receding.

Eyes: Gray-brown

Ethnicity: White/Caucasian

Affiliation: Las Vegas Police Department

~ A senior detective of the Las Vegas Police Department, serving as Mezzo Verte’s ears within the precinct. As a detective, he is cocky yet methodical and personable when he needs to be; his expertise at his job has allowed him to not only progress through the ranks of the LVPD, but escalate in importance to Verte’s gang. Though Roland works with Verte on a regular basis, he is disgusted by his personality, which he sees as foolish and impulsive. Nevertheless, Roland is a man who is able to value his job and his criminal ventures simultaneously—he feels that they necessitate each other. The fact that so far he has led major busts and assisted in key criminal exploits proves to him his importance on either side is invaluable. For Roland, value is only ascribed to something when it is attached to him, especially if they are people. Very adept at using trust as a weapon.

*Morris Wexler.*

Height: 5'11"

Age: 24

Build: Chiseled. Underwear model/eye candy.

Hair: brown with blonde highlights—styled in a “faux-hawk”

Eyes: Pale Blue, like diamonds.

Ethnicity: White/Caucasian

Affiliation: Aces (assistant to The Ace of Hearts)

~ Tabloid reporter and ex-model, Wexler casts a veneer of friendliness and amiability (and sometimes, a mask of vague, deep-seated trauma) that is not seen through by many. Beneath this façade is an aloof and apathetic man who sees people as objects utterly susceptible to him, to be used and thrown away before moving on. He enjoys misleading and deception, and uses his charm and striking attractiveness to great effect in enticing potential (and often unwitting) clients of Red. Though it is Red who sells the information he procures, it is Wexler who does most of the blackmail. Perhaps the only thing he values other than his appearance is duping someone unlucky enough into being completely at his mercy. Wexler is, however, totally loyal and respectful to those who he feels are smart enough to consistently outwit or outmatch those around them.

*Elena Felix.*

Height: 5'6"

Age: 32

Build: Skinny, very slender. Childish appearance.

Hair: Blonde, voluminous shoulder-length sections swept back. Heavily styled.

Eyes: Pale blue, like a kiddie pool.

Ethnicity: White/Caucasian

Affiliation: Felix Mob

~ Sister to Gavyn Felix and sadistic enforcer for the Felix mob. Her childlike demeanor and mannerisms are clever ways she disarms those who stand in her way—for example, her love of sweets, especially wild cherry suckers, and her tendency to get frustrated easily at trifling matters. Elena is a woman not to be misread or, for that matter, trifled with. Her bipolar personality alternates between a deceptively sweet girl to that of a brutal, vicious killer who revels in every ounce of pain she inflicts on her victims. This alternate Elena is ruthlessly efficient at her duties, but “both women” are deferential and doting to Erin Felix, Elena’s mother. Elena is fiercely protective of her mother, acting as her personal protector and enforcer of her will. As such, the enmity between herself and her brother over his leaving the Felix mob is substantial enough for Elena to desire his death, but not act upon it out of respect for Erin, who wishes him unharmed.

*Mezzo Verte.*

Height: 5'4"

Age: 35

Build: Rail-thin.

Hair: Short, styled delicately.

Eyes: Brown

Ethnicity: Italian-Hispanic

Affiliation: Verte Gang

~ Gang leader of the second largest criminal operation in Vegas, alongside the Aces. Operates in many areas, but specializes in vehicle smuggling and custom "chop-shops" that have gained fame and notoriety throughout Vegas for both their automotive genius and expertise at carjacking and grand theft auto. Verte himself is an expert with vehicles and their inner workings; his philosophy towards crime is to compare it to a car and its driver: "I can have the worst, most piece of shit vehicle in the land, but race me in a fine car with a terrible driver, and I'll beat you every time." And Verte is a fine driver, indeed—connected and well-financed, his once two-bit operation is now a booming, yet low-key, force to be reckoned with. A thrillseeker and street racer, Verte is often seen as brash, reckless and impulsive, traits that allow him to take great risks but sometimes put his organization in unnecessary danger. His pride does not allow him to be insulted without punishment.

*Erin "Aaron" Felix.*

Height: 5'6" (wheelchair)

Age: 54

Build: Emaciated. Terminal cancer patient.

Hair: Bald. Sometimes wears a wig of medium-length gray-brown hair.

Eyes: Indigo

Ethnicity: White/Caucasian

Affiliation: Felix Mob

~ Mafia matriarch, crime maven extraordinaire. Recently moved her entire East Coast operation to Des Moines, Iowa to elude authorities. Without her reputation to precede her, she seems a fragile woman, confined to a wheelchair as she is treated at the University of Iowa Medical Center for terminal ovarian cancer. Fragile, that is, until one hears her voice and experiences her ironclad personality. Felix is a firm woman hardened by years of crime, failed ventures, a divorce, and ultimately, her success in her criminal empire. There is a kind of strange serenity about her tone that seems uncharacteristic of a woman about to die, but more fitting of a woman who seems to have everything under control. Like a good mother, she loves her children and wants the best for them.

*Lyle Donovan.*

Height: 5'11"

Age: 40

Build: Slim, with something of a gut.

Hair: Brown, medium length. Parted; heavy receding hairline.

Eyes: Gray

Ethnicity: White/Caucasian

Affiliation: Felix Mob

~ Weapons smuggler, with substantial resources that provide him with extremely high-grade military merchandise. Like Felix, Donovan is also characterized by his years of experience in his field, yet he is somewhat vulnerable and prone to manipulation when in the presence of powerful individuals. He is not unaware of this, and to safeguard himself, he is extremely paranoid, having a recording device on his person at all times. Despite this, the value of what he sells and his outstanding sales record (and a convincing criminal one to back it up) enables a hesitant trust from his clients. Ironically, Donovan is hemophobic, despite the blood-shedding weaponry he sells.

*Gabrielle Cyrus.*

Height: 6'3"

Age: 36

Build: Somewhat heavysset, but built.

Hair: Black-brown, cornrows tied back in a high ponytail.

Eyes: Brown

Ethnicity: African-American

Affiliation: Aces (Assistant to The Ace of Clubs)

~ Figurehead owner of Gavyn Felix's chain of Vegas nightclubs; in reality, Gavyn's personal bodyguard. Her relationship with Gavyn is platonic, yet close. Originally homeless, Gavyn offered her the resources necessary to train her as his bodyguard and confidant. The two have been through much together in the three years since Gavyn's arrival in Vegas, and this could reflect her polite yet coarse attitude towards those she trusts. A capable woman who is an expert at throwing off police attention in nearly all of its forms.

*Officer Tom Holliday.*

Height: 6'0"

Age: 29

Build: Average

Hair: Black

Eyes: Brown

Ethnicity: Caucasian

Affiliation: LVPD

~ A policeman whose dedication to his job is almost as high as his dedication to his family. Relatively new to the force, Holliday struggles to support his family, working long hours in light of his wife's search of a job and his 8-year old daughter's education. His strong code of ethics permeates his job and his firm but compassionate attitude towards those he helps and works with. Perhaps his only vice is the risks he is willing to take to ensure his family's survival.

*Linda Holliday.*

Height: 5'9"

Age: 28

Build: Thin, almost fragile.

Hair: Ginger, long and straight.

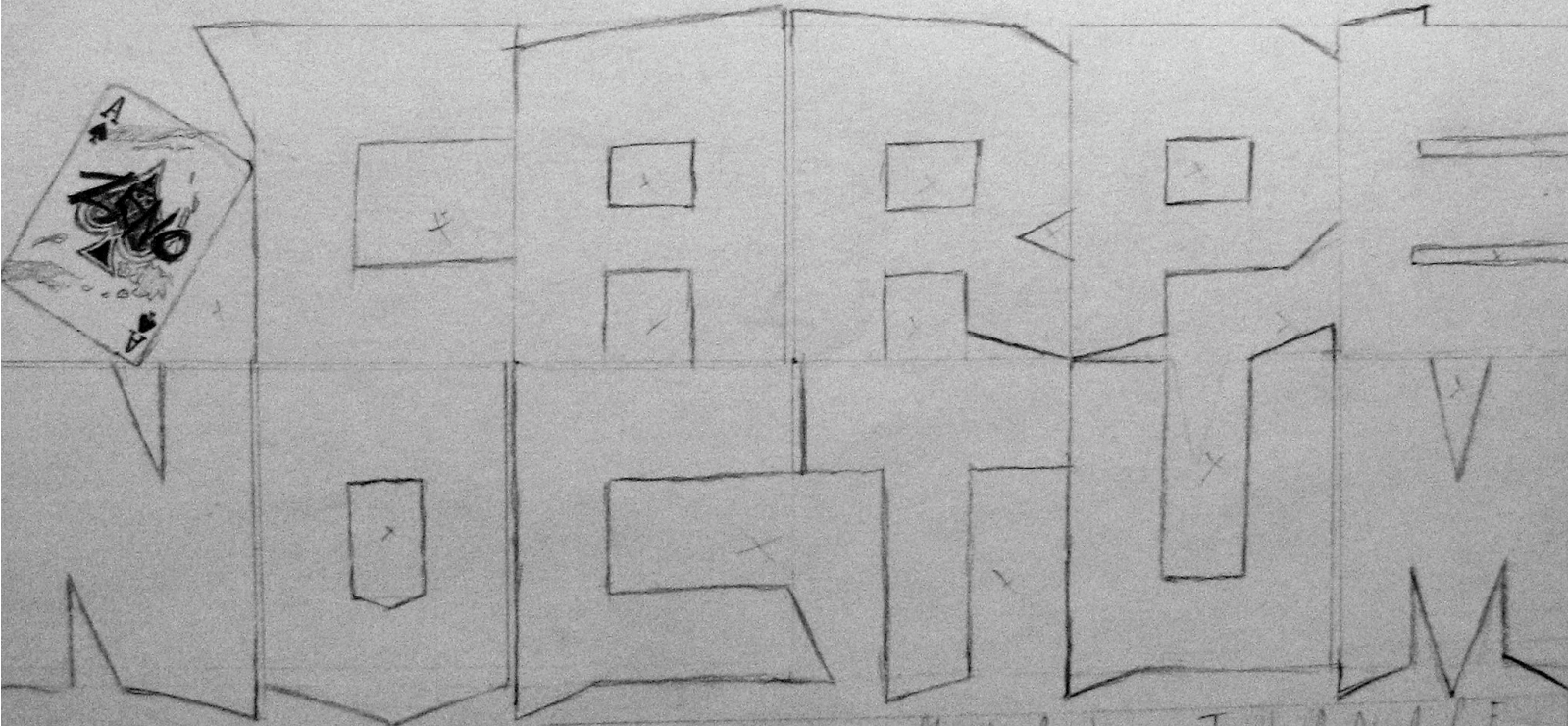
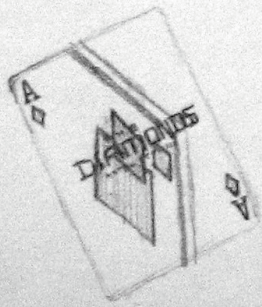
Eyes: Blue

Ethnicity: Caucasian

Affiliation: Aces (Assistant to The Ace of Clubs)

~ Wife to Tom Holliday, she is a housewife devoted to her daughter Sadie and her husband. Recently lost her job as a waitress for repeated tardiness, something she can't quite forgive herself for. Her inability to find a job that pays enough to support her family exacts a heavy toll on her: she blames herself for not supporting her family, and her guilt makes her prone to emotional breakdowns. Her guilt feeds into her inability to get work, fueling her instability and making her a less promising hire. But through her family, she finds strength.



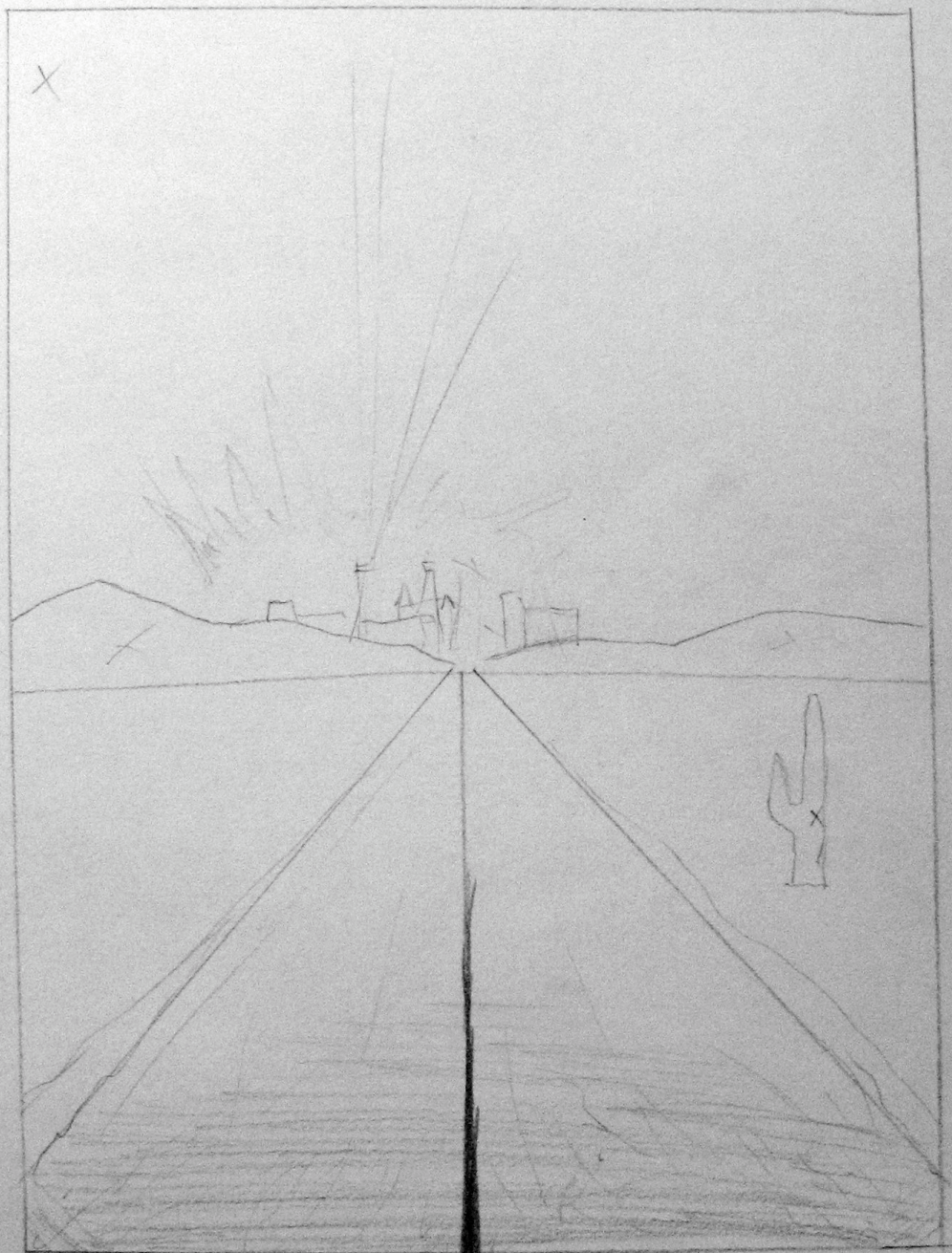


MARK TURNAGE

2008



PROLOGUE SLEEP





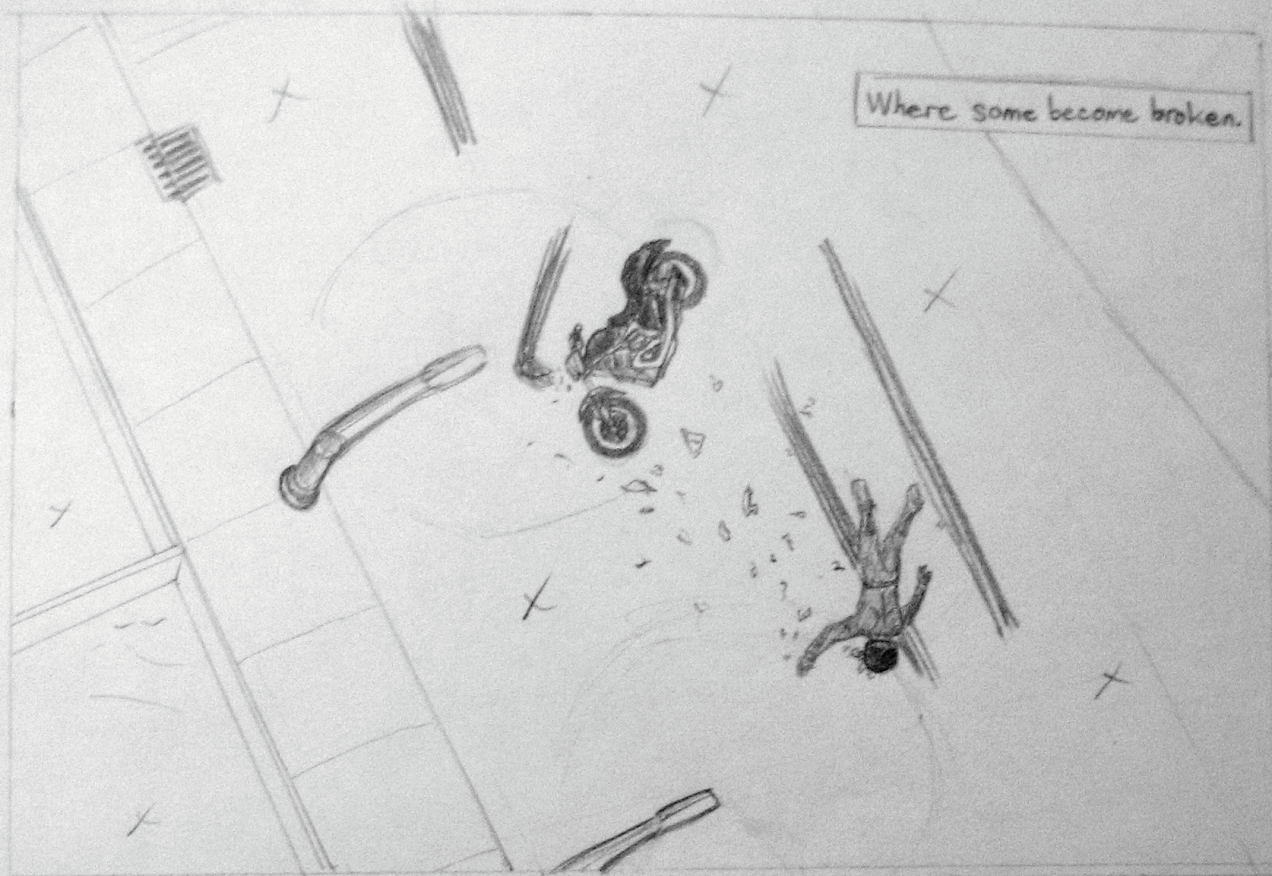
This city never sleeps.

It dreams.

This is the place where  
dreams are made.









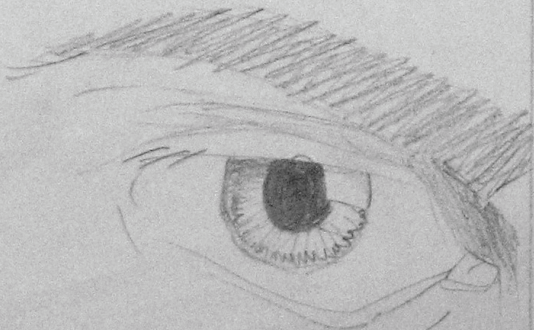
Some don't find dreams here.



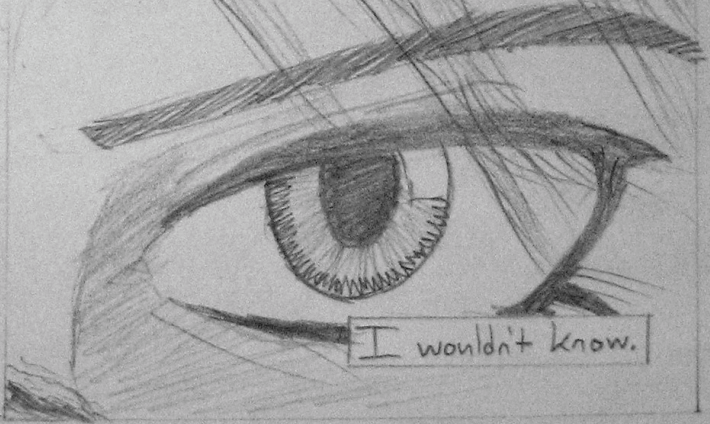
Only nightmares.



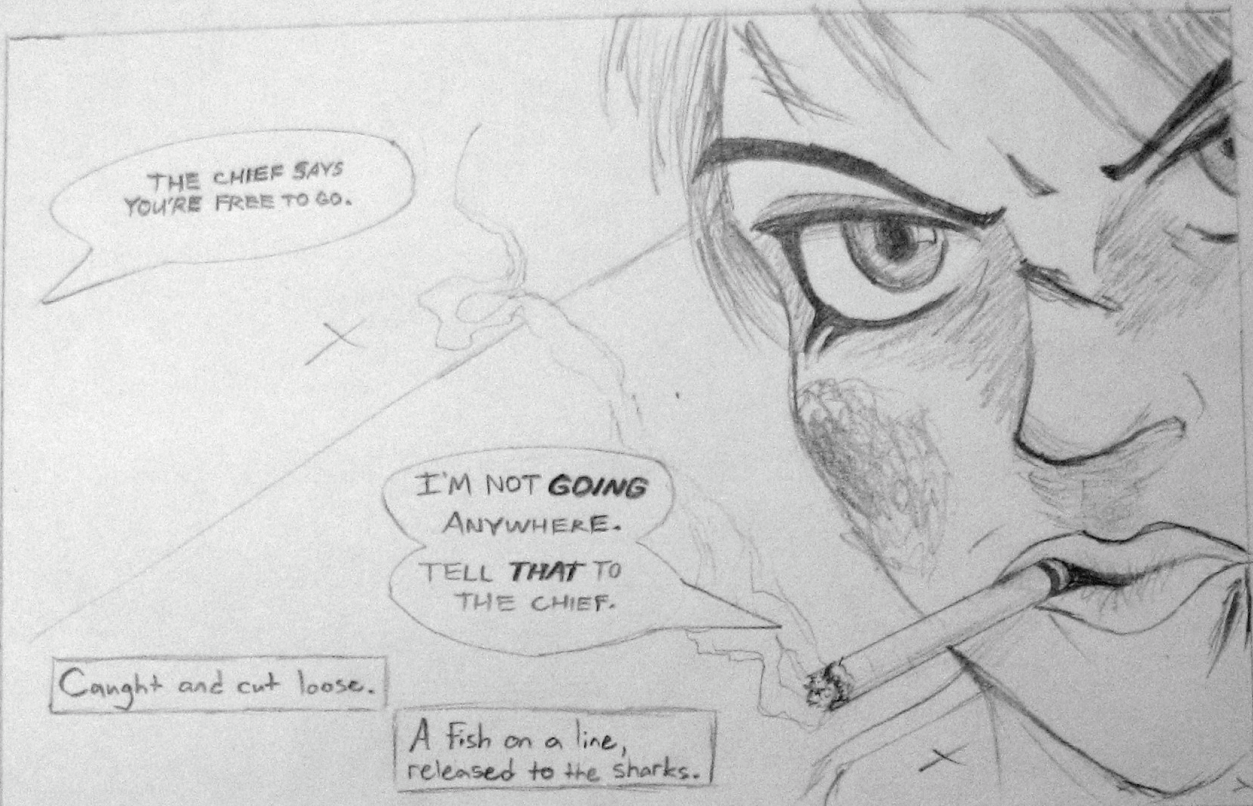
I don't dream.



I wouldn't know.

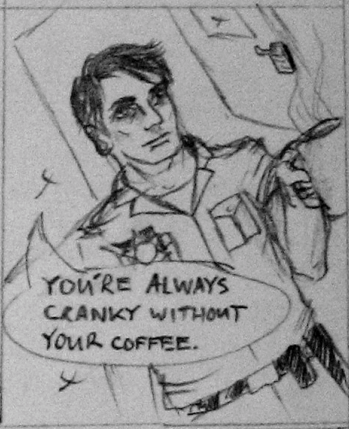
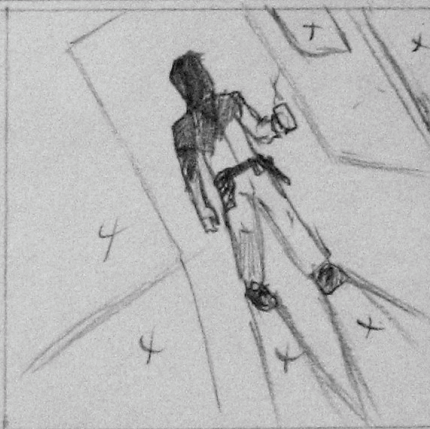
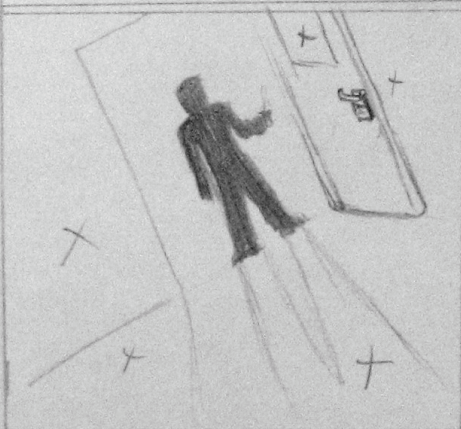






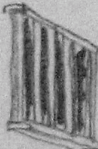
Caught and cut loose.

A Fish on a line,  
released to the sharks.



YOU'RE ALWAYS  
CRANKY WITHOUT  
YOUR COFFEE.

Out there, I'm a target.



...Tom?

CREAM AND TWO SUGARS,  
JUST HOW YOU LIKE IT.  
COME ON. I'LL DRIVE  
YOU HOME.

In here, it's  
too easy for  
them.

Like shooting fish in a barrel.



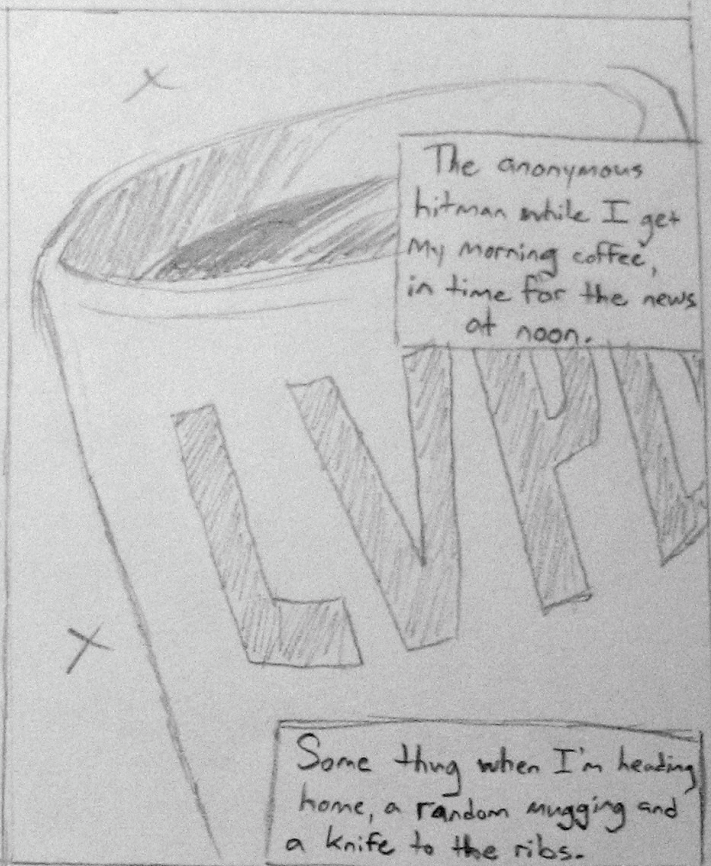


There's plenty of things to kill me out there.

In here.

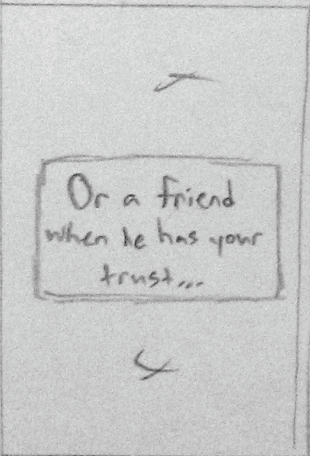
THANKS, BUT I'LL WALK.

It's just a matter of which one gets to me first.



The anonymous hitman while I get my morning coffee, in time for the news at noon.

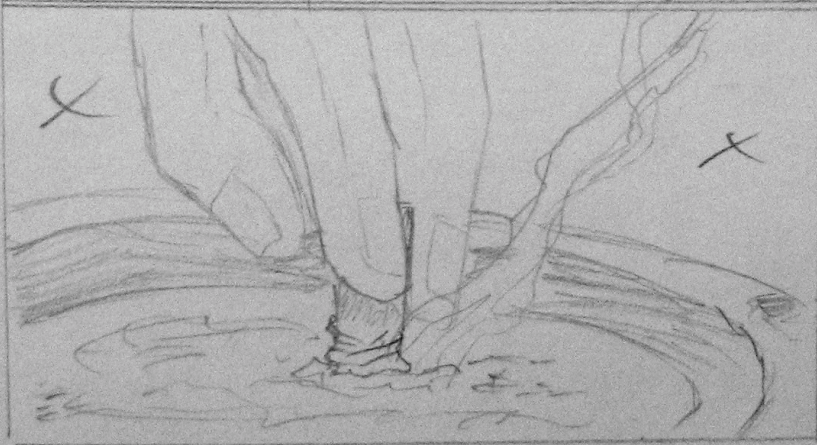
Some thing when I'm heading home, a random mugging and a knife to the ribs.



Or a friend when he has your trust...

IT'S OK, JACK. I CAN TAKE YOU TO YOUR PLACE, NO WORRIES.

...a bullet to the back when you least expect it...



YOU'RE SAFE.





IT'S BEEN A LONG NIGHT FOR ALL OF US.  
HELL, IT'S BEEN A LONG YEAR.

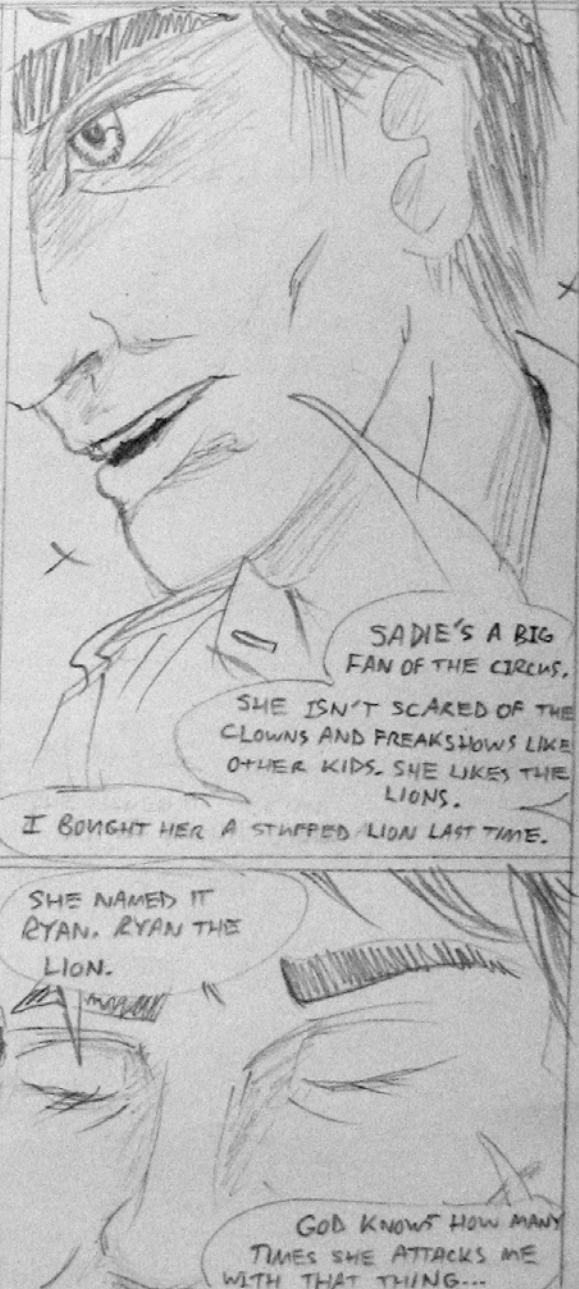


IT'LL BE GOOD TO GET SOME TIME OFF.  
LINDA'S BEEN WANTING A VACATION.

SHE SAID WE COULD STAY HERE IN TOWN, THAT WE DIDN'T HAVE TO GET AWAY FROM ALL THIS.

THERE'S A CIRCUS COMING HERE, AN OLD-SCHOOL BIGTOP WITH A KINGMASTER AND EVERYTHING.

YOU DON'T SEE THOSE MUCH ANYMORE.



SADIE'S A BIG FAN OF THE CIRCUS.

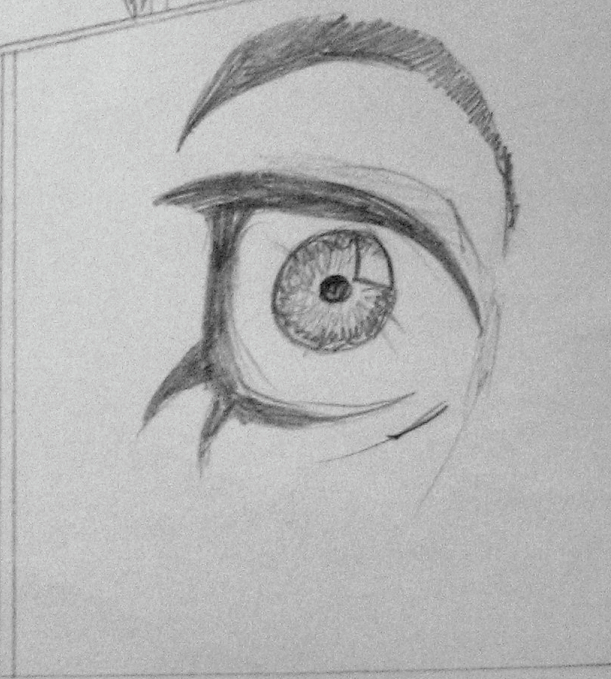
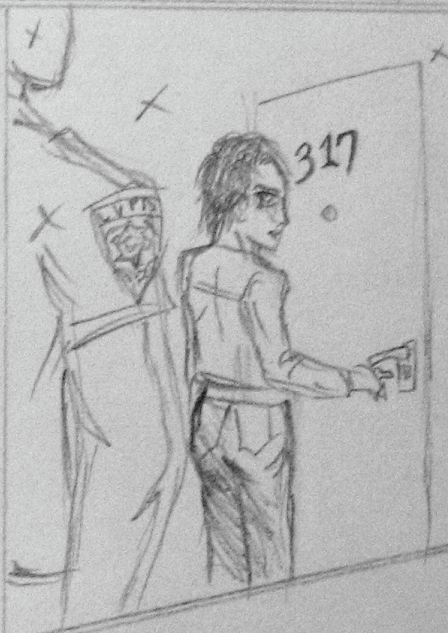
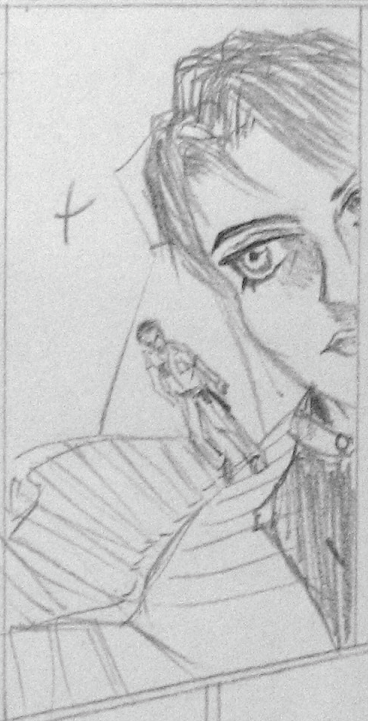
SHE ISN'T SCARED OF THE CLOWNS AND FREAKSHOWS LIKE OTHER KIDS. SHE LIKES THE LIONS.

I BOUGHT HER A STUFFED LION LAST TIME.

SHE NAMED IT RYAN. RYAN THE LION.

GOD KNOWS HOW MANY TIMES SHE ATTACKS ME WITH THAT THING...









CARPE NOCTUM