

Professional Writer's Portfolio

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Summary:

My primary skill base is in creative writing and editing with a healthy balance of independent and team-oriented work. Working via computers and other forms of technology is preferable, as are frequent opportunities for working with and assisting others, although I'm also willing to work in solitude if need be. I'm currently seeking publishing opportunities and entry-level positions in editing, and my future aspirations are to become a comic book writer as my intended career path.

Work Experience:

Best Buy (Plymouth, MA)

Sales associate — Sep. 2019 - Feb. 2020

- Processing transactions at checkout
- Promoting Best Buy Rewards at checkout
- Handling orders and repairs at customer service

Volunteering:

Hanson Public Library (Hanson, MA)

Organizer — Aug. 2023 - Present

- Organize books in alphabetical order
- Check spine labels
- Address sorting and labeling errors

Education History:

Pilgrim Academy (Plymouth, MA)

High school diploma — Graduated in June, 2018

Quincy College in Plymouth (Plymouth, MA)

BA program — Attended from 2019-2020

University of Massachusetts Boston (Boston, MA)

BA program — Attended from 2020-2023

Previous Works:

The Soul Trail (2022)

- Drama/adventure fiction screenplay draft and final assignment — Film and TV Screenwriting course at University of Massachusetts Boston (Fall 2022)
- Available for viewing in .docx and .pdf format

Leadership Roles:

UMass Boston Neurodiversity Group (Boston, MA)

Promotional artist — Nov. 2022 - Feb. 2023

- Discussing the lack of special needs services on-campus
- Digitally illustrating and editing a flier promoting the group
- Providing feedback on how to attract potential members

Skills:

- Storytelling
- Video editing
- Image editing
- Communication skills
- Leadership
- Graphic design
- Grammar and proofreading
- Illustration
- Computer skills
- Google Suite
- Microsoft Office
- Professional formatting
- Creative writing
- Photography
- Branding
- Blogging
- Film and TV screenwriting
- MLA style
- APA style

ElectroNuke

Issue #1: Strangers in a Strange Land

PANEL 1: A wide rectangular panel filling the whole first row of the first page. The point of view is positioned in the passenger's side window of an LAPD cruiser. Painted on the side of the black van up ahead is a white minimalist logo depicting a skull over double angel wings above two crossed AK rifles, below which is the Chinese symbol "折." A hatless officer in a black kevlar vest and navy short-sleeve tee fires a Glock 22...

BLAM! BLAM! BLAM!

...as sticking out from that window is an emaciated crook sporting a spiked mohawk with white tips, a black leather vest with ripped arm holes, and a stained dark red wife-beater. Seeing through red-tinted sniper goggles, he lets loose on the police cruiser with an AK assault rifle lacking wooden components and plastered with a black and gray digital paint job. The road they speed down segregates two rows of dark glass megatall skyscrapers, one on each side supported by a base of rectangular pillars wrapped in snug bundles of vines. Along the borders of the crisp transparent doors and windows are thin neon light strips of red, magenta, soft blue, and sea green. Meanwhile, dark turquoise glass balconies and neon business signs form the outlines of elevated catwalks between the buildings, all of which fade into a black mist several stories up that blurs seamlessly into the sky. The rain puddles coating the pavement reflects the lights of the buildings, cars, and lampposts.

NARRATOR (BLUE BOX)

7th Street, Los Angeles, CA. 11:32 PM, in the year 5030.

For all the focus issues I had, it was time to stay on the ball. Told myself ten times over: "It's not rocket science, Eli. Just follow the lights."

I did all the way here, after all.

PANEL 2: A square panel at the top of a stack to the left on the second row. The chase is viewed from an overhead view toward the east. It's tinted mildly in neon yellow and somewhat distorted by a fisheye effect. Meanwhile, a vertical bar dotted with parallel pegs along its sides like a thermometer runs up the far right side of the view, and a Google Maps marker-style dial arrow points close to the top of its left side.

THE ELECTRONUKE

Hitchcock said it himself. Tension's when those on the outside know there's a bomb...

PANEL 3: A square panel at the bottom of a stack to the left on the second row. In an over-the-shoulder view from behind on the ledge he's perched on, The ElectroNuke runs his index finger along a touchscreen panel fitted into his right wrist, from which cyan light emanates. His crystalline suit of armor plating starts at the head with an all-concealing helmet.

THE ELECTRONUKE

...but those on the inside are *clueless*.

PANEL 4: A tall rectangular panel to the right on the second row. Now pictured from the rim of the ledge, The ElectroNuke stands tall with two fists balled up. His helmet's fitted with yellow cheekbone plates, three vertical yellow strips over the mouth, and an opaque yellow visor resembling safety goggles. Each yellow feature emits a soft glow of the same color. Between the loosely joined chest plates of the metallic deep blue bodysuit is a white three-dimensional circle layered over with a yellow lightning bolt symbol that glows and zig-zags at a single acute angle.

THE ELECTRONUKE

Stay clueless, insiders... 'cause here comes the bomb.

PANEL 5: A wide rectangular panel filling the whole third row. Centered in the panel from behind in a shot right out of the Spider-Verse, he leaps off the ledge with both arms and legs spread behind him, leaving behind cyan light trails from the open circular ducts on the backs of his shoulders, elbows, and knees.

PANEL 6: A wide rectangular panel filling the whole first row of the second page. As viewed from his left in another Spider-Verse shot, the light trails disappear as he skydives through the glass, LED, and neon enclosure. In the distance to his right is a glass canopy catwalk lined with palms and lampposts and continuing along the sides of the two buildings it joins.

NARRATOR (BLUE BOX)

This is freedom. Shame they had to lose theirs.

PANEL 7: A thin rectangular panel to the left on the second row. This acts as the first panel of his wall jump between the sleek glass panels of the buildings across the road, a sequence that stretches on seamlessly between three panels and progresses from the foreground to the background. Having reformed, the light trails stay visible and semi-transparent behind him as he bounces off the glass to his right.

PANEL 8: A thin rectangular panel in the middle on the second row. With the golden headlights racing beneath and in front of him, he pounces off the wall and into the void above the street.

PANEL 9: A thin rectangular panel to the right on the second row. He taps the sole of one foot against the building to his left with diagonal glass panels forming a pattern of flat V-shapes along the front, one hand pressed against the same surface to support his wall run. From the van, which this panel is the first in the sequence to capture, the driver barks an order.

DRIVER

Hey, Keys! Keep an eye on the cash back there!

PANEL 10: A square panel to the left on the third row. The perspective has shifted to the driver's seat, where the getaway driver sees through his red Japanese oni mask, the rest of his cranium covered by the hood of a black sleeveless sweatshirt vest. Even as his fingerless batting gloves

grip the steering wheel, he reels back in his seat to find The ElectroNuke hanging upside down and face-first in front of the windshield.

DRIVER
HOLY—!

THE ELECTRONUKE

Y'know, if you're aiming for a gold medal in the Petty Crime Olympics, gentlemen, I figure you should start by aiming for bronze, 'cause your ambitions? Eh. A little misplaced.

PANEL 11: A square panel to the right on the third row. In a view from just outside the window, the driver lunges his head over his shoulder at the rear seat where the gunner unloads his AK. The gunman gives the driver his attention.

DRIVER
Get this schmuck off the glass, Benji!

PANEL 12: A square panel to the left on the first row of the third page. As framed from his shoulder, The ElectroNuke stops the gunner from firing on him by unsheathing a goldenrod handgun with two rods holding the otherwise separate halves of the barrels together. He pumps a round into the hand of the gunner, who drops his rifle despite no blood being drawn.

BLAM!

DRIVER
Augh—!

PANEL 13: A square panel to the right on the first row. The gunner clutches his wrist and stares down at his now-empty hand in the foreground, which lacks any sign of trauma other than a shiny silver peg stuck in a tight dent beside his thumb.

PANEL 14: A square panel to the left on the second row. The ElectroNuke shakes his pistol downwards, sliding the clip out halfway. This reveals bullets with unusual shell casings within the rectangular chamber. Each shell is rounded at the tip and made of half silver, half blued metal.

THE ELECTRONUKE

It might not be a raging bull... but it ain't a pellet gun, either. Now, could you get on with pulling this piece 'a crap over? I gotta wake up early tomorrow.

PANEL 15: A wide rectangular panel to the right on the second row. The driver barks another order behind him.

DRIVER
Aim for their front wheels, Josh!

There, a second gunman clutching a bloody red paint-splattered AK rifle leans his upper half out the opposite window. Shirtless aside from the black wraps around his wrists and right bicep, the gunman is burly, dark-skinned, and inked up all over with tribal tattoos, even across half of his bony face beneath a web of deep blond cornrows. He grits his rainbow grills and unloads into the police cruiser's front left tire.

TCH-TCH-TCH-TCH-TCH

PANEL 16: A thin rectangular panel to the left on the third row. A bullet-sized hole is ripped into the tire, which releases a straight jet of air.

PWOOOOOFT!

PANEL 17: A wide rectangular panel to the right on the third row. As the cruiser swerves and collides with a lamppost, the van takes a sharp right turn, its driver and passengers hollaring.

ROBBERS

YEAH, WOOOOOO!

DRIVER

You're outta road, jerkoffs!

PANEL 18: A flat rectangular panel at the top of a stack to the left on the first row of the fourth page. A miniature insert shot depicts a chrome throwing knife with a black-wrapped hilt and diamond-shaped pommel, the latter component studded with a luminescent sea green gemstone built into the center. It impales the front right tire of the van and releases its own burst of air.

SH-WHITCH!

PWOOOOOFT!

NARRATOR (BLUE BOX)

Can't imagine these amateurs bouncing back as fast if they knew I wasn't alone.

PANEL 19: A flat rectangular panel at the bottom of a stack to the left on the first row. The van skids sideways, tossing the hero off the hood.

PANEL 20: A wide rectangular panel to the right on the second row. With the van having stopped, all four robbers climb out and approach his body, including a fourth member wearing black aviators with red X's over the lenses; a red and black-striped tee under his black denim vest and spiked shoulder pads; a shaved head with screws piercing the ears; and a dark gray lower face shield resembling the bottom half of a gasmask. The ElectroNuke's helmet is turned on its side at the forefront of the panel, and his visor's facing the reader.

ROBBER

whistle Let's face it, Murphy—you don't belong in that suit. You belong in a halfway house.

PANEL 21: A thin rectangular panel to the left on the second row. The hero stays frozen on his side as they all gather around him in a circle. Yet, they freeze upon noticing his armor rumbling and waves of turquoise light pulsating around the surface like the skin of a cuttlefish.

VVVVVVVVVVVVVV...

ROBBER

Hell is he doing...?

PANEL 22: A thin rectangular panel in the middle on the second row. In an aerial view, The ElectroNuke generates an outward shockwave that propels all four robbers off their feet.

VVV-SSHHAAAAAAAAAAFFFTTT!!!

PANEL 23: A thin rectangular panel to the right on the second row. While The ElectroNuke rises onto his knee, the driver in the oni mask gets on one knee and pulls a shanking blade from the straps on his black leather metalhead boot.

PANEL 24: A thin rectangular panel to the left on the third row. In the first closeup of three, The ElectroNuke shatters the left cheek of the driver's mask into fragments with a jumping knee strike.

FWOOO-ACK!

PANEL 25: A thin rectangular panel in the middle on the third row. The first gunman with the mohawk is surprised by a jumping roundhouse kick despite his assault rifle being raised.

SH-WHAAACK!

PANEL 26: A thin rectangular panel to the right on the third row. The ElectroNuke uses a voltage-packed fist to sock the burly second gunman across the face. This dislocates his jaw, shatters his teeth, and emits a streak of blood from his lips.

SHOOOLT!

PANEL 27: A thin rectangular panel to the left on the first row of the fifth page. The ElectroNuke forearm-blocks a punch from the double X glasses-wearing thug using a set of brass knuckles.

SHOOOFT!

PANEL 28: A thin rectangular panel in the middle on the first row. An uppercut catches The ElectroNuke by surprise.

PWAAACK!

PANEL 29: A thin rectangular panel to the right on the first row. With The ElectroNuke on his knee, the robber presses the tip of a chrome desert eagle against his temple.

ROBBER

Hate to say it, Mr. Chairman, but that voice changer just lost its effect. Guess that's what happens when you give a sped superpowers.

PANEL 30: A square panel to the left on the second row. The ElectroNuke stares down the reader as he rubs his hand over the point of impact.

THE ELECTRONUKE

grunt So it would seem... but *two* speds is a whole lot better.

PANEL 31: A square rectangular panel to the right on the second row. A thick carbon wire has just latched onto the robber's back with a three-appendage steel winch and is now tugging him backwards.

FFWWIIIPP!!!

PANEL 32: A square panel to the left on the third row. A segmented black iron metalhead boot with rounded toes greets him with a high kick to the side of the neck.

FWOOP!

PANEL 33: A wide rectangular panel to the right on the third row. The sole of the same boot crushes his skull against the cement on the right side of the foreground, which The ElectroNuke witnesses from the left side of the background.

KRAAAAAAK!!!

PANEL 34: A tall rectangular panel to the left on the first row of the sixth page. Standing over The ElectroNuke—and, to that effect, the reader—is a short woman of average weight. Her jumpsuit consists of flat steel plates shaped like the side paneling on a house's walls that fold in on one another; the top half of her face is shielded by a smooth chrome helmet layered beneath a black screen-like visor that projects a vertical arrangement of two wide sea green crescents; her pale face is darkened by black cheek and lip makeup; a tattered dull brown cloak hangs off her back and shoulders, complete with a monk-like hood; a titanium sword with some bubbling sea green fluid streaming down the center—as well as a thin chain hanging off the diamond-shaped and green-jeweled pommel—is slung against her back in a tilted rectangular sheath; and a smörgåsbord of assorted energy firearms and miniature blades are clung to her belt. In each of the black holsters strapped to either of her thighs is a chrome pistol resembling an ordinary handgun with an integrated silencer and cylindrical energy canister on the side of the barrel above the grip. Meanwhile, hanging from every inch of her belt's outer edge are pairs of polished black Japanese tãnto knives with the same diamond-shaped pommels. Frowning down at him, she reaches out with a black gauntlet weaponized with several-inch-long silver claws of varying lengths.

PHANTOM BLADE

You know, as well as that panned out? I still don't like seeing you get whacked in the head.

PANEL 35: A flat rectangular panel at the top of a stack to the right on the first row. The ElectroNuke stumbles over himself in a shot from the chest up.

THE ELECTRONUKE

I knew you'd know when to step in! I wasn't scared! Didn't... shit myself picturing that same boot crushing *my* head at all.

PANEL 36: A flat rectangular panel at the bottom of a stack to the right on the first row. From the left side of the panel, Phantom Blade sets a claw down on The ElectroNuke's shoulder.

PHANTOM BLADE

Ellie? Don't bother with the quips. I know you're not a tough guy, and frankly? I don't care.

THE ELECTRONUKE

sigh I know. Just... trying to fit in with the League, is all.

PANEL 37: A square panel to the left on the second row. Red ambulance lights flash all around the corner where the police cruiser made its collision. The ElectroNuke and Phantom Blade follow a pair of stretchers carrying the two officers, both of whom are hooked up to oxygen tanks and being wheeled away by paramedics.

THE ELECTRONUKE

Pardon me. Sir? How are you two holding up?

OFFICER #1

groan Well as can be expected, Booster Gold.

THE ELECTRONUKE

Uh... who?

OFFICER #1

Ah, sorry. Blue Beetle, then.

THE ELECTRONUKE

I don't know either of those people. I'm The ElectroNuke, and this here's Phantom Blade. We're from the Killer Watts.

PANEL 38: A square panel to the right on the second row. As the officer he's speaking to rolls his eyes, The ElectroNuke rubs the back of his neck.

OFFICER #1

Well, fantastic. Same special snowflake and OCD street urchin the Republic thought were right for their jobs. For your sake, those nutjobs better not be dead.

THE ELECTRONUKE

I mean, they're... most likely not. We only hit 'em, and the rounds I carry aren't lethal.

OFFICER #1

Fascinating. Now, listen, how about you prove you're fit for office before doing our jobs for us? Bet we'd all feel safer if you *were* Booster Gold.

PANEL 39: A wide rectangular panel to the left on the third row. The two heroes are left to hobble away as the officers are lifted into the back of an ambulance. Whereas Phantom Blade stays tall, The ElectroNuke slumps forward.

THE ELECTRONUKE

scoff All that flair, and they *still* think we're worthless.

PHANTOM BLADE

sigh Don't mind him, Ellie. Asshole's probably on Ross's payroll. You know, I noticed a winged skull and crossed rifles on the lemon the robbers were driving. An Asian symbol, too. Looked more Chinese than anything.

PANEL 40: A square panel to the right on the third row. They both stop in front of each other.

THE ELECTRONUKE

I wouldn't know. Clothes all seemed to match, too. Same piercings, same leather, same color scheme... whether they belong to something bigger, I say we leave this case open for now. **yawn** I gotta sleep this guilt trip off.

PHANTOM BLADE

That makes two of us. Guess I'll see you back home.

PANEL 41: A thin rectangular panel to the left on the first row of the seventh page. The ElectroNuke jabs his index fingers at the ground as he needlessly dissects her proclamation. Meanwhile, she turns her head away out of disinterest.

THE ELECTRONUKE

Wait, does... that mean we'll be heading home *separately?* 'Cause if we're headed to the same place, we'd just be overcomplicat-

PHANTOM BLADE

I'm outta here.

PANEL 42: A thin rectangular panel in the middle on the first row. She uses her grappling hook to zip upwards, away from the scene, and towards the reader. Meanwhile, The ElectroNuke's left scratching the side of his helmet awkwardly.

PPP-TEEEWWW!

PANEL 43: A thin rectangular panel to the right on the first row. In a high-angle shot, he looks up in the direction she left in with slumped shoulders.

THE ELECTRONUKE

**sigh* Goddamn semantics...*

PANEL 44: A wide rectangular panel filling the whole second row. On the left half of the panel, the silhouettes of both heroes chase each other between the red and magenta haze from the neon building signs along a staircase-like stretch of rooftops—right towards a vertical rectangular tower of dark blue glass panels and a white concrete exoskeleton in the far distance. All the while, they emit their own separate light trails: cyan trails from The ElectroNuke's rocket ducts and sea green trails from Phantom Blade's sword.

PANEL 45: A wide rectangular panel filling the whole third row. A wide glass window makes up the west wall of an elegant bedroom with minimal furniture and no TV—just a thick red cover over a rounded mattress and pillows on a bed frame, two polished dark oak end tables, and two wide dressers of the same polished wood against the wall across from the bed. The whole room is left in a deep navy darkness—including the woman with pale skin and black hair asleep on the opposite side from the window, covered in blankets and sheets from her feet to her ears. From the view outside, it's the middle of the night, and the miles of sleek glass towers surrounding the bedroom strike the clouds above, fading away towards the top. Around the cylindrical scrapers' bodies and roofs are glowing neon rings of lime and magenta; cyan rounded-rectangular advertisements attached to the sides of buildings are transparent and seemingly holographic; and along elevated rooftops tens of stories above ground level are similar streaks of neon light—mostly ice white, pale blue, and turquoise.

NARRATOR (BLUE BOX)

The penthouse of the Azure Building, the ElectroNuke Republic's ninety-story international headquarters. One hour later.

PANEL 46: A square panel to the left on the first row of the eighth page. The scene switches to a bathroom in equally pleasant condition, but the mild gold lights are on, and a man centered in the panel has his entire face dipped in the water filling up the sink in front of him, his arms resting and crossed over the cream granite countertop.

PANEL 47: A square panel to the right on the first row. In a side profile, he lifts his dripping-wet head back up to reveal heavy bags and subtle pink rings that have formed under and around his eye sockets. He's fit but lanky, his skin is a fair beige, and his black bangs stick out and hang far in front of his forehead. Underneath them is a clean-shaven, kind-looking face with glassy grayish-green eyes and a round nose. His pajamas consist of a dark gray tee and baggy black boxers. He keeps his head hanging low and his bangs dripping with heavy moisture.

PANEL 48: A square panel to the left on the second row. He snaps back in a panic at the sight of a man with a near-identical face in the mirror, although he's almost a foot shorter and sporting a black knit cap, dark gray hoodie, dark blue faded straight jeans, and black hipster glasses. Most importantly, though, is the smarmy grimace beaming back at Elias.

ELIAS
AH!

REFLECTION

Evening, Mr. Chairman. What loopholes did it take to earn *that* title?

PANEL 49: A square panel to the right on the second row. Elias looks down at his hands as he rubs them together like a random cold snap had just kicked in.

ELIAS
Uh... a lot, I'd imagine.

REFLECTION

You're acting an awful lot like you don't remember me.

ELIAS
No, I do. I just... don't like what I see.

PANEL 50: A wide rectangular panel to the left on the third row. The perspective now faces the younger reflection as he taunts the current Elias.

REFLECTION

Oh, the chairman of self-pity himself. You're just seeing your reflection.

ELIAS
You haven't been mine for a while.

REFLECTION

But that wasn't your choice, was it? You know who locked me away.

PANEL 51: A square panel to the right on the third row. The reflection turns his head to his left, his lips puckered.

REFLECTION

Gotta say... not a bad girl you got there. 'Course, you... sure seem to like them homely compared to me.

PANEL 52: A wide rectangular panel to the left on the first row of the ninth page. This hits a raw nerve with Elias, who jerks his head up with resentment in his eye.

ELIAS

Leave her out of this.

REFLECTION

Why *are* you washing yourself? It's not like you took a beating out there. Is there dirt in your eyes, or are you just stalling yourself from getting into bed with her? Hm? Don't think you *deserve* to?

PANEL 53: A thin rectangular panel to the right on the first row. Elias bats his head away but keeps the bitterness in his eye.

REFLECTION

Look. The new girl ain't terrible, but she's no Maddie, is she?

PANEL 54: A thin rectangular panel to the left on the second row. His reflection condescendingly smiles, shuts his eyes, and raises his clasped hands to his cheek.

REFLECTION

Oh, how you savored the day you were no longer alone, the day your happy life with her would finally start...

PANEL 55: A wide rectangular panel to the right on the second row. In a side profile, he lowers his hands and opens his eyes on the right side of the panel. Elias stares him down from the left.

REFLECTION

...and then, her boyfriend flattened your nose. No wonder you gave up on love for so long.

ELIAS

She opened up to me when no one else would.

REFLECTION

And then, she let you go. You were never gonna get outta Delaware without me. No, you *needed* the invitation.

PANEL 56: A thin rectangular panel to the left on the third row. The scene switches to a bustling high school corridor. Just beside two lovers making out—a slender valley girl with a blonde updo and pale blue jeans and a fit sports nut in a white and red jersey and gold crew cut—is Elias at his locker, somewhere between the ages of his reflection and his modern-day self. As shown in a profile from his right, he wears his reflection's white hipster glasses, as well as a gray hoodie and dark blue jeans but the lack of a black beanie. Dark bags hang under his disturbed eyes, over which his thick brows furrow his phone screen in front of him.

PANEL 57: A wide rectangular panel to the right on the third row. The phone screen is revealed from his perspective to be displaying an email as follows:

Sender: Hawthorne Republic Administrative Council admin@hawthornerepublic.gov
Subject: Trial invitation

Dear Mr. Elias Murphy,

This is a most urgent time for the whole of the Hawthorne Republic, as teenagers and young adults just like you may define the future of this alliance as we know it. You, along with millions of others across the country, will be allowed registration for Dr. Alfred Hawthorne's Humanitarian Trials, should you be willing to fly to Los Angeles, California and take part in age-specific humanitarian services this year.

Your services to us would be considered with the utmost appreciation, as one of you may be set to take the office of chairman after Dr. Hawthorne's passing. You may stay in your home state to finish your education first if necessary.

**Warm regards,
The Hawthorne 'ElectroNuke' Republic Administrative Council.**

NARRATOR (DARK BLUE BOX)

Fancy that—the alliance founded to replace the League of Nations, asking *you* to contribute. Not a bad joke in hindsight. 'Course, let's not pretend rural Delaware was offering much of *anything*. Not like *they* were.

PANEL 58: A square panel to the left on the first row of the tenth page. At around noon on a cloudless day, an aerial view captures a helicopter descending between the Hall of Records and Law Library in the Civic Center in Los Angeles. It's painted mostly black except for The ElectroNuke's chest logo printed on each side of the main body and beneath the tail rotor. The landing zone is a white concrete path leading directly to the front steps of L.A. City Hall on the other side of the Gloria Molina Playground, as centered in the panel.

PANEL 59: A wide rectangular panel to the right on the first row. The scene sets its sights on an old man hobbling out and away from the chopper. His face and head are covered in wrinkles and liver spots, his eyes are red and sickly, and he can only move with the help of a walker. He wears a navy three-piece suit and a neon yellow satin tie, and his dress shirt beneath matches his balding white hair and trimmed mustache, like a cross between Albert Einstein and Vladimir Lenin. Walking beside him and flipping through a paper-thin electronic tablet is a womanly figure with rough, wrinkly dull brown skin that appears to be imperfectly molded out of clay. Her gray hair with a receded hairline hangs down her back in thick, tendril-like strands, and her eyes are all-black save for white irises with a subtle glow. Her bony figure is dressed up in a dull navy suit jacket and long pencil skirt.

NARRATOR (DARK BLUE BOX)

Civic Center, Los Angeles, CA. 11:53 AM, in the year 5017.

Goddamn, you even had Old Man Hawthorne himself to mentor you! Whether you earned it or not... looks like you'd finally found your paradise. Meanwhile, all *I* could do was watch and stew from inside.

HAWTHORNE

Thanks for joining me, Eleanora. Any improvements in the opioid crisis?

ELEANORA

Aside from a three-point-one-percent drop in addiction rates... it's still slow.

HAWTHORNE

Homeless population.

ELEANORA

A ten-point-six-percent rise was reported last month, but a twenty-three-point-four-percent hike in employment and admittances into shelters was reported this morning. City's cleaned up twenty-nine camps from state parks this month.

HAWTHORNE

I'm pleased with that hike. As for the camp removals... state park maintenance is customary.

PANEL 60: A square panel to the left on the second row. The perspective faces Eleanora's back on the left side of the panel as Hawthorne turns his head towards her on the right. In front of them lies a team of six teenagers sitting in the middle of a short white tile staircase at the bottom of a white concrete path, centered in the panel. There are three boys and three girls, but out of them all, three in particular stand out—one is a blonde girl with oversized dark blue eyes and an inch-long lump for a nose, as well as thick black-rimmed glasses, dark eye and lip makeup, and a baggy gray sweatshirt. There also stands a seemingly robotic boy with metallic yellow skin and a polygonal face, who wears a white dress shirt with the sleeves rolled up, a black and white pinstripe suit vest, light blue jeans, and a black fedora. His eyes are black voids save for glowing cyan discs for irises and darker cyan pupils, the former of which are studded with a ring of dot-like "servos." They're accompanied by the same iteration of teenage Elias with the same white glasses, as well as a red t-shirt themed with a facially scarred biker on a dark red Harley with a chrome red-eyed skull for a front fender. Behind the biker is a minimalist symbol depicting a red fist on fire. Elias babbles away while the machina boy tries his damndest to follow along, and the blonde girl seems to simply not want to be there.

ELEANORA

Any other stats?

HAWTHORNE

Later. I want to hear from our participants.

PANEL 61: A wide rectangular panel to the right on the second row. The teens' heads turn to face Hawthorne upon his arrival.

NARRATOR (DARK BLUE BOX)

Lord knows you got lucky running into an outgoing machina like Rich. He fit into his metallic-skinned breed just fine... or, you know, you have to *assume* he did.

HAWTHORNE

Rather involved, are you?

RICHARD

That, we are, sir. Currently analyzing these neighborhoods between L.A. and Oxnard. Homeless shelters in the area are scarce, but we've already contacted a few of the Republic's agents over there. They're cooperating with social workers to open up to five this month.

HAWTHORNE

That demonstrates initiative... err...

PANEL 62: A square panel to the left on the third row. The same boy smirks and tips his hat. At the same time, Elias crosses his hands behind his back, maintains a light smile, and keeps his back hunched.

RICHARD

Richard Cyrus, sir.

ELIAS

Elias Murphy. We'll be collecting data from agents in Burbank tomorrow.

PANEL 63: A wide rectangular panel to the right on the third row. The blonde girl's only willing to offer a sideways glance. Her voice and facial expression are equally monotone.

HAWTHORNE

Then, I encourage you to do so. As for your name, miss?

MISSY

Missy Rosebud. What do you wanna make of it?

HAWTHORNE

Apparently nothing. Sweet name.

PANEL 64: A square panel to the left on the first row of the eleventh page. As Hawthorne questions them further, Elias gesticulates with his open left hand in the direction of L.A. City Hall to the east, and Richard keeps his hands gripping his hips.

HAWTHORNE

Hopefully, you intend on expanding beyond California.

ELIAS

We're planning on moving eastward in the coming weeks. Three of us will zero in on Nevada and Utah, and three of us will set our sights on Arizona and New Mexico. We'll stay in contact with agents stationed up north, but our sights are set on cutting living costs in low-income neighborhoods toward the east. We can cover greater distances that way.

PANEL 64: A square panel to the right on the first row. Hawthorne starts to turn away from the group.

HAWTHORNE

I like the way you think. Should you have the time, I'd be pleased to know what brought you all here.

RICHARD

Well, *should* we have the time, we just might take you up on that.

PANEL 65: A wide rectangular panel filling the whole second row. The same group has gathered on an orange Mediterranean hipped rooftop on a residential street sloping down to the west. Palms tower at either side, the sky's a deep blue, and white cirrus clouds streak the air above the group. Elias and Richard lean their folded arms over the same railing the shot faces—their backs facing the reader—and the strange blonde girl schmoozes with a few other teenagers behind the opposite railing. The glass citadels centered in the distance include the 777 Tower and the U.S. Bank Tower, but the overall skyline stretches on at megatall heights for distances closer to Shanghai or Hong Kong than the thin real-world L.A. skyline. It even continues all the way past Santa Monica toward the east.

NARRATOR (DARK BLUE BOX)

On Figueroa Terrace at 1:45 PM that same year.

RICHARD

Al's been real stuck on you, hasn't he?

ELIAS

Hm. Or I'm just that much of an outlier.

RICHARD

What, compared to *Missy* over there? I doubt it. 'Course, you plan on telling *him*, but... what brought you here?

PANEL 66: A wide rectangular panel to the left on the third row. The view shifts to below the railing, but both teens stay visible behind it.

ELIAS

Why do you ask?

RICHARD

I mean... when you first talked to us, you looked... lost, I guess? Like you were having a panic attack? I don't know. Maybe, you weren't sure this was the place for you.

ELIAS

That's... quite the foresight, Rich.

RICHARD

Well, you can't become an economist without *foresight*, Eli!

ELIAS

Yeah, tell that to Wall Street in '29.

RICHARD

Ha!

PANEL 67: A square panel to the right on the third row. Elias gets his own closeup as he wrings his fingers, leans in toward Richard, and purses his lips to make a guilty confession.

ELIAS

Well... anyway, I'm sure it showed, but... I-I'm on the spectrum. *High* on it, but... you know which spectrum.

RICHARD

Sure. That tracks.

PANEL 68: A wide rectangular panel to the left on the first row of the twelfth page. The previous view from behind them is repeated, albeit closer and cropping out most of their lower halves.

ELIAS

I didn't always live in Delaware. Moved out there from Ohio. Whatever anger issues I had got worse, and after my parents' divorce, I'd lost it so bad, they figured I was going to murder them.

RICHARD

Were you?

ELIAS

Might as well have been. They sent me off to Shadowland, and I'm still not ready to say what happened there. Since the time I got out, I've just... convinced myself my luck would never turn.

RICHARD

Did it ever turn?

PANEL 69: A square panel to the right on the first row. From Richard's left, he props himself up with a bent right arm against the railing and his left hand on his hip, likely in response to Elias giving him a cold stare from his right.

ELIAS

Does it *sound* like it ever turned?

RICHARD

No... not really. No friends that whole time, huh? Not even one?

PANEL 70: A wide rectangular panel filling the whole second row. Both parties aim their gazes first, albeit with pursed lips from Richard and sorrowful reflection from Elias.

ELIAS

None who *stuck*. And not through lack of trying. I've just... never felt like someone born and raised on this planet. Never *thought* like one. Never *talked* like one. Never *learned* like one, either. Some point down the line, the search for someone like you just... it burns you out, you know?

RICHARD

sigh Sorry to hear that, Eli.

ELIAS

I just don't want to be in the same place anymore. Don't want to be the same *person* anymore. Maybe, someday, I'll... get to feel like a *hero* instead of... feeling like a *villain* all the time. Hopefully, that makes *some* sense to you.

PANEL 71: A wide rectangular panel filling the whole third row. With the skyline occupying the whole left half of the panel, Richard swivels around to face Eli, who shows him a shaky smile.

RICHARD

Maybe a little, but... even in the past, I can't even *imagine* you as a villain. You know, you might *think* you're better off alone, but trust me—*none* of us are. Much as we tell ourselves otherwise.

ELIAS

This is far from the first time I've heard that, Rich, but... it's probably the first time I've *believed* it.

RICHARD

Yeah, well... I hope you *do* believe it.

NARRATOR (DARK BLUE BOX)

Sad as Al's death was, at least you were set to take office with his blessing. Then, when Eleanora Smit followed like a domino? You had a vice chairman right in front of you.

PANEL 72: A thin rectangular panel to the left on the first row of the thirteenth row. Elias is back in his pajamas in the present day, sneering at the mirror in front of him.

ELIAS

What are you trying to tell me?

REFLECTION

How do you go from me to you, Eli? Do those sound like *my* anecdotes?

PANEL 73: A thin rectangular panel in the middle on the first row. Elias swaps his sneer out for uncertainty.

ELIAS

Well, no, but–

REFLECTION

But *nothing*. I went to Shadowland, kissed it goodbye, and all of a sudden, it wasn't me anymore.

PANEL 74: A square panel to the right on the first row. In a side profile, the reflection relaxes his bent arm over the counter and leans in closer to Elias from the right side. Elias lurches back with discomfort in his eye on the left.

REFLECTION

Swapping personalities on the fly ain't a symptom of Asperger's, Eli. I mean, like it or not, I'm with you 'til the end... and between you and me? You're gonna meet some old friends who agree.

PANEL 75: A thin rectangular panel to the left on the second row. A female voice to Elias's right grabs his attention. At the same time, the reflection in the mirror returns to his own.

YOKO

Ellie?

PANEL 76: A square panel in the middle on the second row. He steps out of the bathroom and into the bedroom through a door to the east, where the black-haired girl now sits up in her jade silk nightie, the light on her end table having brightened up the room with an ice-white glow. Like Missy, her eyes are pale blue and abnormally large which, along with her speck of a nose, indicates her as a member of a separate breed from Elias's. Her wide, pronounced lips lack Phantom Blade's dark lipstick, and beneath a single boomerang-curved strand of hair hanging over her forehead are thin, red-framed glasses. Under those, her brows are furrowed in confusion.

NARRATOR (BLUE BOX)

Chief of Staff Yoko Teshima. How could a woman with a face as sweet as her fellow expressionists' *not* fit in with her breed? That's what her street life did to her, I guess.

YOKO

Shouldn't you be asleep right now?

PANEL 77: A thin rectangular panel to the right on the second row. Elias rubs his forearms awkwardly as he wanders toward the opposite side of the bed.

ELIAS

What? I mean... no, I won't be in the office too long. This... text just got me thinking.

YOKO

Who sent it?

PANEL 78: A square panel to the left on the third row. Elias sits on his bedside with both hands on his phone. He slumps his back and sighs while Yoko listens to his left, her muscular legs slung over the side next to his.

ELIAS

sigh He's from Shadowland. Brock Castilla. Don't know how a kid who punched so many holes in walls had a hand left to use. Friendly as we were, he sided with the other tough guys after a while. No surprise there.

YOKO

And by "tough," you mean, "been to prison."

ELIAS

Some of them more than once. He lives in L.A. now, and... I guess he wants to meet in person.

PANEL 79: A wide rectangular panel to the right on the third row. With the perspective tilted mildly from Elias's left, he hangs his head low while Yoko stays brutally honest with him, her fist propping up her chin.

ELIAS

How often do you talk to yourself?

YOKO

That's on my daily agenda, Ellie.

ELIAS

No, I mean to the person you *used* to be. 'Cause I *always* do. He's *ruthless*.

PANEL 80: A square panel to the left on the first row of the fourteenth page. Now viewed from Elias's right, he keeps his head hanging low, all while pinching the bridge of his nose.

ELIAS

sniff Why should *I* be the guy you want?

YOKO

I don't have to say it for you.

ELIAS

But think of all the other guys who could've taken you off the street.

YOKO

Yeah. I do. The *cops* could've done it. Where do you think I'd be if they had?

PANEL 81: A square panel to the right on the first row. Yoko presses her hand on Elias's left cheek and pulls his head away, aiming his face at hers.

YOKO

Ellie. Look at me. Stop hypothesizing. **You** did it. And I'm *glad* it was you. Alright? The things other girls might not like? They *don't. Apply to me.* So stop worrying about it.

PANEL 82: A square panel to the left on the second row. Yoko kisses Elias square on the lips without removing her hand.

PANEL 83: A square panel to the right on the second row. In a view from beside Yoko's cheek, Elias does as he's told and instead makes a hard decision, even through his uncertainty. This visibly pleases her.

ELIAS

You know, I, uh... I think I *will* get back to him. We could spend all week catching up if we wanted to.

YOKO

You might be right. Now... get your ass to sleep, Over-Analyzer. It's past midnight.

PANEL 84: A wide rectangular panel filling the whole third row. The room has gone dark once again, and the perspective has shifted to the other side of the bed where Yoko now sleeps. It faces Elias's back as he sits up and gazes out the window, the building lights shimmering behind the glass.

PANEL 85: A wide rectangular panel to the left on the first row of the fifteenth page. Now in front of a blue sky the next day, the view shifts down to street level in a similar district to 7th Street, where most of the towers are connected by crowded elevated catwalks. The majority of these are spacious enough to form complex shopping malls and tropical vegetation-riddled public parks suspended hundreds of feet and tens of stories above ground level while topped off with glass and white marble canopies. Elias is pictured from behind on the left side, wearing a navy suit with a neon yellow tie—the same previously worn by Al—and carrying a black briefcase as the traffic rushes in front of him. He's texting Brock on his phone, and each message is enlarged and displayed in the air beside him—his in blue and Brock's in white.

NARRATOR (BLUE BOX)

I had the fortune of working in the city at noon the next day without the old feeling of my stomach eating itself. Damn shame it was about to come back. It always does.

Brock

Wanna meet up for coffee this pm

Elias

Oh. Sure, if I don't get any calls. When were you thinking?

Brock

Im actually on my way there so maybe in an hour???

Elias

That soon? Wow. I'm free right now, but probably not for long.

Brock

Cool see you at 12 or so

PANEL 86: A square panel to the right on the first row. Once again, the scene switches, this time to Elias inside a stainless steel hallway through a pair of glass double doors, the rush of traffic just outside. Between a green ATM machine and a rectangular LED sign are two elevator doors, the leftmost of which Elias steps toward while it's open. The sign displays a black leather pattern with a purple globe, red outline, and tilted red minimalist diamond logo printed onto the upper righthand corner, as well as white cursive text along the lower lefthand corner reading...

Looking for a better ElectroNuke?

Trust Richmond.

Most of the world already has.

PANEL 87: A wide rectangular panel to the left on the second row. He stops passing by shops and restaurants on an elevated shopping center and enters a small but clean and modern coffee shop. The logo above the front entrance consists of a pitch-black coffee mug with a double-angled red lightning bolt printed on the side and rippling waves of matching black coffee splashing out. The 3D title in thin italicized cursive lettering, "Black Flash Espresso," separates the logo and the entrance.

PANEL 88: A square panel to the right on the second row. He steps inside the cozy interior with cream-colored tile floors when, across the red-cushioned booths and black-cushioned bar stools, he hears a vaguely familiar voice.

BROCK

Hey! Yo, Eli!

PANEL 89: A thin rectangular panel to the left on the third row. With a welcoming grin, Elias approaches a man at his booth. Said man is thinner than Elias, has a darker skin tone, uneven facial stubble, and rectangular thin-framed glasses. He's sporting a black crew cut, and multiple dark blue tribal tattoos stretch from his neck and down under his wrinkled red t-shirt and black zip-up hoodie.

ELIAS

Have you ever even changed your ***shirt*** since Shadowland?

PANEL 90: A thin rectangular panel in the middle on the third row. Both parties light up as they shake hands.

ELIAS

You look like you've been doing well.

BROCK

Don't look half bad yourself, man!

PANEL 91: A thin rectangular panel to the right on the third row. Doubtful, Elias shrugs his left shoulder.

ELIAS

Eh... better than can be expected.

PANEL 92: A square panel to the left on the first row of the sixteenth page. The two take a seat across from each other.

ELIAS

So, how've you been holding up? What brought you over here?

BROCK

Oh, y'know, just... got sick 'a minimum wage. I know Donny's the vice chairman 'a Richmond now. **scoff** No clue how *that* happened.

NARRATOR (BLUE BOX)

It's frustrating how neck-and-neck our "equals " at the Richmond Republic have been with us. As for Donny, he was the bane of my time at Shadowland, so I guess there was more to his choice to fly here and join them than just his time on Wall Street—what little info exists on that.

PANEL 93: A square panel to the right on the first row. Elias spreads a bent arm over the table in front of him, his smile having faded.

ELIAS

sigh I'm aware. Still acts like a child, but at least he's consistent.

BROCK

Just contacted him for the first time in ages. Said I should enlist in Richmond's army. I mean... we all need our asses kicked sometimes, y'know?

PANEL 94: A square panel to the left on the second row. Elias probes Brock on this, one brow raised in confusion.

ELIAS

Okay, well, why not *our* army?

BROCK

I mean... no offense, man, but... I *was* tighter with him. Let's not pretend the States wouldn't 'a been a Richmond ally if it weren't for the last chairman. Old man had a... "leftist agenda," they say.

PANEL 95: A square panel to the right on the second row. With his eyes shut and his elbow pressed against the table, Elias spreads his fingers along the side of his face.

ELIAS

groan So, nothing mattered more to him than bipartisanship, and they call him anti-conservative. I was starting to miss persecution complexes.

PANEL 96: A square panel to the left on the third row. Elias gesticulates his hand forward, his tone now sharp. Brock leans back with his arm spread over the back of his seat.

ELIAS

For God's *sake*, Brock, Russia's practically been their mother country for decades. What do you think that says about them politically? There'd be no bigger smack in the face to Al's legacy than letting them take over America.

BROCK

chuckle Hawthorne's been dust for, like, nine years, man. You still care what he had to say?

ELIAS

He founded the *Republic*, Brock! The republic *I'm* in charge of!

BROCK

And his impact? What'd he do that the rest 'a the world couldn't do on its own?

PANEL 97: A wide rectangular panel to the right on the third row. As Elias answers with a noticeable attitude, he counts down his examples finger by finger.

ELIAS

Well, let's break them all down, shall we? You have his world-saving CO² regulations; he passed immediate mental health reforms after the Amadeus Arkham incident; the country's life expectancy would've barely reached a hundred; diplomacy wouldn't have been chosen over genocide in Rwanda; he worked with JFK to keep the Soviets from lending an electronuclear arsenal to Cuba; should I go on?! You'd be seeing humanity at its worst instead of its best!

BROCK

You're forgettin' how he left his office to a human punchin' bag.

PANEL 98: A square panel to the left on the first row of the eighteenth page. A now-deflated Elias slumps against the back of his seat, his eyes aimed down at his lap.

ELIAS

sigh I knew this was a mistake.

PANEL 99: A wide rectangular panel to the right on the first row. Now back on his feet, Elias rubs his eyes with one hand and lifts up his briefcase with the other. Brock shrugs both arms in displeasure.

BROCK

I'm just roasin' you here! You know how it is!

ELIAS

Yeah, no. That's *not* a roast, Brock. It's proof that the same pig you were pressured to follow still has you by the throat. You haven't changed. Not you and *certainly* not Donny.

BROCK

Shit, all I said was—

ELIAS

NO. Just... just stop, okay?

PANEL 100: A square panel to the left on the second row.

ELIAS

I've got places to be. Good luck with your favorite manchild.

PANEL 101: A square panel to the right on the second row. As Elias storms off, Brock slouches back down in his booth, pulls out his phone, and starts a call.

BROCK

Yeah, hey. You were right, man. Now, it's *your* call.

PANEL 102: A square panel to the left on the third row. It's a clear midnight in Downtown L.A., with The ElectroNuke suited up and dangling his legs off a ledge toward the top of the 777 Tower in a shot from behind. He's currently answering a call through his helmet with his index and middle fingers pressed against the side.

NARRATOR (BLUE BOX)

Back on 7th Street that night. 11:07 PM.

THE ELECTRONUKE

Late night for you, ain't it, Rich?

RICHARD

Right... about that... see, you're going to have to meet me near the Queen Mary.

PANEL 103: A thin rectangular panel in the middle on the third row. Just as The ElectroNuke's suspicions are raised in his own closeup...

THE ELECTRONUKE

Uhhh... alright. Why is *that* the best—

RICHARD

And don't bring any weapons.

...the call ends abruptly.

BLIP!

PANEL 104: A thin rectangular panel to the right on the third row. The ElectroNuke darts off toward Long Beach, the cyan light bursting from his rocket ducts.

SHLOOOOOOOOO...

PANEL 105: A thin rectangular panel to the left on the first row of the nineteenth page. Richard is back on the phone with The ElectroNuke, now missing his black suit jacket and exposing the gray v-neck sweater underneath. His fedora is tilted lazily, on the verge of falling off his head, and bashed into his left temple is a deep black bruise like a burn mark. He's facing the Pacific Ocean on a small wooden pier branching off from the harbor, although not much of his surroundings populate this closeup aside from stacks of multicolored shipping containers and gargantuan cargo ships in the distance. He aims his head toward the upper right corner of the panel.

RICHARD

Okay, so, we're across from... from the, uh... across from the freeway and Long Beach Power, overlooking the West Basin.

THE ELECTRONUKE (COMMS)

Alright. I'm passing the power plant.

PANEL 106: A thin rectangular panel in the middle on the first row. The view switches to The ElectroNuke touching down with the long rows of shipping containers and loading cranes littered across the harbor behind him. He does so on the same pier where Richard rests on his knees with his hands behind his head and Brock stands beside him with the sights of his black handgun locked on him.

RICHARD

Evening, Eli! Weren't lying about the folks at Shadowland, were you?

BROCK

This ain't your time to talk, three-piece!

PANEL 107: A thin rectangular panel to the right on the first row. Brock's back has turned on The ElectroNuke so he can face the water with both arms stretched out to his sides.

BROCK

Nice night, ain't it, Eli? Way nicer than Delaware! I mean, look't this place! The *breeze*, man! The walks I've taken out here... no wonder you came all this way!

PANEL 108: A thin rectangular panel to the left on the second row. The ElectroNuke cautiously steps forward and reaches out with an open hand.

THE ELECTRONUKE

Brock? Brock, you can... you can put the gun down. No need to drag *him* into—

BROCK

Oh, no no no no no. First off, throw away your guns.

PANEL 109: A thin rectangular panel in the middle on the second row. The ElectroNuke slips his pistols out of his holsters and tosses them to either side without breaking his eye contact with Brock.

BROCK

Now, get that helmet off. I wanna see you like you really are, you hear me?

PANEL 110: A square panel to the right on the second row. In an extreme closeup, The ElectroNuke smacks a button on the side of his neck.

THE ELECTRONUKE

Loud and clear, brother.

FWAP!

NARRATOR (BLUE BOX)

The burning question. "Why even *wear* a mask?" 'Cause I want the world to know who lies beneath. Only mask I hide behind is the one the Justice League wants to see. If *they* can't trust me as a hero, well... how good a hero *can* I be?

PANEL 111: A thin rectangular panel to the left on the third row. An extreme closeup of his neck displays a pair of winch-like clasps detaching themselves from his helmet and folding back onto the neck piece of his suit. Meanwhile, he sets his hands on either side of the headpiece.

NARRATOR (BLUE BOX)

Maybe, Yoko's right. Maybe, I *am* belittling myself more than I deserve...

WEEEEEEEEEE... CLITCH!

PANEL 112: A thin rectangular panel in the middle on the third row. He lifts his helmet off from the neck piece to reveal Elias's head and frizzled hair underneath. He probes Brock as soft-spoken as ever.

NARRATOR (BLUE BOX)

...but at least I'm not hiding away from the world anymore.

ELIAS

Brock. What's going on with you?

PANEL 113: A square panel to the right on the third row. Elias and Brock stand across from each other—the former on the far left side of the panel and Brock on the far right.

BROCK

Donny ain't too happy with you lately. He's as jealous as *all* the boys back home.

ELIAS

Go on.

BROCK

Figured if *anyone* can make you leave the States open... it might as well be one of us. If I can do it, and if I enlist... he said he'll up my service payment in increments, startin' in the first three weeks. Best offer *I've* gotten in a while.

PANEL 114: A thin rectangular panel to the left on the first row of the twentieth page. For the first time, Brock's defeat is captured in a shot from the chest up.

BROCK

Y'know, I've... tried runnin' from my time at that place, but... seems it always catches up. I can't even stop to hold down a girl. What does *that* tell you?

PANEL 115: A square panel in the middle on the first row. Elias shows some rare determination in a view facing him from the chest up, like a reverse angle of the last panel.

ELIAS

sigh You know... believe it or not, I *still* run from it sometimes.

BROCK

Naw! For real?! Livin' the way you do?! Naw, see, I don't think you do.

ELIAS

Oh, no, I *do*, and don't you *dare* tell me otherwise. I want to help you, Brock, but my Republic's on the line here. You know they're the only reason I'm living this way. Besides, if it's no use running... my advice is to quit while you're ahead. It's all *I'm* able to do.

PANEL 116: A thin rectangular panel to the right on the first row. Brock stands his ground and keeps Richard at gunpoint.

BROCK

Well... like it or not, I still got your golden boy's life in my hands here, so... y'know. Think carefully.

PANEL 117: A wide rectangular panel filling the whole second row. Richard commences a distraction with a carefree smirk.

RICHARD

Say, pal... you ever watch this, uh... bizarre action series called Manpuncher?

BROCK

Man-who?

RICHARD

Manpuncher? Angry pyrotechnician gets mutated by a lava lamp? Becomes a mad biker vigilante? Blows up his foes with every punch? It's silly schlock, but it's real charming.

BROCK

You're tryin' to distract me, aren't you?

RICHARD

'Course not! Just... making conversation. Nice night for it.

PANEL 118: A wide rectangular panel to the left on the third row. Richard keeps his cool, even as Brock grows agitated.

BROCK

Now ain't the time for conversation.

RICHARD

Now, the heart of the show? That's the bond with him and his sidekick. Ex-mechanic Joey Blanket. He makes him a Robin Hood-style antihero, helps him embrace his lack of masculinity, and best of all? *Plenty* of homoeroticism later on.

BROCK

QUIT THROWIN' ME OFF!

PANEL 119: A square panel to the right on the third row. Richard's bent left elbow strikes Brock in the gut, forcing him to lean inward.

BROCK

OOOF!

PANEL 120: A thin rectangular panel to the left on the first row of the twenty-first page. With a rocket duct-propelled tackle, The ElectroNuke uses both arms to pin Brock to the floor of the pier.

PANEL 121: A thin rectangular panel in the middle on the first row. While Brock wastes no time in aiming his pistol, The ElectroNuke grabs his wrist with one hand and wraps the other around the gun's slide. The two shots fired strike his visor but fail to penetrate it.

BLAM! BLAM!

PANEL 122: A thin rectangular panel to the right on the first row. The ElectroNuke has just slipped the grip out of Brock's hand. At the same time, however, Brock stomps his abs with one foot. The ElectroNuke stumbles back, but his hold on the gun remains steadfast.

SH-WHOOOCK!

PANEL 123: A thin rectangular panel to the left on the second row. He takes aim at Brock with his own pistol, forcing him to accept defeat and raise both his hands.

BROCK

chuckle You were always hard to keep down, huh? If I offer you somethin', will that keep you from cappin' me?

PANEL 124: A square panel in the middle on the second row. Elias keeps a wary eyebrow raised.

ELIAS

Try me.

BROCK

The robbery you stopped last night? That bank they robbed? That was H.R. MacDougal. Biggest on 7th Street. Few of 'em took a second truck you never stopped.

ELIAS

Yeah? Go on. Shoot.

PANEL 125: A thin rectangular panel to the right on the second row. In an extreme closeup, the left corner of Brock's mouth lifts up.

BROCK

Thought you'd never ask.

PANEL 126: A square panel to the left on the third row. In a side profile from The ElectroNuke's left, Brock reaches into his back pocket, prompting The ElectroNuke to shoot him through the chest.

BLAM!

PANEL 127: A square panel in the middle on the third row. Instead, all Brock pulls out in the closer side profile that follows is some miniature stainless steel drill resembling a metal old-school pencil sharpener.

BROCK

sputter Here. They'd all be... **grunt** ...comin' after me anyhow.

PANEL 128: A thin rectangular panel to the right on the third row. The magic 8 ball-sized drill gets its own extreme closeup from The ElectroNuke's perspective.

NARRATOR (BLUE BOX)

A Locke & Keys steelwork micro-drill. Nearly a thousand dollars. Released a year-and-a-half ago. Perfect for unsealing a bank vault.

BROCK

chuckle 'Least I'm finally outta the race, huh?

PANEL 129: A square panel to the left on the first row of the twenty-second page. In another side profile, The ElectroNuke looks back up to find Brock toppling over backwards.

PANEL 130: A square panel to the right on the first row. From above and behind them, The ElectroNuke and Richard stop in front of the balcony to spot Brock in the water, dying the surface red.

NARRATOR (BLUE BOX)

To think he came so close to earning his medal.

PANEL 131: A square panel to the left on the second row. Just past Elias's ear, the scene opens with both his hands clutching a photo in its scalloped pyrite frame, the grain implying it was taken in the dark. It displays a chain of gray-paneled McMansions with black gable roofs, but the one at the end of the straight cobblestone driveway holds a matching steeple over a rusting belltower. Most of the setting's buried beneath the layers of fog that match the overcast sky, including the decaying tree skeletons scattered about and forming a wooden enclosure out back. As his eyes pierce the setting, a voice emanates from behind him.

YOKO

Hope you realize that time is over.

PANEL 132: A square panel to the right on the second row. The high-angle shot reveals his saddened contemplative gaze. Meanwhile, Yoko wraps her arm around the small of his back. Their suite is spacious, but it's no Trump Tower. Making up the furniture in the living room are blue-and-white-cushioned folding chairs and sofas, well above which a white ceiling fan spins from the height of the sizable headroom. Their kitchen is more of a kitchenette, with the granite countertops and cabinets forming a small ring just to the left of the front entrance, three navy barstools lining the island counter. On a short foundation in front of that is the glass dining table, lined with a black border, matching legs, and ice-white-cushioned chairs. While there are bronze funnel ceiling lights suspended over the dining room, kitchenette, and front entrance, nearly the entire wall to the north of the living and dining rooms is one huge window, letting in the soft glow of natural light.

YOKO

You're not there anymore.

PANEL 133: A square panel to the left on the third row. Now, the two are focused on in a view positioned at the edge of the picture frame in Elias's hands.

ELIAS

Yeah, I know. Still... it carries its own energy, doesn't it?

YOKO

I'd rather not expose myself to it. Neither should you.

NARRATOR (BLUE BOX)

Even after its closure, it's a lesson for the losers and delinquents. The worst part? They're the only ones who'll ever know.

PANEL 134: A square panel to the right on the third row. A match cut switches to Elias's teenage self back when he received the invitation, the distance and framing near-identical. This time, however, a boisterous voice prompts him to look over his shoulder from behind.

DONNY

There he is, Brock.

NARRATOR (BLUE BOX)

I should know...

PANEL 135: A square panel to the left on the first row of the twenty-third page. Now shown from over his shoulder, an uneven cobblestone path leads straight between two rows of dead trees hanging in toward each other. A familiar mist fills the space between their branches and the fallen autumn leaves, and filling the space between him and the rest of the path is a stout boy with the cheeks of a chipmunk and the gray tracksuit of a gopnik. An indigo tee lies beneath his zipped-up hoodie, and between him and a creepily Matt Gaetz-looking jock with torn jeans and a bruised lower lip is Brock, albeit much shorter and missing his tats. The baby-faced boy on the far right continues mounting pressure on the latter.

DONNY

Staff ain't lookin'. Sock that retard fer us.

NARRATOR (BLUE BOX)

...given I was one of them.

PANEL 136: A square panel to the left on the second row. Brock steps forward, faux bitterness in his eye. In a shot facing him, Elias sees right through it and leans his nose in.

ELIAS

Well? What's keeping you?

PANEL 137: A square panel to the right on the second row. A reverse angle positioned next to Elias's left cheek reveals Brock's feeble attempts to avoid trembling.

PANEL 138: A wide rectangular panel filling the whole third row. In a side profile, Elias lunges his head forward, going borderline psychotic in the hazing victim's face.

ELIAS
DO IT!

PANEL 139: A square panel to the left on the first row of the twenty-fourth page. In a closeup positioned beside Brock's forearm, he thrusts a clenched fist forward. Elias's nose is caved in like a water bottle, blood drizzling from his nostrils.

PWAAACK!

PANEL 140: A square panel to the right on the first row. The scene jumps to two pairs of burly arms holding each of his in place within a white passageway with a glass storm door. Dirt, dead leaves, and spider webs are stuffed into the corners and grooves, and a fifth hand smacks him hard enough across the cheek to emit a trail of blood from between his lips.

SHWAAAP!

PANEL 141: A square panel to the left on the second row. Elias gets socked once more in a shot placed beside his shoulder, albeit by a slender sports nut in a black tee and dirty blonde buzz cut. His jaw is shaped like a narrow spade, and the gal just behind his left shoulder balances a fitted brown updo on her scalp. Her white camisole barely conceals her abs, and pale blue jeans reach as high as her belly button over her wide curves. Although she appears to be siding with him, terror eats away at her poker face.

SHRAAACK!

PANEL 142: A square panel to the right on the second row. The impact of this third strike has just returned him to the cobblestone path. He wobbles back up with more malice in his eyes than ever. The dark rings have reformed around them.

DONNY
Go on! Don't give 'im time to breathe!

PANEL 143: A square panel to the left on the third row. Back on his feet, Elias lifts his chin at Brock, who maintains the same illusion of intimidation.

PANEL 144: A square panel to the right on the third row. Elias's stance and glare remain unchanged as the shadow of a fist is superimposed over him.

NARRATOR (BLUE BOX)

I've learned to take a hit. Wouldn't wear that suit five days a week if I didn't.

ElectroVerse: Batman

Issue #1: The Shadow King

PANEL 1: A 16:9 panel to the left on the first row of the first page. A dilapidated hallway in an abandoned projects unit is seen in first-person through night vision. The cameraman's soles are smacking the uneven tiles in a panic.

NARRATOR (GRAY BOX)

I was willing to wait until the stream began. I wanted the whole **world** to know. See his pupils dilate. Hear the panic claw at his lungs.

CAMERAMAN

pant* *pant* *pant* *pant Shit... **pant* *pant* *pant** Oh, god... shit, shit, shit, shit...
pant* *pant* *pant

PANEL 2: A 16:9 panel to the right on the first row. He scrambles for a steel door and grabs the handle, but it's sealed shut. At the same time, he slams the door repeatedly with his palm.

SHLAAAM! SHLAAAM! SHLAAAM!

CAMERAMAN

OPEN UP! SOMEONE, OPEN UP!

PANEL 3: A 16:9 panel to the left on the second row. He turns the camera towards him, revealing a heavily pierced face with gaunt cheeks and a black skull tattoo. His jet black hair is shaved off at the sides and spiked back at the top.

CAMERAMAN

'Kay, well... **pant** ...I get the feelin' this is all you're gonna see 'a **me**, people... **pant* *pant** ...but I'm gonna let you in on one thing. **pant** This one thing, I **know**, an' you better believe it.

PANEL 4: A 16:9 panel to the right on the second row. He strokes his lower face anxiously.

CAMERAMAN

pant ...I'm not askin' you... **pant** ...to believe in monsters. No... Boogeyman, no Mothman, no... no Bigfoot, no **nothin'**, but this...?

PANEL 5: A 16:9 panel to the left on the first row of the second page. He pushes his phone camera in close and jabs his finger toward his viewers.

CAMERAMAN

Folks... Gothamites... don't you ever try an' deny it. The Batman is **real**. He's **real**... he will **find** you... and he'll tear your fuckin' minds ap—

PANEL 6: A 16:9 panel to the right on the first row. An arm has just punched its way through the plywood panel behind him. The arm's split into a series of polygons. Two jagged spines protrude from the side of the forearm, and the segmented fingers are unusually long and sharp.

TCH-WHAAATCH!

PANEL 7: A 16:9 panel to the left on the second row. The rest of its body busts out, just as jagged and polygonal as the arms. A misshapen bat icon within a dark gray oval is layered over the upper chest. The two toes on its boots are straight, pointed, and tightly held together. Connected to the inwards-bent spikes extending from the shoulders is a boxy cowl with two Kelley Jones-style ears at either side of the headpiece. Two white eyes shine like spotlights through the muck, directly at the cameraman. The lower half of its face has folded outward into three mandible-like flaps.

BATMAN

EEEEAAAARRRAAAAYYY!!!

PANEL 8: A 16:9 panel to the right on the second row. The phone is acquired by a black claw, its camera focusing in on the two piercing white dots through which Batman sees. Meanwhile, a comment is left along the bottom.

BATMAN

inhale* *exhale If the sinners are listening... **inhale* *exhale** ...watch the skies for the signal.

@hillkiller

yea sure and im jack the ripper

PANEL 9: A square panel to the left on the first row of the third page. On the roof of the projects, black and red graffiti coats the brick exterior walls, and a backdrop of gothic cathedrals and art deco skyscrapers is erected in the distance. The steel door is almost knocked off its hinges, swinging open and dropping the cameraman back-first onto the roof.

SHWIIIIIIIFT!

PANEL 10: A square panel to the right on the first row. A steel claw latches onto his throat.

CAMERAMAN

sputter

PANEL 11: A square panel to the left on the second row. In a side profile, the same claw presses his back against the top of an HVAC unit, folding his upper body horizontally and his lower body vertically. From his belt, Batman removes a batarang shaped like his chest logo folded in half. He presses its serrated edge against the bare skin above the cameraman's Adam's apple.

BATMAN

You work for Black Mask. Worst thing you can do for yourself is lie about it.

CAMERAMAN

grunt What's it to you?

PANEL 12: A square panel to the right on the second row. Batman leans in closer, as does the side profile.

BATMAN

He just made an exchange with Falcone. You were watching in case of a setup.

CAMERAMAN

grunt Got no idea what you're tryin' to tell—

PANEL 13: A thin rectangular panel to the left on the third row. The edge of the batarang scrapes the skin on the cameraman's neck, which sends a single narrow stream of blood trickling.

CAMERAMAN

AUGH!

BATMAN

I CAN SEND YOU OFF TO ZSASZ IF YOU WANT TO GO DEEPER!

PANEL 14: A wide rectangular panel to the right on the third row. A wider side profile is provided.

CAMERAMAN

Okay, man! Shit! Falcone had a security breach since his problems with Maroni started! **grunt** Lost nearly fifteen mil to Sal's boys!

BATMAN

How's Sionis involved?

CAMERAMAN

He runs the Thorne Private Reserve, alright?! Offered to store Falcone's savings! **grunt** So long as he helps set up crack distribution routes through Janus!

PANEL 15: A thin rectangular panel to the left on the first row of the fourth page. With the cameraman's chest pressed against the HVAC, Batman binds his wrists together with steel brace handcuffs.

BATMAN

Appreciate the cooperation. Figured it'd take more to convince you.

PANEL 16: A wide rectangular panel to the right on the first row. In an extreme wide shot, the cameraman is left on the rain-soaked floor while Batman nears the edge of the roof, overlooking the backdrop.

CAMERAMAN

You can't leave me out here, man! I got PTSD from sittin' in the rain too long!

BATMAN

I know.

PANEL 17: A thin rectangular panel to the left on the second row. Batman looks over his shoulder in a view from behind.

BATMAN

Why else would you run inside?

PANEL 18: A wide rectangular panel to the right on the second row. In a t-pose, he takes off into the night with his literal wingsuit while the cameraman hollers out from the roof behind him.

CAMERAMAN

I'M GONNA FUCKIN' STRANGLE YA WITH THAT CAPE!

PANEL 19: A square panel to the left on the third row. Although the harsh weather and midnight hour remain unchanged, a family home of white and brownish-gray stone in the middle of a freshly mowed cul de sac is established. A midnight blue sedan pulls up on the driveway on the far left side, although a row of black carpools does line the curb just outside.

PANEL 20: A square panel to the right on the third row. A man resembling 1990s Sam Neil with a red tie and a black briefcase wanders into the dining room, where a black candelabra hangs above a long glass table. He stiffens at the sight of someone across the table.

BLACK MASK

Busy night, Rupert?

PANEL 21: A wide rectangular panel to the left on the first row of the fifth page. The man is leaning back in a white-cushioned dining chair with one leg folded over the other, showing off his polished thin-toed black oxfords. His dark navy blazer and matching slacks are layered over his black turtleneck and silver chain necklace. He sees through empty eye holes in the black skull mask concealing his visage—one lacking a lower jaw but fitted with bent, dislocated molars. He casually reads a tiny blue leather book in his black leather gloves.

NARRATOR (GRAY BOX)

Roman Sionis, the Black Mask. Mobster with a silver tongue. Political lobbyist. Torture enthusiast. All rolled into one mind behind the blackened wood from his father's coffin.

RUPERT

How'd you get in here, Roman?

BLACK MASK

Got some big names in here, Rupert. I give ye props fer payin' yer dues on time, 'cause others tend to, uh...

PANEL 22: A thin rectangular panel to the right on the first row. Black Mask locks eyes with Rupert and sharply slaps his book closed in one hand.

SHLAAAP!

BLACK MASK

...fall behind.

RUPERT

I asked you a question.

PANEL 23: A thin rectangular panel to the left on the second row. Black Mask slips the book inside his blazer.

BLACK MASK

Ye've kept my funds real secure at the reserve, Rupert, but I, uh... promised someone they could deposit some 'a their own. He needs security more than anyone.

PANEL 24: A wide rectangular panel to the right on the second row. Rupert steps closer to Sionis, leaning in and gesticulating with both hands.

RUPERT

Roman. The feds are already asking questions, and if they notice a several million deposit, they'll start asking a lot more.

BLACK MASK

Rupert. Look. This is fer the Falcones. If ye need help dodgin' the feds, this is yer shot. They *will* do right by ye.

RUPERT

It's not just the *feds*. Jenna's infertile. We adopted twins last month. We just *started* this shit, Roman.

PANEL 25: A square panel to the left on the third row. Black Mask lazily pushes himself up from his chair, his palm on the table in front of him.

BLACK MASK

Y'know, Rupert, that *is* a lotta weight yer carryin'... an' ye *know* I respect yer judgment.

PANEL 26: A square panel to the right on the third row. Closely followed by Rupert, he wanders around to the entrance hall, where a chandelier not unlike the one in the dining room hangs over the staircase leading upstairs to the left.

BLACK MASK

'Course... sad thing is, I'm a little stuck right now. *groan* Wish I had someone else's *input* on this...

PANEL 27: A wide rectangular panel to the left on the first row of the sixth page. He swings open a white door on the wall around the corner from the dining room. A blonde woman in her late thirties with neck-length hair and a white cardigan lies bound and gagged in the closet, a black eye and severe lacerations in her cheeks and temples. Two seven-year-old boys lie beside her in the same binds and with similar wounds. All three hostages direct their empty gazes up at their taker.

BLACK MASK

What do *you* suggest, Jenna? Sound like a raw deal? How 'bout you, kids?

PANEL 28: A thin rectangular panel to the right on the first row. Roman looks up at a pigment-drained Rupert with his black wood mask slightly tilted sideways.

BLACK MASK

Does no one know how to treat a guest in this house?

PANEL 29: A square panel to the left on the second row. As he slams the door closed on the family, Black Mask paces in Rupert's direction, backing him up into the front entrance hall.

SHLAAAAAAM!

BLACK MASK

Yer lady's got a pretty face, Rupert, but puttin' flesh between pliers can do *wonders*. Feel like gettin' yer *own* facelift?

RUPERT

I was just raising doubts, Roman. It was never a straight "no".

PANEL 30: A thin rectangular panel in the middle on the second row. Black Mask slaps his hands onto either of Rupert's arms in a side profile.

BLACK MASK

'A *course* it wasn't, Rupert! Now, what say we head to the reserve an' make the transfer? I got my men an' the cash waitin' outside fer us.

PANEL 31: A square panel to the right on the second row. In a view over Black Mask's shoulder on the left and Rupert's shoulder on the left, Black Mask raises a black umbrella over their heads. From the side of the front door, he picks up an all-black umbrella and slides it open, popping the canopy over his and Rupert's head as he grabs the doorknob. Along the curb outside in front of them, the backseat door to one of the black carpools outside is open, and black skull mask-wearing henchmen with leather jackets and chain necklaces are lined up, waiting for their passengers.

PANEL 32: A wide rectangular panel to the left on the third row. Polished silver brick walls and tile floors comprising both the first and second levels of the Thorne Private Reserve's main hall. Most of the lights are out, save for a couple of the pure white ceiling lights inside the tellers' offices. While four henchmen carry heavy black briefcases with bumpy armored padding, two others in the group guide Rupert along with their revolvers aimed at the back of his head, oblivious to the white circle printed with a black bat logo projected through the rain at the end of a spotlight outside the square windows near the ceiling.

BLACK MASK

The man's cooperatin', gentlemen. It's not like he's got much security at *this* hour.

PANEL 33: A thin rectangular panel to the right on the third row. The row of henchmen in the foreground scan the walls and ceiling around them as a faint whirring goes off in the far distance.

WHEESH-EEEEERRRRR...

PANEL 34: A thin rectangular panel to the left on the first row of the seventh page. Black Mask pauses in place to peek over his shoulder, slip out a sleek silver AutoMag from the inside of his jacket, and snatch Rupert by the shoulder.

BLACK MASK

Stay close together. I'll watch our manager here.

PANEL 35: A thin rectangular panel in the middle on the first row. The henchmen pause and dart their heads away. Dropping down from above and bouncing three times each until they're evenly distributed between the henchmen's feet are two pill-shaped silver capsules the size of a fire extinguisher.

KLANG! KLANG! KLANG KLANG KLANG!

PANEL 36: A thin rectangular panel to the right on the first row. Black Mask barks at his henchmen as he keeps the muzzle of his handgun held against Rupert's head. Meanwhile, the manager works away at the keypad beside the door to the tellers' offices.

BLACK MASK

One 'a you, look those things over!

PANEL 37: A thin rectangular panel to the left on the second row. One henchman inches skittishly toward one of the capsules, his sawn-off shotgun shaking between his digits.

PANEL 38: A wide rectangular panel to the right on the second row. The capsules pop open like spider eggs in their very own extreme wide shot. From each of them spill a titanic swarm of tiny black bats, the unprecedented size of which engulfs the henchmen, separating them into two frantic groups. Meanwhile, the bats extend over the last two panels, and the shadow of Batman forms in the middle of the swarm as if from the same creatures.

HENCHMEN

AAUUGH! GET 'EM OFF ME! GET 'EM OFF ME!

HENCHMEN

I CAN'T SEE! I CAN'T FUCKIN' SEE!

PANEL 39: A thin rectangular panel to the left on the third row. Black Mask takes Rupert in a headlock and forces the tip of his pistol against his temple.

BLACK MASK

Hell did YOU come dressed as? It ain't Halloween!

PANEL 40: A thin rectangular panel in the middle on the third row. A ground-level view follows two double-toed black boots stepping toward Black Mask from behind the heels. Meanwhile, the goons have collapsed to their knees all around him.

PANEL 41: A thin rectangular panel to the right on the third row. Black Mask grows frantic in an extreme closeup of him and his hostage.

BLACK MASK

SAY SOMETHIN', SHITBIRD!

PANEL 42: A square panel to the left on the first row of the eighth page. A thin silver beam is forced against Black Mask's throat, forcing him to release Rupert. A pair of dark green claws press the beam against his Adam's apple, and out from under a black monk hood with a metallic gold border pokes the beak of a moss-colored plague doctor's mask. Said mask holds two eerie white lenses of its own above the bird beak.

NARRATOR (GRAY BOX)

Richard "Dick" Grayson. Last living member of the Flying Graysons. Acrobats killed mid-performance. Nowadays? He's mostly just Robin.

ROBIN

I don't think I like being called "shitbird," Roman.

PANEL 43: A square panel to the right on the first row. As the bats swarm like locusts behind him, the monster blankly watches Black Mask suffocate through white lenses. The black of the mobster's eyelids closes down on the panel like a pair of window blinds.

PANEL 44: A square panel to the left on the second row. In a fuzzy side profile from Black Mask's perspective, Batman is handed a jerry can by his accomplice. Said accomplice wears a padded black jumpsuit, the front half of the torso colored a deep red-orange like the belly of an actual robin. Connecting the chest panels is a gold disk with a matching bird's head outline carved out of the black circle in the middle, an insignia normally synonymous with Red Robin. His belt is gold and lined with matching pouches, and a single green stripe runs down the side of either

pant leg. His cape is smooth and untattered, not to mention bordered with the same gold trim as his hood.

BATMAN

Got the tank?

ROBIN

Wouldn't come without it.

BATMAN

Good man.

PANEL 45: A wide rectangular panel to the right on the second row. In the background, Robin kneels down behind Black Mask and returns the edge of his staff to his throat while Batman dumps the contents of the four briefcases onto the floor in the foreground. He's already onto the last and finishing the peak of a wide mountain of cash.

ROBIN

Don't worry. I got him.

BLACK MASK

What are ya doin' with that?! That cash is the only thing keepin' me an' Carmine from castratin' each other!

BATMAN

Then, let's hope you have a decoy ready.

PANEL 46: A wide rectangular panel to the left on the third row. Black Mask is being held on the far left side of the panel while Batman douses the mountain with gasoline from the jerry can.

BLACK MASK

Funny. Y'know, if I was you, I'd choose between a scary face *or* a sense 'a humor, 'cause they don't mix well together!

BATMAN

You know... Roman... if I was you, I'd take this punishment seriously. 'Course, men like you... sure like to relish your impunity, don't you? 'Least until the hammer comes down.

BLACK MASK

They don't mix well with a hackneyed social message, either.

BATMAN

Not without fear. That's the ultimate solvent, Roman...

PANEL 47: A thin rectangular panel to the right on the third row. As shown from behind, Batman has just lit up a match between his claws, his cowl peeking over his shoulder at the reader.

SHWITCH!

BATMAN

...and I sure as shit found yours.

BLACK MASK

Don't you do it. ***I'M WARNIN' YOU!***

PANEL 48: A wide rectangular panel to the left on the first row of the ninth page. The match has just struck the money. Batman stands with his back to the reader, his torn cloak fluttering out from behind him as the flames dance.

PANEL 49: A square panel to the right on the first row. Black Mask gasps and roars in a rage at the fire with his finger pointed forward. Robin's staff keeps him held back.

BLACK MASK

****gasp* AUGH! YOU SON-OF-A-BITCH! YOU REALIZE HOW BAD YOU JUST FUCKED ME?!***

PANEL 50: A thin rectangular panel to the left on the second row. Batman stands with his back to the reader, his torn cloak fluttering out from behind him.

BLACK MASK

WHO THE FUCK DO YA THINK YOU ARE?!

PANEL 51: A wide rectangular panel to the right on the second row. In a side profile of both parties—Black Mask's on the left side and Batman's on the right—Batman lowers himself to his knees, crouching down and bringing his face inches away from Black Mask's.

BATMAN

I AM THE NIGHT.

PANEL 52: A square panel to the left on the third row. Police cruisers have gathered around the white marble front stairs to the reserve. Batman and Robin stand in the open front doorway, the former dragging an unconscious Black Mask in front of him by the back of his collar.

OFFICERS

On your knees! SLOWLY! We're only gonna tell you once!

PANEL 53: A square panel to the right on the third row. From each of their wrists, a thin carbon wire with a three-appendage steel winch extends in a flash toward the roof overhead, thus zipping them in that very direction upon latching on. The police open fire on them, but to no avail.

PPP-TEEEWWW!

BLAM! BLAM! BLAM! BLAM! BLAM! BLAM!

PANEL 54: A square panel to the left on the first row of the tenth page. A middle-aged black man with thick-framed glasses, an even thicker mustache, a square chin, and a long gray raincoat stops at the front of the line with his snub-nosed revolver drawn. A greasy, hairy, morbidly overweight second cop sweats beneath his beige fedora beside him.

NARRATOR (GRAY BOX)

Commissioner Jim Gordon. Detective Harvey Bullock. Two good men, sent after my head at the order of a corrupt mayor.

BULLOCK

Y'know, yer like a speedin' bullet with that revolver, Jimmy. **sigh** Hill's gonna **geld** us over this.

GORDON

So, just like the *last* eighty times.

PANEL 55: A square panel to the right on the first row. The overweight cop removes a silver flask from inside his raincoat as he storms off.

BULLOCK

Ah...

PANEL 56: A wide rectangular panel filling the whole second row. Parked in a seedy alleyway, the cracked pavement leading out to the plain brick apartments on the other side of a chain link fence, is a bulky armored convertible. The windows are blacked out, and two gun turrets are mounted to the left and right sides of the car beneath the rectangular hood. Said hood is embossed with the same dark gray logo on Batman's chest. The car is basically the 1966 TV Batmobile with a padded black shell straight out of Mad Max. Hooded punks with sagging pants and heavy piercings scurry off as Batman swings open the driver's side door and Robin does the same on the passenger's side.

ROBIN

sigh That's it for Sionis... 'til it isn't anymore. Can we look into Joker now?

PANEL 57: A wide rectangular panel to the left on the third row. The Batmobile has entered a misty forest of dead trees straight out of Sleepy Hollow, its white xenon headlights aimed at the reader from the center of the panel.

NARRATOR (GRAY BOX)

Second goddamn year of this. My parents' company has become a funnel for pouring cash into a revenge mission.

PANEL 58: A thin rectangular panel to the right on the third row. In the driver's seat, Batman's eyes have gone dark in their sockets, revealing dark gray "compound eyes" with a honeycomb-style pattern.

NARRATOR (GRAY BOX)

Maybe, Sionis turning his folks' business into a front is just as irresponsible. Maybe, I'm just making excuses... but for now, Gotham stays wrapped in my cloak. I clutch her like I would a newborn. Like my folks clutched me.

I still miss that feeling.

PANEL 59: A square panel to the left on the first row of the eleventh page. A steel gate "locked" by two intersecting chains is stamped with red and white "DO NOT ENTER" signs, but the illusion of a road under construction is broken when it splits in two, swinging open and allowing the Batmobile through. A rustic mansion stands atop a wooded hill in the distance on the left side. Its rectangular main body is wedged between the two obelisk-topped front towers, all three segments composed of the same bleached brownish-gray bricks.

PANEL 60: A square panel to the right on the first row. The car passes down a cliffside road, which leads beneath the rear side of the mansion. The uneven stone escarpment breaks off into the Gotham River, the art deco towers on the other side glistening.

PANEL 61: A square rectangular panel to the left on the second row. An oversized metal shutter garage door built into the left wall slides up and into the stainless steel corridor on the other side, taking the car between the rectangular orange highway tunnel lights between the floor and the ceiling.

PANEL 62: A wide rectangular panel to the right on the second row. By splashing through a narrow waterfall, the car's officially entered a cave system where an escalating series of ledges opens up to a misty opening in its ceiling. In the middle of the Batcave, steel workbenches and tool racks are scattered around a circular platform that the car comes to a full stop on. Other than that, all that lies here is a metal desk that bends diagonally to the left and right, its length covered by a wide keyboard and three razor-thin computer monitors. Behind these monitors is a metal staircase with silver bar railings leading up before branching off at the left and right. Both sides lead to the same point, that being a narrow deck with reinforced double doors behind its railing.

PANEL 63: A square panel to the left on the third row. Batman briefly stays in the Batmobile with Robin.

BATMAN

Alright. I've got a few things to finish up down here. As for you, Dick, it's time for bed.

ROBIN

Even *you've* gotta sleep, Bruce.

BATMAN

I've got work to do. You're a kid. You need it more than I do.

PANEL 64: A square panel to the right on the third row. Robin opens the door on his side and reaches his leg out.

ROBIN

Okay, there are... *multiple* incorrect statements in there, but it's too late for me to argue.

BATMAN

That's right. I'll give you a rundown in the morning.

PANEL 65: A thin rectangular panel to the left on the first row of the twelfth page. From behind in the center of the panel, a silver-haired man in a black tux parts the burgundy curtains from a wide white-framed window, flooding him with pale gold backlight. Dead trees dot the yard outside.

NARRATOR (GRAY BOX)

Wayne Manor of Seraph Crossing. 6:04 AM the next morning.

PANEL 66: A wide rectangular panel to the right on the first row. He paces a rustic living room with mahogany walls and floors. A silver stone fireplace is welded into the northern wall, and facing it is a set of living chairs and couches with rounded red cushions. The man's on his way toward the dark oak bookshelf and dusty brown oak grandfather clock standing from left to right on the far east side.

PANEL 67: A square panel to the left on the second row. In an extreme closeup, a bony old finger pushes the brass hands on the grandfather clock so the time shows as 9:35 PM.

PANEL 68: A square panel to the right on the second row. The man looks to his right as the bookshelf slides away toward the fireplace, giving way to a musty steel corridor.

PANEL 69: A square panel to the left on the third row. As seen from behind, he scratches the back of his head in a rickety makeshift elevator as the door splits open at the middle, both halves sliding into the wall. Starting at the very height of the cave system in front of him, the spotlight of the morning sun beams down onto the desk at the bottom of the staircase.

PANEL 70: A square panel to the right on the third row. This extreme closeup mirrors the first, with the same elderly hand setting the mug down on the desktop. A burlier arm wrapped in the sleeve of a gray wool sweater rests behind the mug, its younger hand pushing a mouse along its pad.

ALFRED

Sleepless night again?

BRUCE

How'd you guess?

ALFRED

It's been a trend long enough.

PANEL 71: A square panel to the left on the first row of the thirteenth page. From a side profile, the man at the desk takes a sip. He's well-built and bundled up from the neck down, most of his head matted in scruffy brown hair. His sideburns branch off into a beard coating his slender jawline, and beneath his brows are cobalt eyes from which darkened bags droop. Over his shoulder, his companion sports a square business cut and mild stubble while gazing dignified through the lenses of George Romero glasses with bronze frames. His "tuxedo" lacks a properly adjusted tie, but his posture remains firm and professional.

NARRATOR (GRAY BOX)

Bruce Wayne, a rich boy with dead parents. Wayne Enterprises, the conglomerate he inherited. Alfred Pennyworth, the butler retired from MI6 who took him in.

The perfect recipe for a wasted career.

ALFRED

Seems you dodged a bullet last night. Or a few, by the sound of it.

BRUCE

I've taken a few before. It was nothing.

PANEL 72: A square panel to the right on the first row. Bruce holds his mug up to his lips in a diagonal shot from above, like through a security camera.

ALFRED

Not from Mr. Gordon, though. Dick says you almost did.

BRUCE

scoff He doesn't *want* me to. Hill sent in the warrant.

ALFRED

He drew his gun, didn't he?

BRUCE

But he didn't *aim* it. That tells you something.

PANEL 73: A square panel to the left on the second row. While Alfred smirks in the background, Bruce leans into his monitor, close to the reader, with an intent look in his eye. The cyan reflection of a satellite-generated city map is reflected onto his face from the monitor.

ALFRED

scoff Never took you for an optimist.

BRUCE

Neither have I... but I've got a feeling about this.

PANEL 74: A square panel to the right on the second row. One panel provides a glimpse into the home of the Gordon family, the white walls painted green near the bottom and the floors made of polished birch planks. As revealed from an overhead security camera-style position, Jim wanders through the archway on the left to the kitchen and past the dark oak dining table with his raincoat in hand and his brown vest, cream dress shirt, and soft blue pinstripe tie left visible.

NARRATOR (GRAY BOX)

If he's on the fence about trusting us, saving his family's the key.

GORDON

Barb? Can't hear me through your headset? Sarah?

PANEL 75: A square panel to the left on the third row. From the background, he spots the soft blue paper card folded in half on a white end table in the foreground. The front of the card depicts a golden orange cartoon tabby cat sleeping soundly and curled up with its two kittens, the curly yellow text above them reading...

Every father keeps his family together...

PANEL 76: A wide rectangular panel to the right on the third row. The inside of the card is revealed from Jim's perspective, as he's now the man holding it. Childlike doodles of three cats have been scribbled in black marker, each one sporting X's for eyes and a noose around its neck. The scrappy handwritten message below them reads...

...BUT THAT'S KINDA HARD TO DO WHEN THEY'RE ALL

DEAD!

– PAPA J

NARRATOR (GRAY BOX)

Letter didn't mince its words anyhow.

PANEL 77: A wide rectangular panel to the left on the first row of the fourteenth page. Back in the Batcave, Bruce displays a detailed aerial map of the general metropolitan area of Gotham. Two circular red markers lie toward the south and northwest, respectively. The former's marked with a white "1" and located within a narrow space on the other side of an overpass, and the latter is numbered "2" and pinned to the end of an alleyway in a busier downtown district lined with elegant storefronts.

BRUCE

Lucius obtained the sites of Joker's comedy shows from the police database close to midnight. The ones they raided? All late night hotspots for the mob. He confronts the owner. Then, he pays them off or... bumps them off.

ALFRED

I'd expect more of the latter.

PANEL 78: A thin rectangular panel to the right on the first row. Bruce and Alfred are shown from the front, the map reflected onto them and the mug still to Bruce's lips.

BRUCE

You'd be right. Depends on how bad he wants the spotlight. Kill first, schedule later. One thing for sure is that he's working his way up the ladder.

ALFRED

Would you presume his sights are set on the Iceberg Lounge?

PANEL 79: A wide rectangular panel filling the whole second row. Both parties are centered in the wide shot, both silhouettes backlit by the three turquoise displays.

BRUCE

That's got to be his *end* goal, if anything. I just asked Dick to investigate the Red Room in Alderney. Can you guess who it's run by?

ALFRED

Same man selling "cosmetics" through Janus?

BRUCE

Same man we just took in, too. With Sionis out of the picture, Joker must be *salivating* over the club. Dick's heading over there tonight.

PANEL 80: A square panel to the left on the third row. As viewed from Bruce's right, he takes another sip while Alfred raises both his brows in doubt.

ALFRED

Tad underage, I'd argue.

BRUCE

Not if he knows a way in. Stay in contact with him. Red Room's no place for a kid.

PANEL 81: A square panel to the right on the third row. Alfred strolls out the way he came in with his nose pointed down on the right side of the foreground, and all while Bruce works on the right side of the background.

ALFRED

Will do. By the way, find a reason to leave the house, will you? Clear skies the whole day.

BRUCE

We shall see.

PANEL 82: A thin rectangular panel to the left on the first row of the fifteenth page. A red-orange sunset fades into the deep indigo dusk behind the gothic and art deco highrises. The focus of the panel stays on an alleyway in a high angle shot positioned on the corner of a rooftop to the east. Red neon letters read "THE RED ROOM" above the black-framed steel double doors at the front, the font of which is a cross between those of the SEGA and Star Trek logos. Parallel red rope barricades lead up to the doors, which are guarded by burly bouncers in black tees and gray slacks. The square windows on either side appear sealed by black bar grates, skeezy attendees are lined up between the ropes, and gold-tinted security lights scan the alley from above the windows.

NARRATOR (GRAY BOX)

That night, at quarter of ten...

PANEL 83: A wide rectangular panel to the right on the first row. Inside the club, a honeycomb "grid" of black tablecloths held in place with red candelabras fills the club in front of the birch stage lined with gold lights. The walls are patterned with black and gray argyle, the floors are red and black variations of the hallway floors of the Overlook Hotel, and the patrons range from female socialites in black dresses and makeup to male mob enforcers wearing turtlenecks, blazers, and gold jewelry. Dark women hide behind black Zorro masks, white-suited cads behind Guy Fawkes masks, and turtlenecked suits behind rubber horse and gorilla masks. Out from between the red curtains of the stage comes a man in a light gray suit, blue tie, and white clown mask with a pointed oversized nose and Jigsaw-style red swirl painted on his forehead. With an arm and open hand stretched in the direction of the curtains behind him, he speaks into the handheld mic in his other hand.

ANNOUNCER

Well, folks, we've kept you waiting long enough! You know who it is, but you never know *what* he'll do next! He's glittery, gangly, and scarred all over! You won't catch him *dead* without a frag grenade in one hand and a bike horn in the other! Put up a hand fo—

PANEL 84: A thin rectangular panel to the left on the second row. He's cut off by a round fired from the cylinder of the long-barreled Taurus pointed right above his ear. Clutching said revolver is a white-gloved hand at the end of a glittery deep pink sleeve. The wrist underneath is white and dry with beige patches and boils.

BLAM!

AUDIENCE

gasp

PANEL 85: A wide rectangular panel to the right on the second row. The announcer's body hangs halfway off the edge of the stage. Although he's shown buried in shadow from behind, rich with bluish-white backlighting, the man shoving the Taurus into his glittery hot pink trench coat is almost as gangly as the two skeletons.

JOKER

Ye overstayed yer welcome, Stevie! That's Harley's job 'round here!

AUDIENCE

HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA!

PANEL 86: A wide rectangular panel filling the whole third row. Behind a wooden barstool and mounted microphone on the other side of the curtain is a magenta wall speckled with turquoise and lime green circles like a '70s game show set, and fixed over the middle is a pink neon sign reading "THE JOKER" in rounded cursive letters. Realistic baby dolls hang by their necks with gold ribbons from the ceiling, and one classroom skeleton with a red-painted smile stands at each side. In a low-angle shot in front of him, the shooter's face and attitude lighten up as he stretches both arms out at his sides, a flat straw barbershop quartet hat with a lime green satin band in his left hand and a black cane with a metallic gold cap at the bottom and a matching grinning jester head in his right. His skin is almost a pure white, and the rough patches of scar tissue are spotted with boils. His jawline ends with a deep dimple dividing the end of his knife-like chin, and his nose is almost as narrow but rounded near the tip. A red dot is painted onto each of his gaunt cheeks, alongside a matching painted "clown nose" and an extended smile that curls at either corner into a Fibonacci spiral. Black eyeshadow surrounds two eyes with eerie lime green irises, no hair exists on his eyebrows, and what little hair he has hangs down from his cranium in thick lemony green strands. Over his pale green dress shirt is a satin yellow-orange bow tie and suit vest, and his trench coat is fitted with a satin collar and inner side of the same orange. Protecting his feet are black spats wrapped in white cloth, and a lit cigarette is stuck between his lips.

JOKER

Welcome to the circus, kids!

CLAP! CLAP! CLAP! CLAP! CLAP! CLAP!

NARRATOR (GRAY BOX)

The Joker. Identity unknown. Control freak hiding his scars and insecurities Vaudeville-style behind a clown mask of bad jokes and glitter. Someone took the Theater of Cruelty to another level.

PANEL 87: A square panel to the left on the first row of the sixteenth page. With his hat back on and his grimace retained, Joker has just taken the mic off its stand with his right hand and tucked his other into his left pants pocket. Meanwhile, his cane leans against the side of the stool.

JOKER

Wow! What an *ocean* 'a faces here tonight! I see yer all dressed up fer the orgy!

AUDIENCE

Ha ha ha ha ha ha!

PANEL 88: A wide rectangular panel to the right on the first row. Seated on his stool in the center of a wide shot, he gesticulates above his thigh with his free hand.

JOKER

Now... folks. All ma' friends here. If there's one lesson I ain't fergettin' tomorrow, it's this: the human body's a *shitfest*. Alright? Whether yer givin' birth or watchin' *The Fly*, yer always left questionin' what sorta god would leave our catastrophically flawed anatomy the way it is.

PANEL 89: A wide rectangular panel to the left on the second row. He waltzes toward the east side of the stage and jabs his free thumb toward his chest.

JOKER

This ain't a *recent* lesson 'a mine, neither. No, see, I've been learnin' it fer as long as I've known how to *walk*. If ye can believe it, an ol' pastime 'a Papa Joker here was seein' how little critters reacted to whatever chemicals happened to be lyin' around that day!

PANEL 90: A thin rectangular panel to the right on the second row. He continues his waltz while gesticulating forward and visibly howling to himself.

JOKER

Can you *imagine* lil' three-foot-tall Joker, wanderin' 'round 'is slum with that goofy-ass rictus, scrounging 'round fer things he can stick in 'is gerbil?!

PANEL 91: A thin rectangular panel to the left on the third row. Having stopped, he shows the audience a suspicious smirk, pinches his thumb and index finger together, and wags the imaginary needle back and forth.

JOKER

"Oh. What's this, a heroin needle? Oh, I can do *somethin'* with this."

AUDIENCE

Ha ha ha ha ha ha!

PANEL 92: A wide rectangular panel to the right on the third row. He waltzes toward the east side of the stage and jabs his free thumb toward his chest.

JOKER

Still... ain't nearly as fun when it's happenin' to *you*, is it? See, ma' dentist at the time was a... local *boogeyman* 'a sorts. Got a sorta sick thrill from inflictin' pain, but... then, came one 'a MY appointments. Naturally, I... got frisky from a few too many tartar scrapes to ma' gums, so once he reached his digit in there?

PANEL 93: A square panel to the left on the first row of the seventeenth page. He snaps his finger in a closeup, his tongue stuck between his yellowed teeth.

K-NAP!

JOKER

SNAP! Incision clean as cataract surgery!

AUDIENCE

Ha ha ha ha ha ha!

JOKER

Ha ha ha ha ha! This clown got to visit Ol' Faithful early, baby!

PANEL 94: A wide rectangular panel to the right on the second row. He lunges the hand clutching his mic and cigarette forward. In a side profile, he frowns, lets his head hang, and wags his cigarette in front of him.

JOKER

Oh, the scarlet geyser 'a karma... **sigh** Sad thing is, after pullin' myself out, I flipped through the paperwork on 'is desk, no concern fer 'is... banshee routine... an' it seems the geezer was so occupied with gum torture, he'd failed to disclose lil' Joker's overbite diagnosis to 'is methheads back home.

AUDIENCE

gasp

PANEL 95: A thin rectangular panel to the left on the third page. Matter-of-factly, he purses his lips and shrugs.

JOKER

I know. Ouch. An' I was with a guy who'd just lost a finger.

AUDIENCE

chuckle

PANEL 96: A wide rectangular panel to the right on the third row. From a front-row perspective, he bends inward and clutches his stomach, hurting from the laughter.

JOKER

So, just to rub salt in 'is wound, I nabbed the paperwork, stole 'is whole nitrous oxide supply, an' ***NGH- *snicker**** The best part was that ***HA HA HA HA HA!*** I... I ended up stickin' 'is paperwork in my folks' gas tank! They hadn't blown up on me so bad in ***YEARS!***

AUDIENCE

HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA!

PANEL 97: A wide rectangular panel filling the whole first row of the eighteenth page. Joker holds the mic to his lips, bears his teeth, and sticks his index finger toward the crowd as he shuffles back toward the rear of the stage.

JOKER

sigh Y'know, call it cliché, but if there's anythin' I took home from that other than... y'know... a shit-ton 'a happy gas...

AUDIENCE

chuckle

JOKER

...it was that an apple a day keeps the doctor away. Was partly my rotten molars that got me sent there, after all... but after what we're gonna see here today... yer gonna know how good a job a cyanide capsule can do.

PANEL 98: A thin rectangular panel to the left on the second row. Joker snaps his fingers in their own extreme closeup.

K-NAP!

JOKER

Roll 'im out, sweethat!

PANEL 99: A wide rectangular panel to the right on the second row. A dental chair is wheeled onstage from the left, and writhing in his wrist and ankle braces is an elderly man sporting neck-length gray hair, and green scrubs. Meanwhile, a cage-like dental appliance has trapped his head from the neck up like the reverse bear trap from SAW, only with a series of hooks holding his jaws open by the corners of his mouth. The face of the assistant doing the wheeling is less gaunt and more childlike, but her splotched skin is identical to her boss's. Her bleach-blond hair remains intact, although most of it is concealed under a maroon and navy jester cap. Her eyes share his same radioactive irises, and from the corners of her dark red lipstick are matching burn marks forming a similar faux smile to his, minus the spirals. Beneath her mildly yellowed Elizabethan ruff collar is a navy latex undershirt with short sleeves and puffy shoulders, just below the collar of which is a diamond arrangement of four smaller dark red diamonds. Matching the diamonds are lederhosen-esque overalls of the same shiny latex as her undershirt, their white circular buttons comically oversized. Each arm is shielded by an elbow-length glove—the right glove colored maroon and the left glove navy—leaving very little of her patchy biceps unconcealed. Two black metalhead boots with tall, rounded toes are fastened together along the front and sides with dark gold buckles, plus a matching chain zipper on the outer side. She beams at the audience as she leans hard into the chair she's pushing, her rounded bottom pointed towards the ceiling.

NARRATOR (GRAY BOX)

One of the trophies he'd won in his career was Harley Quinn. Former psychiatry intern with an attraction to the disturbed. Taking orders with a Disney kid smile. A Hollywood producer's dream.

JOKER

Now, rest assured, folks, there were *zero* test runs for this performance! We encourage ye *all* to try this at home! Consider practicin' on Grandma. Old hag probably wants to die anyhow.

AUDIENCE

Ha ha ha ha ha ha!

PANEL 100: A wide rectangular panel to the left on the third row. Still smiling, Harley drops what resembles a NyQuil capsule in its aluminum-plastic casing into his hand as he steps toward the side of the chair.

SUBJECT

sputter* *sputter No, no, no... d-d-don't...

JOKER

Watch this elusive process occur right before yer eyes!

PANEL 101: A thin rectangular panel to the right on the third row. From between two of his fingers in their own extreme closeup, a smooth white tablet not unlike Eclipse gum is dropped between the jail bars over his oral region and between his jaws.

PANEL 102: A thin rectangular panel to the left on the first row of the nineteenth page. The "test subject" starts convulsing. Meanwhile, the two clowns crouch down to his level at either side, their intent eyes wide open.

SUBJECT

sputter* *sputter* *sputter

JOKER

Awww, look't 'im! Look't 'im go! He's hangin' in fer dear life!

PANEL 99: A thin rectangular panel in the middle on the first row. He raises the back of his hand to the side of his mouth.

JOKER

That's 'is *first* mistake.

AUDIENCE

Ha ha ha ha ha ha!

PANEL 103: A square panel to the right on the first row. In a side profile of their hostage, both clowns duck and cover as he regurgitates a creamy white burst of foam, saliva, and poison.

JOKER

Ha ha HA! THAR, SHE BLOWS! We found the great white whale, me boys!

HARLEY

Mmm hmm. *That* stain ain't comin' off easy.

PANEL 104: A square panel to the left on the second row. Joker pulls down on a lever on the side of the chair...

CLICHT!

...which swings the restraints and facial appliance open halfway. The hostage spasms out of his seat and onto the floor in front of him.

JOKER

sigh Okay, ol' boy. Ye've suffered enough fer one night.

PANEL 105: A square panel to the right on the second row. Harley surprises the man with a soccer ball kick to his hip...

PWAAACK!

...thus rolling him off the stage as the audience applauds.

CLAP! CLAP! CLAP! CLAP! CLAP! CLAP!

AUDIENCE

whistle

PANEL 106: A wide rectangular panel filling the whole third row. Perched atop the flat plane of black steel mesh making up the rafters in a close over-the-shoulder view, Robin watches Harley throw both hands in the air and grin as if prepared to start crowd-surfing. He presses two fingers against the side of his cowl as he contacts Bruce.

ROBIN

Bruce? He's... h-he's got the Red Room.

BRUCE (COMMS)

Wha...? Already?

ROBIN

Yes, already! Don't ask! Just get over here!

BRUCE (COMMS)

sigh Shit. Be there in ten. Keep your eyes on him.

PANEL 107: A square panel to the left on the first row of the twentieth page. The audience has left, the lights have dimmed, and the body of the hostage lies on his own puddle of toxic saliva. As Joker shoves his hands into a pink donut box with a clear window on the lid, the puddle and dental chair several feet behind him, Harley gushes over the success of the show in the

foreground. Behind her and to the left is a cleaning mop sticking out of a yellow rolling water tub, its raised tip leaned against the corner of the wall between the onstage and backstage segments.

HARLEY

Ha ha HA! Oh, I'm tellin' ya, honey, we could take this show 'round the frickin' world if we wanted to!

JOKER

Shit certainly sells. 'Specially when the right folk are sellin' it.

HARLEY

More audacious pair 'a sickos, they *never* saw! **sigh**

PANEL 108: A square panel to the right on the first row. Upon turning back around to face him, her latex-covered hands run between her neck and breasts. All the while, she rubs her thighs together and he prepares to shove a powdered donut between his teeth, even though his smoke is still hanging out.

HARLEY

Ya know what *else* sells?

JOKER

Misery, fer one thing. Whole world loves a trainwreck.

HARLEY

Mmm hmm.

PANEL 109: A square panel to the left on the second row. Although she manages to distract him from his smoke just by stepping closer, the perspective facing him from behind her, the donut is now half-eaten between his fingers, globs of raspberry jelly exposed.

JOKER

But that ain't what yer referrin' to, is it?

PANEL 110: A square panel to the right on the second row. Once close enough that her breast touches his, her fingers run down the collar of his trenchcoat, her eyes half-closed. This all occurs in a side profile.

HARLEY

Wanna start a private circus? We can play "Trapeze Artists".

JOKER

Ye got a fine imagination, sweethat.

PANEL 111: A square panel to the left on the third row. In a similar profile positioned a foot away from the last, he shoves the mop in her face, to which she reels back in surprise.

JOKER

After cleanup.

PANEL 112: A thin rectangular panel in the middle on the third row. Joker keeps the remaining half of his donut pinched between his teeth next to his cigarette while he tugs one of his gloves off, revealing mangled digits with tattered skin around dirty fingernails bordered with dry blood.

PANEL 113: A square panel to the right on the third row. Joker tosses his gloves over his shoulder as he wanders off toward the side of the panel, his donut box tucked under his arm. Harley aims her eyes at the thick white sludge on the floor and scowls to herself. As she scrubs away the puddle, her slender hands grip the length of the mop with a noticeable firmness.

HARLEY

sigh

PANEL 114: A square panel to the left on the first row of the twentieth-first page. In a view from below, Batman drifts down from the rafters, his cape slowing his fall like a parachute and empty compound eyes locked on the reader.

PANEL 115: A square panel to the right on the first row. With Batman's cowl on the left side of the foreground, a lone spotlight beams down behind him. This illuminates Joker at his table on the right side of the background, who strains with gritted teeth while uncorking a brandy bottle. Meanwhile, there are two short glasses on the table—one in front of him and the other across.

JOKER

Evenin', buddy! Ye like Maltese? I'm more of a... champagne fella, but I figured ye probably like the hard stuff.

PANEL 116: A square panel to the left on the second row. In a side profile, Batman has just turned to face him.

BATMAN

It's fine stuff. Figured it was *your* thing, too.

JOKER

Oh, baby, if it's *yer* thing, then frankly? I might as well chug the whole bottle. Ha ha ha!

PANEL 117: A wide rectangular panel to the right on the second row. As the clown starts to pour in an over-the-shoulder view. His shoulder fills the far right third of the panel while Batman occupies the rest.

BATMAN

I know you're going to stall, but I'd like to see Gordon's family.

JOKER

Well, Sweet Caroline, ye *already* got my behavior down, an' it feels like we met each other yesterday! Let me tell ye, it's real charmin'.

BATMAN

There's no friendship between us, let *me* tell you.

JOKER

Eh, maybe give it a couple 'a months. It's real lonely in this world.

PANEL 118: A thin rectangular panel to the left on the third row. From a security camera position in the upper righthand corner behind Batman, Joker gags on his liquor mid-sip, hiding his head behind the arm holding it.

JOKER

Errrgh...! *snicker*

BATMAN

As a minimum, at least. Where are they?

JOKER

sputter *snicker* Fuck if *I* know.

PANEL 119: A wide rectangular panel to the right on the third row. In a side profile, Joker leans inward and grimaces, his elbows pressed against the table and his chin against his folded hands.

JOKER

So... buddy. What are yer turn-ons?

BATMAN

Excuse me?

JOKER

What gets ye off?

BATMAN

That's personal.

JOKER

Well, I know what gets *me* off.

PANEL 120: A thin rectangular panel to the left on the first row of the twenty-second page. Joker leans in further and mumbles out the corner of his mouth in the reflection of Batman's right compound eye.

JOKER

My attorney. Ha ha ha ha!

PANEL 121: A wide rectangular panel to the right on the first row. In a closer side profile, Batman snatches him by the throat and tugs him over the table. This brings their faces hardly a foot away from each other.

BATMAN
TELL ME.

JOKER

Oh, no, no, no... **grunt** ...see, speakin' 'a gettin' me off, that's... **sputter** ...all brute force is gonna do.

BATMAN

Just tell me where they are.

JOKER

Ack... didn't say I'm givin' anythin' away fer free, did I? 'Least... **grunt** ...not without a "favor" or two. **snicker** What do ye say, huh? Lil' cape ride?

PANEL 122: A wide rectangular panel to the left on the second row. The side profile is more or less repeated, albeit with a closer field of view, Batman raising the wrist monitor on his free arm, and Joker's smile having faded.

BATMAN

If risk gets you off, I'd be glad to send an anonymous tip to Gordon, get a SWAT team over. How long do you think you'll hold?

JOKER

Clever boy. I can take ye backstage, but... **grunt** ...yer probably too wise to follow, aren't ye?

BATMAN

You don't know me very well. ***Get moving.***

PANEL 123: A square panel to the right on the second row. Now on his feet, Joker keeps his hands up while Batman holds him tight by the collar from behind. The clown bites his lower lip as his head is yanked back.

JOKER

Hey, hey. Easy now, honey. I'm movin'.

PANEL 124: A wide rectangular panel to the left on the third row. The scene switches to a wide shot of Joker guiding Batman offstage, the neon sign for the show resting inactive in the foreground while the pair's silhouettes wander past. Joker stops to stretch an arm out in front of

a deactivated LED sign reading "THE JOKER & HARLEY SHOW" in a rounded Arial-style font, the circle behind the centered text akin to the Hard Rock Café logo.

JOKER

We were savin' a show fer 'em. They ain't alone in here, though.

PANEL 125: A square panel to the right on the third row. In a ground-level view, Harley's boots are focused on in the foreground, and so is the small steel head of her sledgehammer, each of the faces splattered with a red and white bullseye. Meanwhile, in the background, Batman's posture stiffens as his head tilts up to face something just past her, something hanging just above the reader.

BATMAN

Lord almighty...

PANEL 126: A wide rectangular panel to the left on the first row of the twenty-third page. A thinner burgundy curtain has just parted in front of them. Harley props up her sledgehammer against the floor beside two individuals strung up from the rafters, and although their soles are touching the ground, they are strung up by their throats via thin ropes, and their heads are concealed by brown burlap sacks. Both are African American women, the one on the left about a foot taller than the other and clad in a white cardigan and pale blue jeans. The one on the right sports a blue v-neck sweater and black slacks.

PANEL 127: A square panel to the right on the first row. Lime-colored acid is gushed into Batman's compound eyes from the ovary of the flower on Joker's chest. The clown's tugging on the bottom petal.

SSS-LEEEEEESSHH!

BATMAN

AAUUGH!

PANEL 128: A square panel to the right on the second row. Robin rests his back against the side of a deep tan wood desk and circular mirror, wrapped around which is a lei of circular lights. One eye on his cowl is busted and missing shards of glass, his temple is caved in, his hands are bound behind him, and not even a muscle spasm goes off in him.

PANEL 129: A thin rectangular panel to the left on the third row. In a closeup, he raises his head just as the toe of a red slipper smacks his shoulder.

PANEL 130: A square panel in the middle on the first row of the twenty-fourth page. He looks up to find the shorter woman using the sole of the same foot to thrust-kick a saw to be used for God knows what off the desk behind him.

KWOOOP!

PANEL 131: A thin rectangular panel to the right on the first row. The saw is now centered in the panel, having just plopped down beside Robin.

SHLAAANG!

PANEL 132: A square panel to the left on the second row. Joker delivers a soccer ball kick to Batman's eye, further cracking open the compound lens.

BRAAATCH!

PANEL 133: A square panel to the right on the second row. Joker peeks over his shoulder, the constricted pupils in his bloodshot eyes facing the reader.

JOKER

Got some steam to let off. Drop the hammer, hun.

PANEL 134: A square panel to the left on the second row. Her rictus maintained, Harley smashes the red and white bullseye at the bottom of the yellow high striker attraction framed in red to her right.

BWAAAAAASH!

PANEL 135: A square rectangular panel to the right on the second row. The red pin on the high striker smacks the yellow neon top. A familiar rope extends up the side of the same attraction.

KWAAANG!

PANEL 136: A thin rectangular panel to the left on the third row. A closeup reveals the rope string up over the black bars of the rafters being tugged on hard, back toward the high striker.

SHWEEEEEEEEEEE!!!

PANEL 137: A thin rectangular panel in the middle on the third row. The two women have just been thrust off their feet and now dangle from the ropes, their legs waving frantically.

KWITCH!

PANEL 138: A thin rectangular panel to the right on the third row. Robin watches this happen as he saws away at the binds behind him.

ROBIN:

Awww, shit...

PANEL 139: A thin rectangular panel to the left on the first row of the twenty-fifth page. In a closeup of Joker's lower back on the far right side of the panel, he sweeps the back of his coat away to slip out a gold-engraved switchblade with a smiling skull of the same metal near the

bottom end of the grip from the back of his pants. Meanwhile, Batman watches on his back from the left side of the background.

PANEL 140: A square panel in the middle on the first row. Joker raises one bent leg over Batman's midsection as he aims the tip of his blade toward his cowl.

JOKER

Y'know, buddy... Mama always told me I was born to make the world smile. Since yer always frownin'... an' makin' the **world** frown... I figure ye need this more than **anyone**.

PANEL 141: A square panel to the right on the first row. As shown from behind, Harley darts a bloodshot eye toward the noise over her shoulder as Joker tugs at Batman's cowl with his free hand.

FWING! SHWEETCH!

JOKER

C'mon, buddy... it won't hurt fer long...

PANEL 142: A wide rectangular panel filling the whole second row. In the foreground, Harley preps her sledgehammer as the source of the noise reveals itself. Robin has just tossed an instance of his metallic red birdarangs, slicing the ropes and dropping the girls.

HARLEY

Thanksgivin' came early, daddy. I'll pluck the turkey.

PANEL 143: A square panel to the left on the third row. She raises her sledgehammer, but her forward charge is delayed when another birdarang slashes her knuckles on impact, streaking blood out from the tear in her glove.

HARLEY

FUCK!

PANEL 144: A square panel to the right on the third row. Batman seizes on Joker's shifted attention by socking him in the jaw.

FWOOOK!

PANEL 145: A square panel to the left on the first row of the twenty-sixth page. Robin directs a roundhouse kick at Harley, but she combat-rolls under his leg.

PANEL 146: A square panel to the right on the first row. While Robin grabs his bo staff leaning against the wall beside the desk, Harley slips a silver-engraved equivalent to Joker's switchblade from the strap of her metalhead boot. The silver skull, however, wears a jester's cap.

SHLITCH!

PANEL 147: A thin rectangular panel to the left on the second row. He snatches her wrist in the middle of her overhead swipe.

PANEL 148: A wide rectangular panel to the right on the second row. He swings her by the arm into the Joker & Harley Show sign, scattering sparks and particles of glass.

TCH-LLAAAAAASSHH!!!

PANEL 149: A square panel to the left on the third row. While grounded, Joker unsheathes his Taurus and embeds a round in the space between Batman's abdominals.

BLAM!

PANEL 150: A square panel to the right on the third row. Joker plants another round in Batman's cape with which he shields himself. The minimal penetration suggests that his cape is bulletproof.

BLAM!

PANEL 151: A thin rectangular panel to the left on the first row of the twenty-seventh. Before the third round goes off, Batman sends a batarang forth.

SHWING!

PANEL 152: A thin rectangular panel in the middle on the first row. The tip of the batarang fills the barrel of Joker's Taurus. The third round that goes off nearly blows his hand up like a firecracker.

BLAAATCH!

***JOKER
AUGH-!***

PANEL 153: A thin rectangular panel to the right on the first row. Batman reclaims his batarang as it scatters in midair after the explosion.

PANEL 154: A square panel to the left on the second row. Batman latches onto Joker's chest with his wrist-mounted batclaw and sends a harsh electric current through.

KLIITCH! JEEEEEEEEESH!!!

PANEL 155: A square panel to the right on the second row. Joker clutches the length of the wire, seemingly embracing the electrocution, with one hand and readies his switchblade with the other. He smirks like a drunkard all the while.

PANEL 156: A thin rectangular panel to the left on the third row. Joker slashes clean through the wire, emitting a storm of sparks from the incision point, as he falls onto his knee.

SHLAAAAASH!!!

PANEL 157: A thin rectangular panel in the middle on the third row. Joker bites down on his tongue as he shows Batman a nasty leer, right past the reader.

JOKER

Yer gettin' kinky now, hun. Ye really *do* know me.

PANEL 158: A thin rectangular panel to the right on the third row. Batman stares down the reader in disbelief.

NARRATOR (GRAY BOX)

Another Albert Fish in the making. God help this city.

PANEL 159: A square panel to the left on the first row of the twenty-eighth page. While she recovers on the floor, Harley stomps Robin in the ankle, stumbling him back.

SHWOOCK!

PANEL 160: A square panel to the right on the first row. Harley leers at Robin with widened eyes as she shoves the length of her blade into his forearm.

SHLITCH!

ROBIN

AAUUGH!

HARLEY

Ooh, hoo hoo! This one's *tender*, sweetie!

PANEL 161: A square panel to the left on the second row. Robin slams the elbow of his clean arm down on Harley's skull from above, knocking her down towards the floor.

SHWACK!

PANEL 162: A square panel to the right on the second row. While Harley reaches for her sledgehammer, Robin yanks the blade out of his bleeding arm.

ROBIN

*Yeah, and they... *grunt* ...call you a victim...*

PANEL 163: A square panel to the left on the third row. Batman darts his head away in the middle of keeping Joker in a chokehold against the floor.

PWAAAM!

ROBIN:
EEERRRGH...!

PANEL 164: A square panel to the right on the third row. Harley has just whacked Robin in the gut with her hammer.

PANEL 165: A thin rectangular panel to the left on the first row of the twenty-ninth page. In his chokehold, Joker reaches out and retrieves his fallen Taurus.

PANEL 166: A thin rectangular panel in the middle on the first row. Batman has just grabbed Joker's wrist and directed the muzzle of his Taurus toward the reader.

PANEL 167: A thin rectangular panel to the right on the first row. The revolver has just blasted Harley in the ankle, causing her to lurch forward like a zombie.

BLAM!

HARLEY
OW!

PANEL 168: A thin rectangular panel to the left on the second row. Robin spends his opening whipping Harley upside the chin with his bo staff.

SHWIP!

PANEL 169: A thin rectangular panel in the middle on the second row. Batman reloads his batclaw with a spare winch, clamping the replacement onto his wrist launcher.

SHLIFT!

PANEL 170: A thin rectangular panel to the right on the second row. Batman catches Joker once more by the wrist as he prepares to fire his Taurus again.

KWITCH!

PANEL 171: A wide rectangular panel filling the whole third row. Batman yanks the batclaw up to hurl Joker back onstage toward the reader, twirling him with centrifugal force like a log.

SH-WHOOOOOO-

PANEL 172: A square panel to the left on the first row of the thirtieth page. Centered in a shot from above, Joker's laughter starts to rise again through bloodied lips, now that he's been joined by Harley. Both partners are lying backfirst, their chests to the viewer.

JOKER

snicker Guess we got our... **grunt** ...private circus, sweetthat...!

HARLEY

snicker

PANEL 173: A square panel to the right on the first row. Robin stretches out his arm so Batman can hold it up, examining his knife wound.

BATMAN

Yeah, it's deep, alright.

ROBIN

snicker You know I'm bulletproof, Bruce... **grunt**

BATMAN

But you're clearly not *knife*-proof, you stupid kid. Let's have Al patch that up.

PANEL 174: A wide rectangular panel filling the whole second row. In a first-person view with fisheye distortion and a high FOV, Batman towers a mile over him. His legs appear to stretch ten feet taller; and the white lights from his compound eyes gleam down at the reader.

JOKER

snicker Ha ha ha... feel up fer... ha ha ha... feel up fer an encore, buddy? Ha ha... ha ha... ha...

PANEL 175: A wide rectangular panel filling the whole third row. The framing of the panel is more or less identical to the previous, only this time, Batman's rolling up the sliced portion of his batclaw wire, its length stretched horizontally between both his claws.

BATMAN

That's it. Let the coward out.

PANEL 176: A wide rectangular panel to the left on the first row of the thirty-first page. Police have gathered around the entrance to the Red Room, where snow now tumbles lightly from the indigo clouds. The scene dwells on Gordon lighting his pipe with a match, his head hanging low and his lower back against the driver's side door of his cruiser. A burly Hispanic detective in a street cop uniform approaches from the east, her stringy hair hanging down in thick bangs and a tight ponytail.

MONTOYA

Coulda asked fer a lighter, sir. You'd be gettin' me away from Harv.

GORDON

chortle You know, Renée, I'm used to matches. Sure didn't grow up with lighters.

PANEL 177: A square panel to the right on the first row. Montoya presses both her elbows against the roof of the cruiser behind her while Gordon wipes the snow off his coat with a gloved hand.

MONTOYA

We *are* gonna find 'em, sir. You can bet on that.

GORDON

Hm. You know, Sarah said I talk about Barb too much. The... wife, not the daughter. I mean... I might as *well* be. I saw her take a round, right in front 'a me.

MONTOYA

An' Jim Jr.?

GORDON

sigh Still haven't heard back. No surprise. He saw what happened.

PANEL 178: A square panel to the left on the second row. In a side profile, he huffs smoke with his cheek to the reader as he stares up at the rooftops.

GORDON

Frankly, I'm not sure I can let these girls go, but... they wouldn't be the *first*.

MONTOYA

Let's table all the sentiment fer now, sir.

PANEL 179: A square panel to the right on the second row. Gordon just about drops his pipe at the sound of the front doors swinging open.

SH-WHEEE!

PANEL 180: A square panel to the left on the third row. In the distance, the two women stumble out in an over-the-shoulder shot of Gordon, backlit from the crimson light inside. The taller woman is revealed to be older with plump lips while the other is practically a child, her cheeks freckled and rounded glasses over her hazel irises.

GORDON

Oh, my god...

PANEL 182: A wide rectangular panel to the right on the third row. Haggard, the girls bury themselves in his arms, and he clenches them against his breast by their backs as tight as he shuts his eyes. While the family takes up the right half of the panel, the buildings to the west fill up the left. The ears, shoulder spikes, and flapping cloak of the lone shadow watching them blend near-seamlessly into the roof.

GORDON

Who made this happen?

BARBARA

scoff You're never gonna believe it.

NARRATOR (GRAY BOX)

No... I reckon he *won't*.

PANEL 183: A square panel to the left on the first row of the thirty-second page. Inside the Batcave, Bruce's brawny digits wrap around the handle of his black mug. Meanwhile, a voice echoes out from his clawed glove, which lies unoccupied in front of his mousepad.

GORDON (CALL)

Ahem. You know, uh... Batman... **sigh** God, that sounds ridiculous... I didn't need the notice. My daughter told me who did it. You're kind of a bright spot in her, uh... dark little world, I guess. I just... wanna thank you for everything.

PANEL 184: A square panel to the right on the first row. The coffee's inhaled by the lips buried under Bruce's beard. Everything in the foreground is in shadow save for the cyan backlighting of his monitor.

GORDON (CALL)

Look. If you feel like helping, we've... *ahem...* got an armed robbery in progress. Negotiations haven't... panned out so well.

PANEL 185: A wide rectangular panel to the left on the second row. The Batcomputer displays Joker's mugshot, several of the bloodied corn kernels in his mouth missing in spite of his rictus. The label at the bottom of the window reads...

IDENTITY UNKNOWN

"THE JOKER"

GORDON (CALL)

We got the guy to say his name was Arnold, but I don't think he's well. Thinks his puppet's the one keeping the hostages. **scoff** You seem to have a way 'a... slipping by unnoticed, though. Talk to you soon.

PANEL 186: A square panel to the right on the second row. Bruce's free hand taps one of the arrow keys in front of him.

NARRATOR (GRAY BOX)

It was time to take my talons off Joker for a while. Part of me felt bad for him, but none of me even *knew* him. That meant it was off to the robbery, but I had a case of my own open.

PANEL 182: A wide rectangular panel filling the whole third row. Bruce leans into the display after it switches to a police sketch, his chin propped up by his fist. The man in the sketch is beefy, greasy, and slack-jawed, his mouth missing teeth and his hairline receded. His label reads...

IDENTITY UNKNOWN
"JOE CHILL"

NARRATOR (GRAY BOX)

Turns out, the Devil doesn't wear a suit. He wears *rags*. I should know.

I'd met him before.