

SHOWDOWN



by Seth Ben-Ezra

SHOWDOWN

You either die a hero or you live long enough to see yourself become the villain.
—Harvey Dent, The Dark Knight

You do not truly know someone until you fight them.
—Seraph, Matrix Reloaded

The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?
—Jeremiah 17:9

TO RALPH MAZZA, WITH RESPECT. IF YOU HADN'T TOLD ME ABOUT THAT DESIGN CONTEST, I NEVER WOULD HAVE WRITTEN THIS GAME.

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A FINAL

CONFRONTATION

A FINAL CONFRONTATION

This time, it ends in blood. All the small insults, petty betrayals, maneuvering, and excuses, all of it has led up to this moment. The two of you are facing off, but only one of you will walk away.

It was unavoidable. From the moment you saw each other, you were fated to meet one last time in a collision of passion, rage, and violence. But why? How did it all come to be? Were you bitter rivals, escalating your rivalry until bloodshed was the only possible ending? Were you once friends, now torn apart by some unforgiven sin? Were you once lovers, with gentle caresses now turning to blows?

And does it really matter anymore? One of you is about to die; the other will spend the rest of his days with this moment burned into his memory.

For a moment, time pauses.

Your eyes narrow.

And the weapons come out.

Showdown is a roleplaying game about two people locked in a bitter struggle that can only end with the death of one of them. It's for two players and should take between 60 and 90 minutes to play. Over the course of play, you and your opponent will be fighting over two things: the outcome of a climactic duel between these two foes and the history that led them to that duel. Win the duel, and you get to choose who lives and who dies. Control the history, and you get to shape why they fought in the first place. How did it come to this? Who's the hero? Who's the villain? And who's left standing when the dust settles?

Raise your weapons and prepare to face the truth.

@ Play generously.

Showdown is a competitive game, but it relies on a base of mutual trust and respect in order to work. Since *Showdown* is played mostly with words and ideas, you will need to make judgment calls about the definitions or boundaries of those words and ideas. For example, is "desperate" a diminishing of "confident"? Or does being "a brilliant scientist" mean that you wouldn't make a rookie error in an experiment?

As you play this game, play generously with your opponent. If your opponent objects to the extent of your judgment call, then be ready to roll back your judgment call and re-examine it. At the same time, try to see things from your opponent's perspective when she make a judgment call that you're not quite sure about.

Don't let your game devolve into bickering over definitions. Instead, work together to have an awesome game experience that both of you will happily remember by playing generously with each other.



PREPARING FOR BATTLE

PREPARING FOR BATTLE

In order to play *Showdown*, you will need the following :

- ≈ Four sets of dice from d4 to d12. Ideally, they should be in pairs of contrasting colors, like black and red.
- ≈ Two sets of four Stance Cards.
- ≈ Two sets of five Attack Cards.
- ≈ Two character sheets
- ≈ Two pencils
- ≈ An Upper Hand token
- ≈ A Flash of Insight token.
- ≈ A blank piece of paper for a map
- ≈ Two small tokens (like coins or small dice) to mark character positions on the map

You can download the necessary files for these cards, sheets, and tokens from the Dark Omen Games website (www.darkomengames.com).

Each of you take two sets of dice, so that you both have a set of each color. Each of you should also take one set of Stance Cards, one set of Attack Cards, a character sheet, and a pencil. Leave the Upper Hand token, the Flash of Insight token, and the mapping components to the side for now.

Once you have everything, you're ready to start your game of *Showdown*.

DETERMINE GENRE AND STYLE

You two now need to establish the genre and style for your narrative combat. *Showdown* can work with nearly any genre and style that would include a fight to the death. Want to stage a Western-style gun fight? Or what about two desperate criminals in a shootout in a warehouse? A magical duel between wizards? It's especially important that you discuss the sort of weapons that your characters will be using. Will you be slashing at each other with swords? Are you maneuvering starships in an asteroid field? Piloting giant mechs across an alien landscape? The possibilities are vast and entertaining. Talk it over with your opponent until you both agree on something that sounds good.

One way to nail down the style of the game is to start by talking about movies that you've watched recently and are excited about. Were there any iconic battles or duels in those movies that really got you excited in the moment? Draw from those. If you've both seen the same movie, this can help both of you communicate your vision for the upcoming game.

@ What if I can't print out the cards and sheets?

In a pinch, you can hack together the necessary material using scrap paper and a deck of cards.

For Attack Cards, give each player the 4, 6, 8, 10, and Jack of a single suit. Scribble the character information and the Stance names (found on page 20) on a couple pieces of papers to serve as character sheets. Just cross off the Stances as you use them.

MAKE CHARACTERS

Once you've chosen the genre and style, it's time to make your characters.

Showdown works best when you make your characters separately. Don't worry, it shouldn't take more than ten minutes. This lets you be surprised by your opponent's results, as well as be intrigued by how your characters met and came to this dramatic point in their lives.

You'll come up with a few things during this step: a few **details** that you'd see or hear in the first couple minutes of a movie, the iconic **weapon** he'll use, the **Qualities** that the character believes himself to possess, and finally a **name**.

As you work on your character, make sure that you'd root for this person if he was in a movie or book. Like everyone else, the person you're making believes he's the hero of this story. That doesn't mean that you need to make a perfectly nice character, but you should want to see him live through this duel.

When creating your character, focus on him the way he is at the moment the duel begins. As you play, you'll come up with both characters' backstories, so don't come up with one at this moment.

If you're having trouble coming up with ideas, borrow inspiration from the hero of one of the movies that you used to set the genre and style of the game, or perhaps another fictional character that you already really like. Remember that this is just a starting point, and your character won't turn out the same as the character you're using as a model.

⌚ Create Details

Take a moment to imagine your character. What does he look like? What does she sound like? Does he wear any distinctive clothing? Does she have a particular way of talking? Write down four of these details on your character sheet. These should only be things that would be obvious to someone observing your character in action for a few moments. "Flowing hair" or "long fangs" would be okay; "hardened killer" is not a detail (but see Qualities, below).

If you're stuck, answer these questions:

⌚ *What distinctive marks does your character have? Scars? Tattoos? A rare eye color?*

⌚ *What does your character intentionally do that*

we'd see? Have a strange hairstyle or odd clothing choice?

⌚ *What mannerisms would we see? A stutter or eloquent speech? All smiles or grimaces?*

You're coming up with details because these help you and your opponent describe each other in the heat of battle.

⌚ Create Weapon

Now you need to figure out the iconic weapon that your character is using. You already established some broad possibilities earlier when discussing genre and style, but now it's time to use those guidelines to choose a weapon that fits the look and personality of your character. Write it down on your character sheet, and think about what the weapon says about the character.

You're coming up with a weapon for the same reason you're coming up with details, and because the weapon will frame how many of your actions in the duel will play out.

⌚ Create Qualities

What is your character's self-image? Is she a mighty warrior? Is he compassionate? Is he certain that he is the smartest one in the room? Is she dedicated to her country? Write down four of these Qualities on your character sheet under the column labeled "I think that I [am]..." and make sure it reads like a complete sentence.

These Qualities represent how your character sees himself, not necessarily what he actually is. Therefore, unlike Details, Qualities are not simply apparent upon observation. For example, "*UNYIELDING IN TIMES OF STRIFE*" would be an acceptable Quality, since it reflects your character's self-image and isn't an observable fact about the character. However, "rippling muscles" is a detail, since it's an observable fact about the character.

If you're stuck, answer these questions:

⌚ *What are you proudest of? For example, being "a brilliant strategist" or "welcoming of strangers" or "calm under pressure".*

⌚ *How do people in your life see you? People in general? For example, your character might be "the one with the answers" or "a capable leader" or "the life of the party".*

☞ *What goals do you have in life? For example, your character might “want to find true love” or be “destined to become king” or be “next in line for promotion in the firm”. Remember, this is what your character thinks, not necessarily what is actually true.*

You’re coming up with Qualities partly because you’re describing what your character’s self-image, which establishes what the backstory should be about. The emerging narrative that plays out in flashbacks will challenge the truth of these Qualities and demonstrate that some of them are merely convenient fictions to prop up your character’s self-image.

☞ Name your character

Finally, give your character a good name.

When both of you are finished making your characters, read them to each other.

BEGINNING THE DUEL

With characters in hand, you’re ready to get down to business!

☞ Assign the Upper Hand and Flash of Insight Tokens

Each of you secretly select one of your Attack Cards. Once you have both made your selection, reveal them simultaneously. Whoever selected the larger dice gets the Upper Hand token, and the other player takes the Flash of Insight token. Then, discard the Attack Cards that you used—place them to the side and place the associated dice with the cards. These are no longer available to use.

If both of you selected the same Attack Card, then set those cards aside and select again. Do this until you’ve chosen different cards. Once you choose different Attack Cards, put the other cards back in your hand. You should start with four Attack Cards in your hand.

If you somehow run through all your Attack Cards before playing different cards, share a good laugh, then start over with all Attack Cards available.

If you have a really strong idea of where the duel should be set, then you should play a high Attack

Card. If you are more interested in controlling the first flashback (where you’ll set how the characters first know each other), then play a low Attack Card.

☞ Set the Scene of the Duel

Now, whoever has the Upper Hand token sets the scene of the duel. This is the last place that these two characters meet. Neither of them may leave this place during the game, because this is where one of them will die.

If you are setting the scene of the duel, describe the location where the duel is taking place, the environmental conditions at this location, and the position of the characters within the location. The characters could just be showing up and starting off, or already in the middle of action. In any case, they haven’t been hurt yet... that’s what the rest of the game is for!

When setting the scene, talk about how your opponent’s character is at a disadvantage, as long as it’s not in a way that goes against your opponent’s Qualities. Feel free to state obvious disadvantages, like one character being totally exposed while the other has the high ground or is concealed. Many great stories start from those positions. Or consider subtle ways of putting your opponent at a disadvantage—for example, what if your opponent’s position is “behind the hostage that he’s holding”?

Make sure that both of you understand the general layout of the location of the duel. If you’re not setting the scene, ask clarifying questions to make sure that you understand what’s going on. If you are setting the scene, answer these questions honestly, though you don’t have to answer the questions the way your opponent hopes you’d answer them. You paid for the right to set up the duel. Use it!

As you are describing the duel location and answering questions, sketch a map of the area. Mark any important areas and use small tokens to mark where the two characters are at the beginning of the duel. As the game progresses, move the tokens around to show where the characters have moved.

With the tokens assigned and the duel set, you’re ready to face off!

☞ Example Character Sheets

The next couple of pages show some example characters for *Showdown*. You can use these to play one of your first games or as inspiration for your own ideas.

Genre: Space Opera in the vein of *Stars Wars* or *Battlestar Galactica* with the fighter pilot rivalries of *Top Gun*. Lots of space combat intercut with ego clashes on the ground.

Location: A crowded asteroid field, cluttered with rocks and debris.

CHARACTER SHEET	
HIGH DIE WINS	NAME Ty
LOW DIE WINS	WEAPON FX-30 DAGGER INTERCEPTOR ARMED WITH TWIN PLASMA CANNONS
DETAILS	
SHORT	
SPIKEY HAIR	
SPARKLING EYES	
A CONSTANT GRIN	
I THINK THAT I [AM]	QUALITIES
THE LIFE OF THE PARTY	BUT REALLY I [AM]
POPULAR WITH THE LADIES	
GREGARIOUS	
A SMOOTH TALKER	

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CHARACTER SHEET	
HIGH DIE WINS	NAME Anna
LOW DIE WINS	WEAPON FX-51 Talon heavy fighter armed with a nova cannon and photon torpedos
DETAILS	
Cropped hair	
Tattoo on shoulder	
Scowling face	
Lithe	
I THINK THAT I [AM]	QUALITIES
Committed to my unit	BUT REALLY I [AM]
Disciplined	
Respected for my skills	
Aggressive	

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Genre: Cosmic level superheroes, like Dr. Strange or Silver Surfer. Crazy, over-the-top effects and powers are the norm in this setting.

Location: Downtown New York City, hovering between skyscrapers as bystanders flee in terror

CHARACTER SHEET	
HIGH DIE WINS	NAME THE CAPED AVENGER
	WEAPON HIS INDESTRUCTIBLE BODY AND FISTS THAT CAN CRUSH STEEL
DETAILS	
RED AND WHITE COSTUME WITH COWL	
RED CAPE	
UNNATURALLY AGILE	
CAN FLY	
QUALITIES	
I THINK THAT I [AM]	BUT REALLY I [AM]
SELF-SACRIFICIAL	
HEROIC	
BELOVED BY THE PEOPLE	
SELF-CONTROLLED	

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CHARACTER SHEET	
HIGH DIE WINS	NAME Mythico
	WEAPON His mystical command of the Forces of the Cosmos
DETAILS	
Accompanied by a mystic tome	
Bolts of power crackle around his body	
wears a gold chain with medallion	
Long, brown beard	
QUALITIES	
I THINK THAT I [AM]	BUT REALLY I [AM]
have unmatched intellect	
Awe-inspiring	
have commanding presence	
have cosmic insight	

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Genre: Modern crime in the vein of Sons of Anarchy or The Shield. Gangs rule the street, and the cops are just as bad as the crooks. Gritty, violent action in the dirty city.

Location: An abandoned two-story warehouse by the waterfront.

CHARACTER SHEET	
HIGH DIE WINS	NAME Tony
LOW DIE WINS	WEAPON A WELL-MAINTAINED .45 AUTOMATIC
DETAILS	
TRENCH COAT	
GRIZZLED FACE	
BROKEN NOSE	
WEARS A LARGE, GOLD CLASS RING.	
I THINK THAT I [AM]	QUALITIES BUT REALLY I [AM]
TRUSTWORTHY	
LOVES HIS FAMILY DEEPLY	
WANT TO ESCAPE "THE LIFE"	
CLEVER	

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CHARACTER SHEET	
HIGH DIE WINS	NAME gina
LOW DIE WINS	WEAPON 12-gauge pump shotgun with wooden stock and flash suppressor
DETAILS	
Short, curly hair	
gold nose ring	
leather vest	
combat boots	
I THINK THAT I [AM]	QUALITIES BUT REALLY I [AM]
renacious	
A hardened veteran of the police force	
competent	
compassionate	

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Genre: Small town America in the early 1960s, with a particular focus on the high school scene. Jocks with letter jackets, cheerleaders with sweaters and skirts.

Location: The senior prom dance in the school gym at Augustus High.

CHARACTER SHEET	
HIGH DIE WINS	LOW DIE WINS
NAME <u>LISA</u>	
WEAPON <u>HER BOYFRIEND'S SWITCHBLADE</u>	
DETAILS	
<u>BLONDE</u>	
<u>PREGNANT</u>	
<u>SHORT</u>	
<u>CHEERLEADER</u>	
QUALITIES	
I THINK THAT I [AM]	BUT REALLY I [AM]
<u>CONFIDENT AND SELF-ASSURED</u>	
<u>SEDUCTIVE</u>	
<u>POPULAR</u>	
<u>WISE IN THE WAYS OF THE WORLD</u>	

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CHARACTER SHEET	
HIGH DIE WINS	LOW DIE WINS
NAME <u>Mary</u>	
WEAPON <u>a metal folding chair that was nearby</u>	
DETAILS	
<u>Mousy brown hair</u>	
<u>wears a knit cardigan</u>	
<u>wears thick, horn-rimmed glasses</u>	
<u>Has acne</u>	
QUALITIES	
I THINK THAT I [AM]	BUT REALLY I [AM]
<u>Intellectually superior</u>	
<u>Straightforward</u>	
<u>Honest</u>	
<u>Law abiding</u>	

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SEQUENCE OF PLAY

SEQUENCE OF PLAY

The duel is fought through a series of rounds, during which both of you will describe your characters' struggles to overcome each other in the final duel and also to have positive outcomes in the developing series of flashbacks about your characters' shared history. Your characters will be damaged both by losing available Attack Cards and by having their Qualities changed into worse traits. Once one of you runs out of Attack Cards, the game is resolved at the Bitter End.

OVERVIEW

At the beginning of each round, you'll **Declare Maneuvers and Memories** (p. 18). This begins with **maneuvers**: whoever has the Upper Hand token will describe his character's action and intent in a new moment of the duel, and then the other person will do the same for his character. Then you will move on to **memories**: the person with the Flash of Insight token will narrate a new flashback scene and describe his character's agenda, followed by the other player describing her character's agenda for that scene.

After this, you'll **Attack!** (p. 20). Both of you will **select Attack Cards** from your hand. Once this is done, you will reveal your Attack Cards at the same time. Then, whoever has the Upper Hand may **adopt a Stance** by playing a Stance Card from her hand. If she opts to pass, the other player may play one of his own Stance Cards. No more than one Stance Card may be played per round. Finally, both players roll the dice from their Attack Cards and use the results to assign the Upper Hand and Flash of Insight tokens.

Once this is done, you will **Inflict Pain and Suffering** (p. 22). Whoever has the Flash of Insight token has a **revelation** about one of the Qualities of her opponent's character, allowing her to change the Quality to something worse, revealing its true nature. Then, the person with the

Upper Hand token recovers the Attack Card that he played, while the other player must discard the Attack Card that she used.

Then, you will **Narrate Outcomes** (p. 24). Whoever *doesn't* have the Flash of Insight token narrates the outcome of the flashback scene, including the successful completion of his opponent's agenda for that flashback. Then whoever *doesn't* have the Upper Hand token narrates the outcome of that moment of the duel, including the successful completion of her opponent's action.

Finally, if both players still have Attack Cards in hand, then you play another round. Otherwise, you proceed to the **Bitter End** (p. 28), where the player who still has Attack Cards narrates the conclusion of the duel, including which character dies. Finally, the player who is out of Attack Cards narrates a final flashback scene, tying the events of the series of flashback scenes to the beginning of the duel.

GROUND RULES

Each phase has specific rules on who gets to add to the developing story and what they are allowed to say. There are a few rules that always apply.

You may only narrate events and actions that are consistent with the characters' current Qualities. For example, as long as your opponent is "*AN EXCELLENT SHOT*," then you can't narrate that he fumbles with his weapon and looks like an idiot. This applies to Qualities that have been replaced during play. If you cross off "*AN EXCELLENT SHOT*" and replace it with "*A LAUGHABLE SHOT*," then your opponent has to stop narrating all those clever gun tricks that she's been using so far.

You may not narrate an event or action that would permanently remove the ability of the character to act in the story. For example, it's not fair to make a character permanently comatose. He's not comatose in the duel, right?

You may not narrate the final death of either character until the end of the duel.

Both characters must survive until the end of the duel (the Bitter End, p. 28), so neither could have died beforehand. If your genre allows for things like resurrection or cybernetic restoration, then you might be able to bend this rule a bit, if your opponent is also interested in that direction.

You may not narrate an action that would remove either character from the location of the scene. This means that neither character

may leave the location of the duel, and neither character may leave the location that is established as the setting for a flashback. What constitutes a "location" is deliberately subjective. The principle is that the action of a scene needs to remain in the place that was set for it. So, if the duel is between two characters on motorcycles driving through a system of canyons, the system of canyons would be the "location".

You may always ask questions of your opponent. If you find your opponent's narration unclear, ask clarifying questions to ensure that you are both on the same page. If your opponent is feeling stuck and would like the assistance, you can offer suggestions. That said, it's possible for suggestions and questions to turn into attempts to steer your opponent's choices. Don't do that.

EXAMPLE OF PLAY

Abigail and Brian are going to be playing *Showdown*. After a little discussion, the two of them settle on a basic gritty crime setting. A few more minutes of preparation yields the characters of Tony and Gina.

They assign the Upper Hand and Flash of Insight tokens. Abigail has a pretty clear idea of where she'd like the duel to be, so she chooses her d10 Attack Card. Brian has decided to wait and see what happens, so he plays his d6 Attack Card. Abigail takes the Upper Hand, while Brian gets the Flash of Insight.

Abigail sets the scene of the duel. "We're in an abandoned warehouse. Dirt and cobwebs. Broken windows. Random crates lying around. You're taking cover behind one of those crates up on the second floor. I'm hunkered down in the stairwell, just out of your line of sight. 'Give up, Gina!' I yell. 'Come out and no one has to get hurt!' But we both know better."

Brian grins. Of course Gina knows better—only one of them is walking away from this confrontation alive.



CHARACTER SHEET	
HIGH DIE WINS	NAME: TONY
	WEAPON: A WELL-MAINTAINED .45 AUTOMATIC
DETAILS	
TRENCH COAT	
GRIZZLED FACE	
BROKEN NOSE	
WEARS A LARGE, GOLD CLASS RING.	
QUALITIES	
I THINK THAT I [AM]	BUT REALLY I [AM]
TRUSTWORTHY	
LOVES HIS FAMILY DEEPLY	
WANT TO ESCAPE "THE LIFE"	
CLEVER	

Duel Scene Map



CHARACTER SHEET

HIGH DIE WINS

LOW DIE WINS

NAME Gina

WEAPON 12-gauge pump shotgun with wooden stock and flash suppressor

DETAILS

short, curly hair

gold nose ring

leather vest

combat boots

QUALITIES

BUT REALLY I [AM]

I THINK THAT I [AM]

tenacious

A hardened veteran of the police force

competent

compassionate



DECLARE MANEUVERS AND MEMORIES

The first step of each round is to establish what you're fighting to accomplish during the round—both in that moment of the duel, as you fight to survive, and in the next flashback, as you fight to establish that your opponent isn't who he thinks he is.

Ⓜ Maneuvers in the Duel

Whoever has the Upper Hand token states his character's next action in the duel. Do this by saying **what he's doing** and **what he intends to accomplish**. Then the other player then states his action in the same way.

Example: "I throw my knife at him, cutting his safety rope so that he falls" is a good action. It provides both what your character's action (throwing the knife) and intent (causing your opponent to fall by cutting his safety rope).

State actions that are quick. What's "quick" is subjective and depends on the specifics of the duel. For a swordfight or gunfight, any action taking longer than a couple seconds is too long. In a conflict involving dueling frigates, a maneuver taking several minutes is acceptable, as long as you're not taking several minutes to describe it. Think of it as a moment in a sequence in a movie. Keep your actions and descriptions punchy, and press on.

Ⓜ Memories and Identity

Now, whoever has the Flash of Insight token sets up the next flashback. Do this by stating **how much time has passed** since the last flashback, the **location** where this flashback occurs, any **notable environment details**, and **the characters present**. Flashbacks must be in chronological order, occurring after the previous Flashback and before the duel (giving enough time for there to be more flashbacks between this one and the duel). Both characters must be present and able to interact with each other in each flashback.

Example: "The next flashback happens two days after the last one. We're both at the bar. It's closing time, and we're alone, except for the bartender, who is waiting for us to go home." This provides the time-frame (two days later), a location (the bar), notable environment details (alone at closing time), and who else is present (the bartender).

Once the flashback has been set up, whoever has the Flash of Insight token describes the situation in which the two characters are interacting.

Finally, whoever has the Flash of Insight states his character's agenda for the flashback, which represents how he is trying to gain advantage over the other character in the situation. This can be direct action against the other character, provoking the other character into a particular action, or manipulating of the broader situation to impact

the relative status of the two characters. Then the other player states his character's agenda in the same way.

Example of an agenda that is direct action against a character: "My agenda for this flashback is to hurt Jun's feelings so badly that he'll leave me alone."

Example of an agenda that is provoking action from the other character: "My agenda for this flashback is to get Leslie to kiss me."

Example of an agenda that is manipulating the situation for status gain: "My agenda for this flashback is to impress the crowd so that they will follow me instead of Jun."

There are two restrictions. First, only state one outcome per agenda.

Example: "I want to win his heart and impress the crowd" is stating two agendas. You'll have to pick which one is more important: winning his heart or impressing the crowd.

Second, you may not attempt to win an agenda that you lost earlier in the game. If you couldn't get the other person to kiss you or leave you alone, you can't ask for that again. But you certainly can build off of what's happened since, such as "I want to make him regret not leaving me alone earlier." Also look for ways to undermine your opponent's previous victories; if he won an agenda involving seducing your character's spouse, you could describe an agenda where get your opponent to feel guilt over it.

The first flashback has two special rules.

First, it must be about the very first time that your characters met. Second, when setting it up, instead of stating how much time has passed since the last flashback, state when it occurs relative to the duel. You can state a hard number ("three months ago") or a vague idea ("back when we were kids at the Academy"). You'll have between four and seven flashbacks between this first one and when the duel happens, so beware of starting too short, like with "twelve hours ago."

The amount of time you start with will influence the sort of story you tell. One that starts decades back will feature the characters growing into the duel, whereas a shorter time frame is more about characters who have explosively collided. Both kinds of setups are fun! Try different ones and see what sort of stories you come up with.

Example: "The first time we met was five years ago in a little town called Princeville. The two of us are back to back in the city square as the zombies slowly close in. The sun is setting, and there's debris everywhere."

EXAMPLE FIRST ROUND: DECLARE MANEUVERS AND MEMORIES



Abigail says, "Okay, I have the Upper Hand, so I get to say my action first." She thinks for a moment. "Okay. I'm going to throw a rock to distract you so I can get up the stairwell."

"Fine," says Brian. "Gina is going to shoot out all the lights on the second floor to make it dark. That way she'll be able to get out from behind that crate."

"Classic moves," says Abigail. "Okay, you have the Flash of Insight, so you get to set up the first flashback."

"This is the first time that Tony and Gina meet, right?" Brian thinks for a bit. "I got it. It's two years ago, and they're both at Cam's, a local bar. I figure that Tony is hanging out there, and Gina strolls in. It's a weekend crowd, so it's pretty noisy. Plus the DJ is playing loud music, so they have to yell to be heard by each other."

Abigail nods. "Right. So what's Gina's agenda? What does she want from this encounter?"

Brian smiles. "Gina wants to arrest Tony."

"What! Gina's a cop?"

"Looks like."

Abigail sighs. "Well, I was thinking that my agenda was to get you to come home with me. Now..." She pauses, then smiles. "Yes, I love it! My agenda is to get you to come home with me tonight. What could possibly go wrong?"

ATTACK!

With the two scenes set, you'll attack each other! Remember, you're fighting for success in both the duel and the flashback.

② Select Attack Cards

Now **each of you secretly selects an Attack Card from your hand**. Once both of you have made your selection, reveal your cards simultaneously to show the dice that you have selected. Place one of these dice on the Dueling Die space on your character sheet and the other on the Flashback Die space. If possible, use the same color for each type of die throughout the game. For example, use red for your Dueling Die and black for your Flashback Die.

② Adopt Stance

If you have the Upper Hand, **you may now adopt a Stance by playing a Stance Card from your hand**. If you decide not to adopt a Stance, your opponent may do so.

The Stances that modify the result of your dice can cause those results to go lower than 1 or to higher than the die would normally go. For instance, if you are using A Dirty Trick on a roll with d10, if your results are 3 and 8, they become 6 and 11. Likewise, you can use A Skillful Attack to turn a die that rolled 1 into 0.

If you adopted A Superior Maneuver, resolve its effect immediately. Otherwise, you'll resolve your Stance after rolling dice.

② Roll Dice

Both of you roll your Dueling Die and your Flashback Die. If you adopted a Stance (other than A Superior Maneuver), apply its effect to your roll.

Whoever has the higher Dueling result takes the Upper Hand token. If you tie for the higher Dueling result, whoever is currently holding the Upper Hand token keeps it.

STANCE	EFFECT
A Dirty Trick	+3 to both dice.
A Mighty Blow	+2 to both dice.
A Skillful Attack	+1 to one dice, -1 to the other die. Choose after rolling.
A Superior Maneuver	Return your selected Attack Card to your hand and play a new Attack Card before rolling dice.

Whoever has the lower Flashback result takes the Flash of Insight token. If you tie for the lower Flashback result, whoever is currently holding the Flash of Insight token keeps it.

If a Stance Card was played, discard it now. (Notice that the Stances that add to your dice results makes it harder to capture the Flash of Insight, since low rolls win the Flash of Insight.)

Example: James rolls a Dueling result of 3 and a Flashback result of 1. Lisa rolls a Dueling result of 5 and a Flashback result of 2. Lisa receives the Upper Hand token, and James receives the Flash of Insight token. If both of them had rolled a 1 for their Flashback results, whoever was currently holding the Flash of Insight token would keep it.



INFLICT PAIN AND SUFFERING

With the dice having decided your fates, you'll now deliver pain to the defeated.

@ Flashbacks and Revelation

If you have the Flash of Insight, change a Quality on your opponent's character sheet. Choose a Quality from the "I think that I [am]..." column on your opponent's sheet and cross it out. Then write down a Quality in the "But really I [am]..." column next to the Quality that you just crossed out. This replacement Quality must contradict, diminish, or pervert the original Quality.

If you have already crossed off all the Qualities on your opponent's sheet, then take the Upper Hand token instead (if you don't already have it.)

@ Duel and Injury

If you have the Upper Hand, you get to keep the Attack Card that you just used; return it to your hand and put the associated dice back in your Ready Dice. **Your opponent discards the Attack Card that he played, placing it to the side and placing the associated dice on it.**

If all of your opponent's original Qualities have been crossed off, then have your opponent discard a second Attack Card of his choice, if he still has any, placing the associated dice on it as well.

Note: If you took the Upper Hand because your opponent was out of Qualities to change, then you do this step, not your opponent. And if you crossed off your opponent's last original Quality this round and have the Upper Hand, your opponent does suffer losing two Attack Cards. Ouch!

EXAMPLE FIRST ROUND: INFLICT PAIN AND SUFFERING

Abigail takes Brian's character sheet. "Hmm. What do we have here?" Her eyes light on Gina's *COMPASSIONATE* Quality. "I'm thinking that one is going to go." She crosses out *COMPASSIONATE* and writes *EASILY MANIPULATED* in the blank next to it.

CHARACTER SHEET

NAME: Gina
WEAPON: 12-gauge pump shotgun with wooden stock and flash suppressor

DETAILS

short, curly hair
gold nose ring
leather vest
combat boots

QUALITIES

I THINK THAT I [AM]:
renacious
A hardened veteran of the police force
competent
~~compassionate~~

BUT REALLY I [AM]:

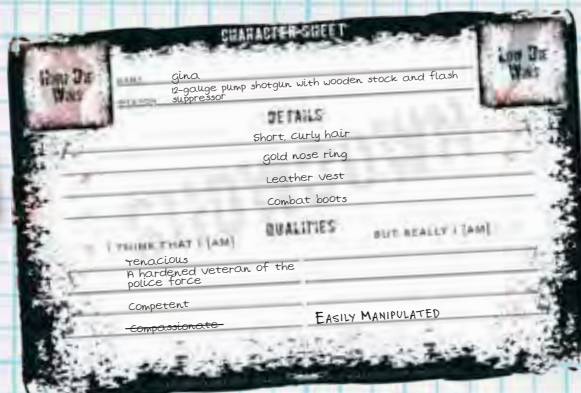
EASILY MANIPULATED

HIGH DIE WINS (top left)
LOW DIE WINS (top right)

Brian sighs. "Yeah, that makes sense. But at least I get to keep my dice!"

Unfazed, Abigail discards her d6 Attack Card and dice. "Time to say what happened!"

(Hidden Hand)



(Hidden Hand)

NARRATING OUTCOMES

You've both fought hard this round, but now the dice have spoken, and you know who came out ahead. So, embrace the outcome, and prepare to make the victorious characters look awesome!

Ⓜ Flashback Outcome

Whoever *does not* have the Flash of Insight token narrates the outcome of the flashback. This narration must include successful completion of the agenda of the player who is holding the Flash of Insight. You may include the successful completion of your agenda, as long as that doesn't contradict his agenda or overshadow his victory in any other manner.

The narration must also illustrate the Quality that was changed this round. For example, if your character received the Quality of *POOR LOSER*, then you need to show this Quality during your narration.

Ⓜ Dueling Outcome

Whoever *does not* have the Upper Hand token narrates the outcome of the dueling actions. This narration must include the successful completion of the action of the player who is holding the Upper Hand. You may include the successful

completion of your action, as long as that doesn't contradict his action or overshadow his momentary victory in any other manner.

The narration must also illustrate the Stance that was adopted this round. For example, if one character adopted A Dirty Trick, then you need to describe how that character attempted or succeeded at a dirty trick. Update the map to keep track of any important changes to the duel location, and move the tokens tracking the characters if they have changed position.

Ⓜ If One Person Has Both Tokens...

If you are holding both the Upper Hand and the Flash of Insight, keep one and give the other to your opponent. The choice is yours, depending on whether you want to give your opponent control over the next flashback or moment in the duel.

Ⓜ Finish Him?

If one of you has run out of Attack Cards, the duel is over. Go to **the Bitter End** (p. 28) to see how the game ends. Otherwise, it's time for another round of combat, starting with **Declaring Maneuvers and Memories** (p. 18).

EXAMPLE FIRST ROUND: NARRATING OUTCOMES

Brian says, "You won the Flash of Insight, so I get to say how it happens, right?"

Abigail nods. "Yep."

Brian says, "Good. So, we cut to Gina getting out of bed with Tony. It's a sleazy motel, so I think that it's wood paneling and a floral blanket."

Abigail smiles. "I know how to show a girl a good time."

Brian smiles back. "Yeah, well, Gina gets up to use the bathroom, which is where she left her clothes. And her cell phone. Which she uses to text someone. And that's when the motel room door gets kicked in by the cops. They drag Tony out of bed..."



"Naked?"

Brian grins. "Sure. They drag Tony out of bed naked and handcuff him. Gina comes out of the bathroom with her clothes on, winks at Tony, and walks out of the room."

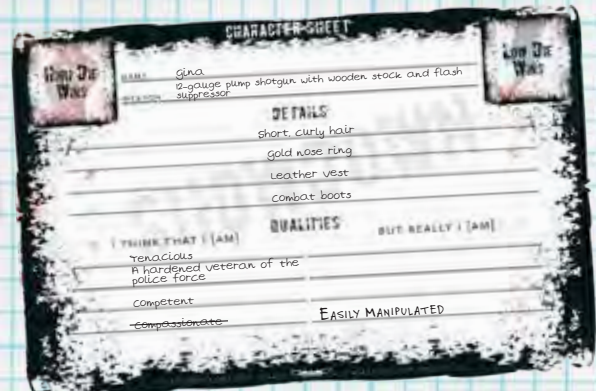
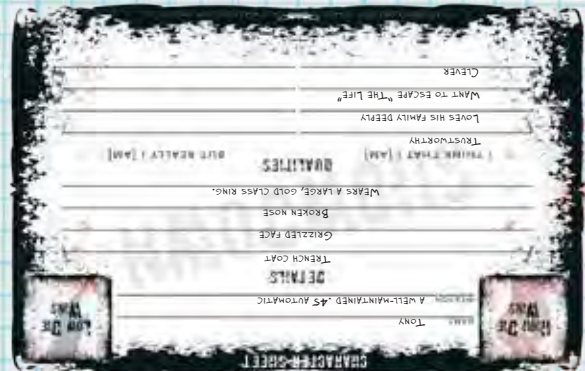
"Hey! What about that whole *EASILY MANIPULATED* thing? I didn't see that happen."

"Oh, right. Um...okay, how about this? Gina sends the text from the bathroom, but when she comes out, she kisses Tony and says, 'I'm really sorry I have to do this.' And that's when the cops kick in the door."

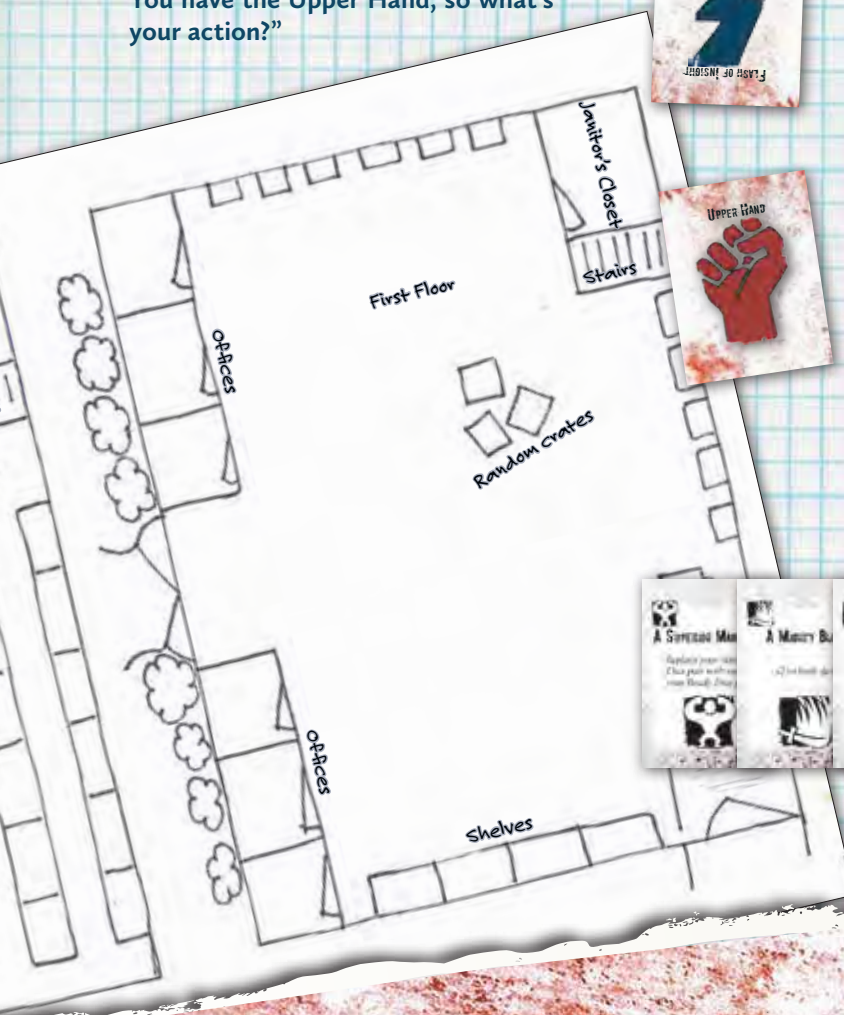
(Hidden Hand)

"Since you got the Upper Hand, I get to say what happens in the duel." Abigail thinks about it for a bit and sighs. "So, I throw the rock up and off to the side, which you totally ignore. Instead, you come out blazing. As I go to make my move up the stairs, I see the muzzle flash as you take out all the lights. I duck back down into the stairwell, but it's totally dark now, and I have no idea where you are. But I'm pretty sure that you know where I am."

Abigail continues, "We still both have Attack Cards, so it's time for another round. You have the Upper Hand, so what's your action?"



(Hidden Hand)



EXAMPLE SECOND ROUND

Brian says, "So, now that it's dark, Gina is going to move quietly over to where Tony is so that she can surprise him with a faceful of buckshot."

“Yikes!” Abigail says. “Well, I’m going to take my life in my hands and dash up the stairs and dive behind a crate near the top. Running is bad, but staying is worse.”

Brian nods. "Sure. What's the next flashback?"

Abigail says, "It's only been a couple of hours since the last flashback. We're at the police station, and you're interrogating me. You know, people behind one-way mirrors and all that kind of thing. But I know that you're soft for me. I don't think your heart is really in this interrogation. So my agenda is to play on your feelings so that you'll let me go."

Brian says, "Okay. Gina's agenda is to get you to tell us everything you know about the crime family who you work for."

Abigail says, "Cool. Now, we choose Attack Cards."

Brian chooses d8. Abigail chooses d12.

"I'm going to play my 'Superior Maneuver' Stance which lets me change my Attack Card," says Brian. "I'm going to play my d12 Attack Card instead."

Both players roll their dice. Abigail gets a 11 for Dueling and a 6 for Flashback. Brian gets a 12 for Dueling and a 3 for Flashback.



Abigail stares at the dice. "You're kidding me!"

"Nope. I get to keep the Upper Hand and I get the Flash of Insight."

Abigail passes the Flash of Insight token across to Brian, who puts it on the table with the Upper Hand token.

"So, let's see what's on that character sheet," Brian says. Abigail passes it over. "Hmm. I don't think that Tony *WANT TO ESCAPE "THE LIFE"* at all. I think that you're really *"AN ADRENALINE JUNKIE WHO LOVES THE RUSH OF CRIME."* He marks up the character sheet appropriately. "Also, you lose your d12 Attack Card."

Abigail discards her d12 Attack Card and dice off to the side. "Okay, time to see if I can salvage anything from this." She stops to think. "Okay. So you're interrogating me, and I'm putting on all these moves, right? Which, in my mind, are totally working. Which means that I'm not paying attention. So I end up gushing a bit too much about my line of work. Talking about how much I love the buzz of racing away from a job and how other work was just too boring. And that's when you hatch your plan. You step into the other room and convince your bosses to let me go so you and your team can tail me. And that's what happens. I walk free, thinking that I sweet-talked my way out of prison. And, yeah, I'm being tailed, but maybe I'm more right than you're willing to admit."

Abigail continues, "Okay. Now the dueling outcome. Hmm. Let's just go simple here. I charge up the stairs and roll behind the crate, which would have been great cover if you were still pinned down. But, of course, you're not. Instead, the light from the stairwell falls directly on me, and you can see me perfectly."

Brian grins. "Which means Gina has Tony perfectly lined up, right?"

Abigail says, "Yep. How am I getting out of this one?"

Brian chooses to keep the Upper Hand and gives the Flash of Insight token to Abigail.

Abigail says, "Well, we both still have Attack Cards, and you have the Upper Hand. What are you doing next?"



THE BITTER END

Months or years of struggle between the two of you have led up to this final battle. How will it all end?

@ The Duel's Aftermath

If you are holding the Upper Hand, narrate the conclusion of the duel. One of the characters must die. It *was* a duel to the death, after all. No going soft now. Also, you must establish the immediate aftermath of the duel for the surviving character. Was he arrested? Did she escape? Did she rescue the hostage? At this point, you may narrate the surviving character leaving the location of the duel, but you may not narrate anything after that. Think of it as the last lingering camera shot on the field of battle just before the credits roll. We don't get to see what happens beyond it.

Just because you're out of Attack Cards doesn't mean it's your character who has to die. That's likely the case, but anything can still happen in those final moments. Sometimes a noble death can redeem an otherwise irredeemable character. Or, maybe, it can just purge the world of a vile monster, even if that monster is you. Consider

who *really* should die, even if it's the person who fared best in the duel overall.

@ The Last Flashback

If you are holding the Flash of Insight, narrate one final flashback. The point of this flashback is to connect the events of the previous flashback to the beginning of the duel. As such, only one of the characters needs to be present, and neither of you set an agenda. If both characters are present, this flashback is the last time these two characters will interact in any way before the duel. At the end of this flashback, both characters are irrevocably committed to the duel, whether or not that's something they individually want.

Note that this means you have the last word in the whole game, and that's a big deal. Find some way to put your own spin on the final events of the story, or ways to color all the actions that have happened in a bitter light. This is a good moment to tie up any loose ends you think are lingering, and show why the duel had to happen if that wasn't already clear.

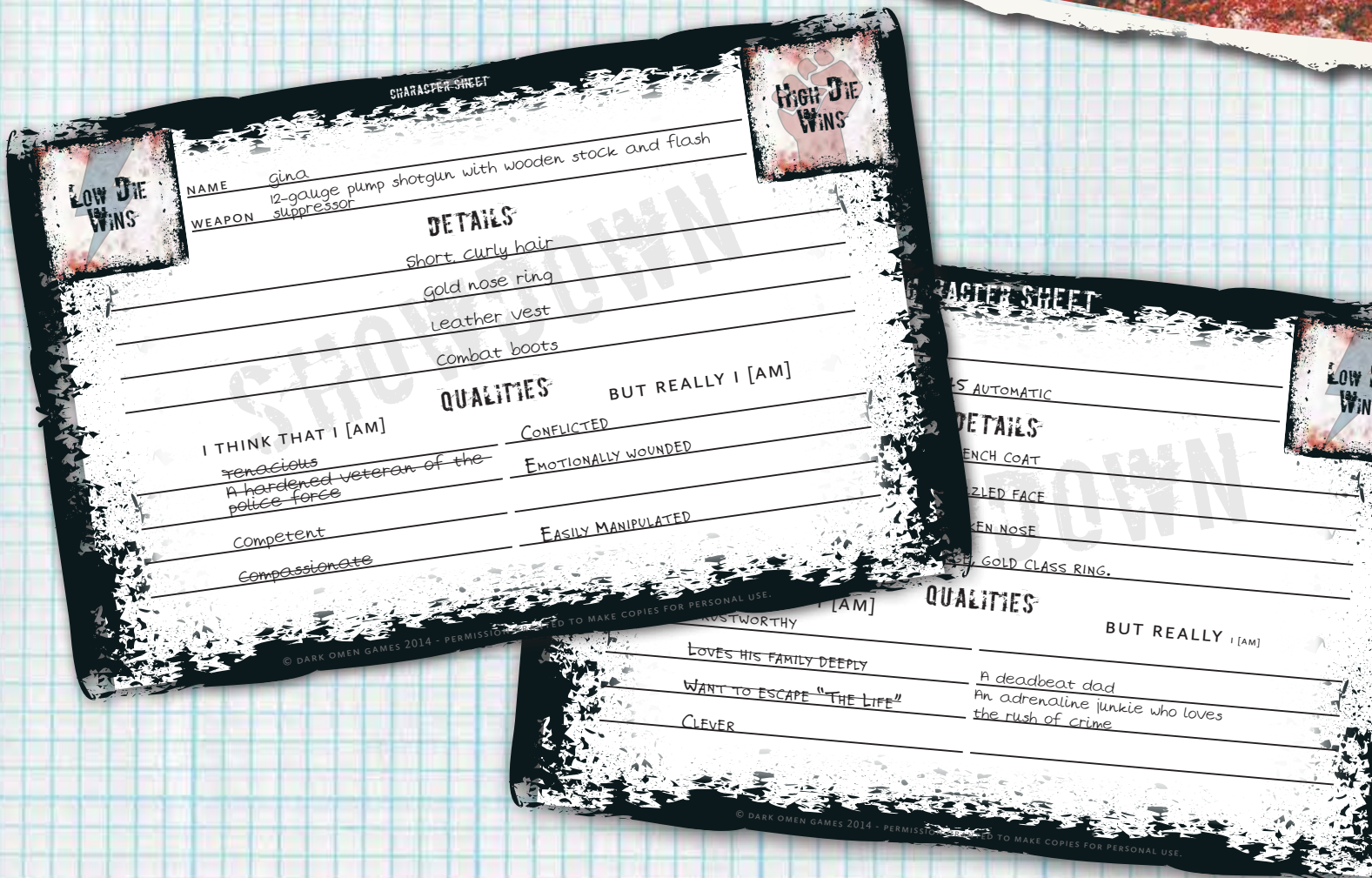
EXAMPLE GAME: THE BITTER END

Over the course of the flashbacks, Abigail and Brian have described how Tony and Gina continue to have secret trysts, even as the police investigation continues. But are they falling for each other, or just using each other? It's hard to say, as both of them kept manipulating each other for information and advantage.

The characters have changed, too. Gina is now *CONFLICTED* instead of *TENACIOUS* and *EMOTIONALLY WOUNDED* instead of *A HARDENED VETERAN OF THE POLICE FORCE*. Tony is now *A DEADBEAT DAD* instead of *LOVES HIS FAMILY DEEPLY*.

Over the course of the duel, we've seen Gina generally outmatch Tony. Despite his best efforts, he finds himself backed up to the edge of the warehouse roof.

And now Abigail is out of cards.



Abigail says, "Okay, you hold the Upper Hand token, so you say how the duel ends."

Brian says, "Tony is trapped between Gina and the edge of the roof, so he starts talking quickly. 'Hey, baby. It doesn't have to be like this. You could just let me go! No one has to know.' But Gina knows she can't, and she shakes her head. So Tony sighs. Then he makes his move. His gun comes up and—BANG!"

He pauses for effect.

"And?" Abigail asks.

"And Tony staggers backwards, his chest blown out by Gina's shotgun. He falls from the roof silently. Gina drops the gun and drops to her knees. And that's it, I think."

Abigail blinks. "Wow. Um, okay. Since I have the Flash of Insight, I get to set up the last flashback. This is earlier today. I'm at home, and I just got a phone call from my boss in the crime family with very specific orders. I need to kill you. The family knows that I've been dallying with you, and they're not pleased. So I stare at two objects on his table. One is the box with the engagement ring I bought last week. The other is my gun. But after a moment I shake his head and sigh. 'Sorry, Gina. I guess it wasn't meant to be,' I say out loud. Then I pick up the gun and walk out of the room."

AFTERWORD

AFTERWORD

As I worked on *Showdown* over the last few years, I found myself delving into the culture of hip hop. In particular, I stumbled across the idea of the “battle”, where rival artists compete head-to-head in an attempt to upstage, belittle, or otherwise crush their opposition. But how can art be combat? The only way it works is, oddly enough, through a mutual respect and acknowledgment of the craft of the opponent, even as they attempt to outdo it. This idea was profoundly helpful to me as I put the final touches on *Showdown*.

I want you to respect your opponent when you play by playing generously. But that’s not the same thing as collaborating. *Showdown* isn’t about collaborating. I want you to play *Showdown* hard. I want you to tear your opponent’s character to shreds. I want you to find those emotionally tender places in your opponent and poke at them. And, along the way, I want you to learn to doubt yourself.

Showdown is about our endless capacity for self-deception. We are all convinced that we are the heroes in the stories that comprise our lives. But are we?

What if you’re the villain?

And what would you change in your life if you were?

CHARACTER SHEET

HIGH DIE
WINS

NAME

WEAPON

LOW DIE
WINS

DETAILS

I THINK THAT I [AM]

QUALITIES

BUT REALLY I [AM]

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CHARACTER SHEET

HIGH DIE
WINS

NAME

WEAPON

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DETAILS

I THINK THAT I [AM]

QUALITIES

BUT REALLY I [AM]

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SEQUENCE OF PLAY

I. DECLARE MANEUVERS AND MEMORIES

- A. Maneuvers in the Duel
 - 1. Upper Hand: describe action in duel
 - 2. No Upper Hand: describe action in duel
- B. Memories and Identity
 - 1. Flash of Insight: narrate flashback
 - 2. Flash of Insight: describe agenda for flashback
 - 3. No Flash of Insight: describe agenda for flashback

II. ATTACK!

- A. Select Attack Cards
 - 1. Both: secretly select Attack Card
 - 2. Both: reveal selected Attack Card
- B. Adopt Stance
 - 1. Upper Hand: choose Stance Card to play or pass
 - 2. No Upper Hand: choose Stance Card to play if opponent passed
- C. Roll Dice
 - 1. Both: roll Dueling dice and give Upper Hand to high roll
 - 2. Both: roll Flashback dice and give Flash of Insight to low roll

III. INFLECT PAIN AND SUFFERING

- A. Flashbacks and Revelation
 - 1. Flash of Insight: change one of opponent's Qualities
- B. Duel and Injury
 - 1. Upper Hand: return used Attack Card to hand
 - 2. No Upper Hand: discard used Attack Card

IV. NARRATING OUTCOMES

- A. Flashback Outcome
 - 1. No Flash of Insight: narrate outcome of flashback
- B. Dueling Outcome
 - 1. No Upper Hand: narrate outcome of Duel Actions
- C. If one person has both tokens, give one to opponent

V. FINISH HIM?

- A. If one player is out of Attack Cards, go to the Bitter End.
- B. Otherwise, return to Declare Attacks

VI. THE BITTER END

- A. Player with Upper Hand: narrate conclusion of duel
- B. Player with Flash of Insight: narrate final flashback

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Dirty



Secrets

a game about crime

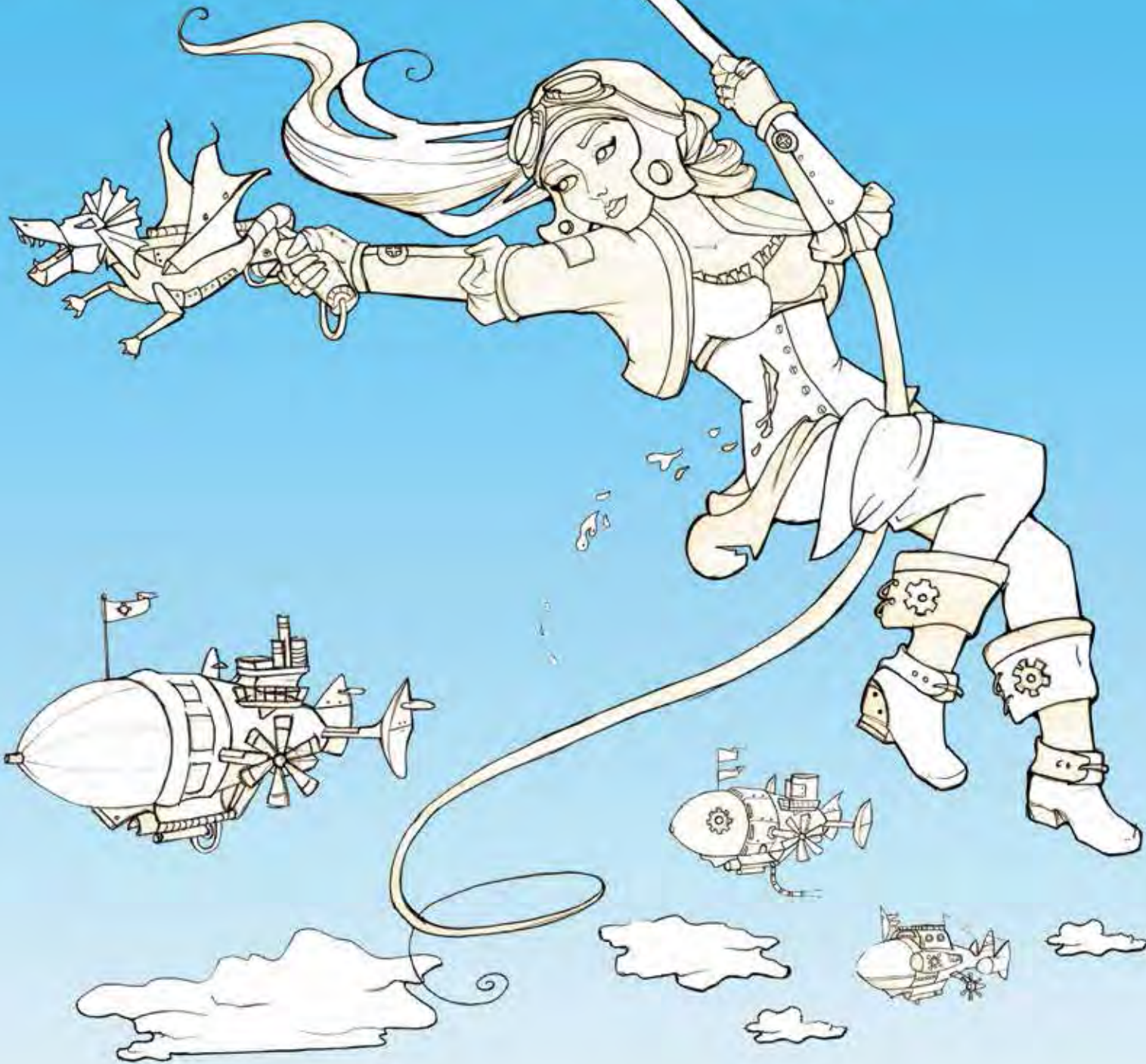
Injury		2	Middle Class Non-White Citizens
1:	Lightly injured		
2:	Seriously injured		
3:	Killed	3	
Relationship Types			
1-2:	Sexual/Romantic		
3-4:	Familial		
5-6:	Business	2	Poor



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