

# CARRIAGE

## SPECIAL EDITION



## CARTEL CREDITS

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## ADDITIONAL CREDITS

➤ ***Cartel** makes use of the Apocalypse World engine created by Vincent and Meguey Baker through Lumpley Games. You can find more of their work at [lumpley.games](http://lumpley.games).*

➤ *The section on r-maps is drawn from Paul Beakley's post titled "Paul's R-Map Method" ([bit.ly/3ghEoLc](http://bit.ly/3ghEoLc)). You can find more of Paul's work on [indiegamereadingclub.com](http://indiegamereadingclub.com).*

➤ ***Getting fucking shot** was created by Jason Morningstar. You can find more of Jason's work at [bullypulpitgames.com](http://bullypulpitgames.com).*

➤ *Vector graphics used throughout from [Vecteezy.com](http://Vecteezy.com).*

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## CHAPTER ONE INTRODUCCIÓN.....4

¡Bienvenidos! .....	5
What is Cartel? .....	6
Tres Cuentos .....	8
How This Works .....	10
Playing Safely .....	13

## CHAPTER TWO LA GUERRA ANTIDROGAS .....14

¡Viva Mexico! .....	15
Un Poco de Historia .....	16
Los Jefes de Jefes .....	18
Los Carteles .....	20
La Ley de Mexico .....	24
Diablos y Angeles .....	26
Durango, MX .....	28

## CHAPTER THREE MECÁNICAS Y JUGADAS .....30

¿Plata o Plomo? .....	31
scenes y stories .....	32
Moves y Dice .....	34
Basic Moves .....	36
Stress Moves .....	58
Heat Moves .....	64
Other Rules .....	68

## CHAPTER FOUR LOS NARCOS DE DURANGO .....76

Fierro Pariente .....	77
Creating Narcos .....	78
The Playbooks .....	86
EL cocinero .....	88
La Esposa .....	92
El Halcon .....	96
El Narco .....	100
La Polizeta .....	104
La Rata .....	108
La Sicaria .....	112

## CHAPTER FIVE EL MAESTRO DE CEREMONIAS ..... 116

Esta es la Neta .....	117
Your Agendas .....	118
Your Principles .....	120
Your Moves .....	123
Moves Upon Moves .....	130
Engaging The PCs .....	134
Using NPCs in play .....	142
The First Session .....	146
The Long Example .....	150

## CHAPTER SIX EL AGUILA Y LA SERPIENTE.....156

Tan lejos de Dios .....	157
Siempre Juntos .....	158
Más Historia .....	160
Agencias Gringas .....	164
Agendas .....	166
New Principles .....	167
New MC Moves .....	168
Using Gringos in play .....	170
El Güero .....	174
Engaging El Güero .....	180
Otro Example .....	182



# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCCIÓN







# BIENVENIDOS!

**Cartel** is a tabletop roleplaying game in which you play ordinary people mired in the drugs, money, and violence of the Mexican drug war. When you play it, you and your *amigos* (or *enemigos*?) tell a story together, a tale of bloody drama and tragic violence set against the tense backdrop of the broader Mexican experience in Durango, Mexico.

As you play your character, you speak as they speak and decide what actions they take, but the events of the story aren't solely up to you. Instead, **Cartel** requires that you sometimes roll dice to find out what happens—a reminder that *la guerra antidrogas* is as unpredictable as it is inescapable—a way of ensuring that the story doesn't stagnate or deflate in the telling. In **Cartel**, you never truly know what will happen next.

This chapter introduces **Cartel's** setting and explains what you need to play the game with your friends, including:

- ▶ **The Basics:** This chapter opens with an introduction to how **Cartel** works as a game (page 6), as well as details about the setting—Durango, MX—and the drug war itself (page 8).
- ▶ **Best Practices:** Playing **Cartel** requires some play materials—such as playbooks and dice (page 10)—and a willingness to engage with difficult material (page 12). I cover best practices for both!
- ▶ **Safety Tools:** In addition to explaining the materials you need to play, I also cover some basic safety tools (page 13) your group might want to use when you play a session of **Cartel**.

If you're familiar with roleplaying games like **Cartel**, you can jump to **Chapter 2** (page 14) to read about the setting or **Chapter 3** (page 30) to learn more about how the mechanics of the game work.

# WHAT IS CARTEL?

When you play **Cartel**, you take on the role of a person whose life has been intertwined with the Sinaloa Cartel, a sprawling network that moves drugs—heroin, marijuana, cocaine, and meth—from producers in Central America to the rest of the world. Your characters might be lovers, friends, allies, or enemies, but they are all tied together through *los carteles*, often finding themselves in conflict with each other when things spiral out of control and violence ensues.

That's not to say that you're all ruthless killers. Most of the work of the Sinaloa Cartel is done by people more desperate than ambitious, more foolish than cruel. Some of you might even play characters who don't realize how completely the cartel has infiltrated your lives: a woman whose husband keeps his work with *los carteles* secret might find out too late what her *esposo* really does late at night.

**Cartel** is ultimately about the intersection between the roles characters have adopted—the cook, the *jefe*, the dirty cop—and the personal lives and obligations those characters want to preserve. What will you choose, *cabrón*, when you must decide between your life and the lives of your closest *amigos*? What will you do when your family gets too close to the secrets you keep from them? What are you willing to give up...to keep from losing everything?

## STORIES OF THE DRUG WAR

**Cartel** uses dice, but the stories you tell with your group while playing it aren't random. They are stories of circumstance and coincidence, *sí*, but they are also stories of cruel fate and crueler choices. **Cartel** is about clever people caught up in a system bigger than them, one that cares little if they live or die, so long as the flow of money and drugs is uninterrupted.

Playing these characters—instead of merely observing them from a distance—challenges the dominant narratives of the drug war, asking us to find the humanity in the people that are often described as monsters. In your hands, these *narcos* stay people, even when they do terrible things or make the wrong choices. After all, they are trying to do their best in the most difficult of situations, trying to find their way when all paths lead to darkness.

But be clear, *güey*, there are no heroes here. No rescue, no happy ending for all involved, no justice save what you claim for yourself. So long as *Los Estados Unidos* prohibits the drugs it can't stop smoking, snorting, and shooting, there will be cartels with all their accompanying sales and savagery. *Ni yendo a bailar a chalma*. Do not pretend that you can plan to make things better for the people of Mexico; you are lucky if you have a chance to do the right thing for once.



## 2007: DURANGO, MX

**Cartel** is set in a particular place at a particular time—Durango, MX (2007)—a moment in which the cartels were at the height of their power, just before the Mexican government set a plan in motion to remove the cartels with military force, a strategy that would leave more than 100,000 *Mexicanos* dead from a decade of violence.

Durango—located in the Free and Sovereign State of Durango, nearly ten hours from the Mexico-US border—is a small, but thriving *ciudad* known for its eclectic architecture, stunning cathedrals, and annual street festivals. Yet Durango also lies on the border between two of the most powerful drug trafficking organizations in the world: the Sinaloa Cartel and Los Zetas.

If the Sinaloa Cartel is classic rock—perfecting the combination of violence and patronage that made Mexico a narcostate in the first place—then Los Zetas is dubstep, incomprehensible to anyone who worked the streets fifty years ago. Los Zetas aren't the only cartel to use videotaped beheadings, mutilated bodies, and mass killings to seize power, but they pioneered the form.

It's hard to describe how much ordinary Mexicans fear Los Zetas. They are the boogey-men of Durango, “those-who-should-not-be-named,” the enemy that even the most hardened *narco* fears. *Monstruos, muchacho*.

Caught between the devils you know and the very things devils fear...that's you, *cabron*.



# TRES CUENTOS

Listen closely, *cabron*. Everything you need to know about **Cartel** is right here, *más o menos*. The stories of the people caught up in *la guerra* are more truthful than any government report.

## 43 MISSING STUDENTS

In September of 2014, forty-three students were kidnapped in broad daylight by unknown assailants on their way to a political protest. Some said the police had taken the students, but others claimed that it was cartel enforcers disguised as police. No one knew why these students had been targeted, and no one knew what had become of them.

Soon, authorities announced that they had found a mass grave. Forensic tests, however, revealed that authorities had discovered an entirely unrelated mass grave: the students' bodies were nowhere to be found. The shallow pit contained only the victims of another unrelated massacre.

Some reports claim that the local cartel—*Guerreros Unidos*—killed the students because the protesting youth had been infiltrated by Los Rojos, a rival gang. The mayor of Iguala, and his wife, were eventually arrested, and many believe that the power couple asked the cartels to kill the students to hold on to political power.

But the truth is...no one knows. No one will ever know. That's Mexico. That's the drug war.

## THE \$57,000 RECEIPT

Back in 2005, a woman driving across the Mexico-US border was detained when US border agents found over \$50,000 hidden in her car.

The agents detained the woman and took the money, but didn't have any way to charge her. It's not illegal to have money, *güey*, even if everyone knows you don't have it legally. They can take it from you, but they can't charge you with anything. Not even if you're Mexican.

Those *pinches* cops asked if she was going to be in danger when she went back to Mexico. It's a typical police tactic: put a *narco* in a tough spot and then ask if they want any help staying alive.

The woman said no, mostly because "it wasn't that much money." Turns out, \$50,000 is just the cost of doing business at the border. The cartels expect folks they send to *el norte* to get caught sometimes with cash or drugs.

But the woman did have a request: a receipt. See, she knew that getting caught by the cops wasn't that big a deal, but she wasn't a *pendeja*. Losing the money wasn't the problem. But if the *jefes* thought she stole the money...that's a death sentence. So the cops wrote her a receipt, she went back to Mexico, and everyone was happy.

Even the cartels keep records, *cabron*. How else would they count all their money, scattered across international bank accounts?

## NARCOCORRIDOS

The cartels are a constant source of death and destruction in Mexico, but not everyone sees *los narcos* as the villains of Mexico. There's a whole industry of media—like gangsta rap and mob movies—that promotes, documents, and reports on the cartels, portraying them as romantic outlaws, vibrant revolutionaries, or even just tragic figures of Mexican myth.

*Narcocorridos*, for example, are ballads about *narcos* and their escapades, morality tales and poetic myths that glorify (and sometimes demonize) the *narcos*. These songs are extremely popular all over Mexico. They are everywhere.

In Ioan Grillo's excellent book, *El Narco*, he interviews a narcocorrido singer named Conrado, asking him if anyone's ever made a career off a song instead of the other way around:

.....  
*Conrado tells me the story of one low-level trafficker who paid to get a particularly catchy ballad made about him. Soon everyone played it on his car stereo. "The crime bosses were like, 'Bring me the guy from that song. I want him to do the job for me.' So he rose through the ranks because of the song."*

*"So what has happened to him now?" I asked.*

*"Oh, they killed him. He got too big. It was because of the song, really."*  
.....

In a land without irony, the man who laughs is king. *Así es la vida*. You know how it goes.

## QUID EST VERITAS?

A few thousand years ago, our lord and savior Jesus Christ told Pontius Pilate, Roman judge and executioner, that he came unto the world to bear witness to the truth. Some say Pilate mocked Jesus, responding "Quid est veritas?" What is truth? Does it matter when so much else is at stake? Does it matter at all?

So it is in Mexico. Just because a story seems *increíble* doesn't make it *falsa*. Did the Virgin Mary tell an Aztec convert—Juan Diego—to build a shrine for her in 1531? Did she give him dozens of roses and place her image on his coat so that he could convince the local bishop to permit his efforts? Does it matter? Pope John Paul II still canonized Juan Diego in 2002 at Mary's shrine, the *Basílica de Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe*; the Zapatistas carried Guadalupean flags when they marched on Mexico City.

Truth is the story that lasts the longest, no matter what actually happened. Everything else might as well be a clumsy lie.

In *los carteles*, the secrets everyone keeps from each other—the lies that litter family reunions and court testimony alike—compound this problem. The only credible story is the worst case scenario, the one that keeps you safe by reminding you to trust no one, no one at all.

*Piensa mal y acertarás, amigo*. Expect the worst, and you'll never be disappointed by the way things turn out. Expect anything more, and you're just setting yourself up for a tough fall.

Quid est veritas? It's never that simple, *güey*.

# HOW THIS WORKS

In order to play **Cartel**, you need a few *amigos* who want to explore Mexican narcofiction with you for a few hours. You might decide to play just a single session of the game—sort of like an intense movie—but most sessions of **Cartel** end with plenty of story still to tell. It's up to your group to decide how many sessions is a good fit for your story and playstyle.

**Cartel** works best with roughly four players and a **Maestro de Ceremonias** (MC), a player devoted to portraying the rest of the drug war outside of the **player characters** (PCs). More than five PCs spreads out the game too much, leaving you with too little time to focus equally on the characters, but fewer than three PCs makes it hard to generate enough *chisme* drama and relationships between the PCs.

Before you start your first session, you need to gather some supplies to help the game run smoothly. Usually the MC brings these tools to the first session, but other players are welcome to contribute. You probably want to keep this rulebook handy as well, in case you have a question about something while you're playing the game.

Everything you need to print is available at [magpiegames.com/cartel](http://magpiegames.com/cartel). If you'd like to read the text for the playbooks in this book, you can find them on page 87 in **Chapter 4**.

## NECESSARY SUPPLIES

You need a few supplies to play **Cartel**:

- **Dice:** You need at least two six-sided dice, the kind you find in **Monopoly** or **Risk**. You can get by with just one set, but most people like to use their own dice. Why give away your luck to someone else when you need it most?
- **Playbooks:** You need a copy of each of the seven core **playbooks** for **Cartel**. Each playbook is a different archetype players choose from when creating their characters. You can add in **limited edition** playbooks or take out one or two core playbooks for your game, but you need to have a variety; no two players can choose the same playbook.
- **Pencils y Paper:** The playbooks have space to take notes, but you need to have other paper on hand for makeshift maps, lists of characters, etc. And pencils aplenty, *cabrón*.
- **Additional Materials:** You might want to pick up the **Deck of Locations** or the **Map of Durango**—alongside other images—or print out additional worksheets for use in the game. You can learn more about these items at [magpiegames.com/cartel](http://magpiegames.com/cartel).



## WHY PLAY CARTEL?

When I have explained **Cartel** to people over the last five years, I often get some version of “Good god, why would I want to do that? That sounds like a terrible, horrible time!”

To be honest, I don’t mind that reaction. **Cartel** isn’t for everyone. It’s intense, requiring you to play against your fellow players as much as you play against any part of the setting while you keep your head amidst the violence and chaos of the Mexican drug war. ¡Chingale!

But for those who want to tackle such content, I can promise you this: **Cartel** is a unique experience crafted to simulate the paranoia and tension of your favorite crime dramas, wrapped up in a polished, tragic game engine.

I’ve spent years honing **Cartel’s** systems and playbooks because I don’t want this game to be misery tourism through the worst parts of Mexico. Instead, I’ve labored to create a game that captures the intensity of crime fiction like **The Wire**, **Breaking Bad**, and **Jackie Brown**, all wrapped up in the culture and swagger of **Once Upon a Time in Mexico** or **El Mariachi**. I’ve strived to *make a Mexican crime game that’s fun*.

When you play **Cartel**, you walk a mile in the shoes of people struggling to make the best of a bad situation without losing what little they have scraped together. Each decision they make matters more than you might expect, *güey*, and their lives (and deaths) will move you in unexpected ways.



## PLAYING DIVERSE CHARACTERS

I often get asked how non-Mexicans can portray Mexicans in **Cartel**. I've come to understand the question is ultimately about respect. After all, there aren't any real Quendi for you to slander with your offensive portrayal of Eldar.

I can't snap my fingers and make you comfortable playing characters from a culture you don't know, but I have a couple of rules I find useful when I play a character (including NPCs) from a different racial or ethnic identity.

### Focus on Demeanor

Slang and accents are most likely to convey a cheap stereotype, and they are often the least exciting thing about diverse characters we love. Instead, I try to think of an actor that I would love to see playing the character and think about their demeanor and affect: how do they say things and what do they say?

Take Benicio del Toro, for example. He's going to show up in a lot of **Cartel** games I run, but I never try to mimic his accent. Instead, I try to make my portrayal mimic his *intensity*. He tends to lead with his head, as if he's thinking his way through scenes. He's precise with his language. He is menacing, but rarely threatening or vulgar. Including all of that is unlikely to cause harm or offend anyone, but it will summon the character I want to see in the game.

### Let Them Be Human

No one worries about playing elves because elves aren't real...but elves are also more than one thing. If someone doesn't like your elf character, you can always say, "I hear you, but that's how my character acts. He likes to quilt and I think that's cool." Since it's your game, that's how your elf acts. No one can argue with you; let them make their own elf!

Give **Cartel's** characters that same breadth and depth. Make them diverse, even within a group. Grant them unique interests—like Freamon from **The Wire** making doll furniture. Let them think diverse thoughts. Mexicans (as a whole) might feel a particular way about politics or family or whatever, but we're not a monolith.

### Relax, Be Cool

Once you let go of the idea that you're playing a character that has to represent all Mexicans, you can just play the character. That sounds like a dodge, but it's not. *It's the only way forward.*

You're playing **Cartel** to have fun. Just play the character, with all the wants, needs, and opportunities that come with that character's immediate story. What's happening in their life right now? What conflicts are they dealing with at work? At home? How are they planning to solve those problems? All of their conflicts—their internal life!—are ten times more important than their skin tone or nationality.

# PLAYING SAFELY

I absolutely trust everyone who sits down to play **Cartel** in good faith to treat the setting and characters with respect. It's possible for you to create a character that is a terrible, racist stereotype, but many parts of the game—from the playbooks to the setting to the moves—do a great deal of work to keep that from happening.

And yet...it is inevitable that at some table, in some session, lines will be crossed. Here are some tips to work through those transgressions.

## SETTING EXPECTATIONS

Before you begin a game of **Cartel**, take a few moments with your group to discuss your collective expectations. I don't know if it's possible to play a game of **Cartel** without violence or without drugs, but the degree and scope of description matters a lot to people. Talk to each other and be honest with your feelings.

It's possible that such a discussion leads your group to decide to play a different game. ¡*No hay problema, cabrones!* You don't always have to watch crime fiction when you go to the movies, and you don't have to play **Cartel**. This game is designed to make you and your group uncomfortable, to push you to think through your own morality and circumstances; you and your *amigos* might not be in the right place for that kind of experience.

## SAFETY TOOLS

If you decide to play **Cartel**, invest in safety tools, even with your usual group. Such tools can't make the game risk-free, but they can help your friends have an ongoing conversation about how the game is working for you all. Here are a few examples of safety tools you might want to use when you play **Cartel**:

- ▶ **The X-Card** is a tool that helps groups manage difficult content without setting boundaries in advance of play. Place a card with an "X" on the table; a player who feels uncomfortable with the game can touch the card to ask the group to rewrite or step back from the scene. You can read more about the X-card at [tinyurl.com/x-card-rpg](http://tinyurl.com/x-card-rpg).
- ▶ **Lines and Veils** is an exercise in which your group holds a discussion prior to the game about what content you all want to exclude completely (lines) while reserving the right to fade to black around additional difficult content (veils) during the game. You can read more at [tinyurl.com/lines-veils-rpg](http://tinyurl.com/lines-veils-rpg).

Remember that safety tools are supplemental to actual discussion within your group. Talk to each other while you play and be kind!



# CHAPTER TWO

LA GUERRA ANTIDROGAS



# VIVA MÉXICO!

You don't have to be *un experto* on *la guerra contra el narco* to play **Cartel**, but you can't wander into the game blind either, *güey*. The playbooks, the moves, and the overall structure of the game all require you to know a little something about the way things work in Mexico.

That said, **Cartel** is less interested in accuracy than authenticity; I need you to understand the broad strokes of the drug war far more than I need you to understand any particular policy or remember any single event. And if the setting described in this chapter sparks your interest, *cabrón*, you can dig deeper, but the rough shape of things is what you really need to know to play the game.

Thus, this chapter explains the history of Mexico and the cartels, detailing the major actors and factions that shape **Cartel's** setting:

- ▶ **La Historia:** This chapter starts with a short primer on Mexican history (page 16) and a brief summary of important events for the cartels from the 1950s through 2007 (page 18).
- ▶ **Cartel Structure:** You may find it useful to understand the structure of the cartels. I review how cartels operate (page 20) and the major roles your characters can take on within *los carteles* (page 21).
- ▶ **Everyone Else:** I also review the other factions that might appear in a game of **Cartel**, including Mexican law enforcement (page 24), Los Zetas (page 26), and the Catholic Church (page 27).

If you want to jump ahead to understand how **Cartel** works as a game, skip to Chapter 3 (page 30) to learn more about the mechanics or read Chapter 4 (page 77) to find out how to make your own characters!

# UN POCO DE HISTORIA

Before I tell you about the drug war or *los carteles*, I have to first explain some things about *México*. Like all countries born from the fires of colonialism, Mexico has a complicated and tragic history; you won't understand a thing about the narcostate until you have some inkling of how we got here in the first place, *mi amigo*.

## 1492: LA CONQUISTA

While Christopher Columbus sailed an ocean blue, his legacy is a sea of red. Soon after “discovering” lands in the Caribbean that he incorrectly believed belonged to India, Columbus brought back enough treasure and legends to usher in a wave of European conquest and genocide that killed more than 80% of the indigenous people living in Central and South America over the next century.

*México* was not spared, *güey*. The mighty Aztec Empire—weakened by smallpox and disease—fell to Spanish conquistadors and their indigenous allies in 1521, providing a base of operations from which the Spanish waged war against the people of the New World for the next 150 years.

The precious gold and silver extracted from the Americas enabled the Crown to massively expand the Spanish Empire, but did nothing to improve the lives of the indigenous people who survived the genocide that followed contact.

## 1821: MEXICAN INDEPENDENCE

Hundreds of years after the fall of the Aztecs, Mexican revolutionaries—inspired by Napoleon's defeat of Spain and the American and French revolutions—won the more than decade long war of independence against the Spanish Crown. No longer truly indigenous or European, many Mexicans had begun to view themselves with a unique political identity and a desire for self-rule.

But democracy arrived later. Conservatives first installed Emperor Agustín de Iturbide and a Mexican Empire, but Iturbide was deposed and executed within two years. Spain refused to recognize Mexico's independence until 1836.

## 1910: MEXICAN REVOLUTION

Mexico struggled with further conflict (and European intervention) through the 1800s; President Porfirio Díaz finally managed to bring a measure of stability to the country...but he served seven consecutive terms. His rule (the Porfiriato) was characterized by a ruthless consolidation of power and wealth among elites.

The people—led by Francisco Madero, Pancho Villa, and Emiliano Zapata—revolted again, but the conflict raged for nearly thirty years across Mexico as the United States routinely intervened to promote its own interests and the insurgents failed to maintain power.





## 2000: THE MODERN ERA

After two decades of violence, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) took power in 1929, promising a return to stability. To some degree, they succeeded; PRI ruled *México* for roughly 70 years, including an expansive era after World War II that brought new levels of prosperity. But unrest in the 60s blossomed into *huelgas* (strikes) by the early 70s, and people began to question PRI's rule. Neoliberal reforms in the 80s did little to forestall the inevitable: PRI lost the presidency to the National Action Party (PAN) in 2000.

PAN's victories brought democracy in only the vaguest sense. The 2006 Presidential election of PAN candidate President Felipe Calderón was widely seen as illegitimate election fraud.

But as Calderón took office, cartel violence in the states of Tamaulipas and Michoacán grew more prevalent—Los Zetas, the Sinaloas, and the Gulf Cartel openly fighting. Calderón decided to kill many *pájaros* with *una piedra*: he sent the military to deal with *los narcos*, attempting to both distract from questions of his legitimacy and put *los carteles* in their place once more.

Calderón's escalation of *la guerra antidrogas* unleashed a wave of death that rivals the Conquista itself, killing more than 100,000 Mexicans over the next ten years while rumors swirled around his administration's connections to the Sinaloa Cartel. The military had some victories, of course, but the cartels are resilient *enemigos*...

# LOS JEFES DE JEFES

This history of *México* is written through *transformaciones y revoluciones*, conflicts that reimagined Mexican life and structures in messy and sometimes incomplete ways. The history of *los carteles* is no different, *cabrón*. There have been kings and princes, rulers of vast territories who thought themselves untouchable. But all things must end, *muchacho*, to make room for all the new things that start.

## EL PADRINO: MIGUEL ÁNGEL

Drug smugglers have moved product into the United States from Mexico since the early 1900s, but *los carteles* didn't consolidate those efforts until the 1970s. Suddenly, Mexican drug lords were more than just minor criminals; they became legends. In particular, Miguel Ángel Félix Gallardo—founder of the Guadalajara Cartel in Mexico—rose to prominence in Mexico as *El Padrino*, The Godfather.

Don Miguel was a former Judicial Police officer, a cunning criminal who seized on the government's success in stopping Colombian shipments through Florida by connecting Pablo Escobar's cocaine to American markets through Mexico. Along with Caro Quintero and Ernesto Fonseca Carrillo, Don Miguel ruled over nearly all of Mexico's drug operations, bringing in billions of dollars a year in profits.

## The Inevitable Fall

But nothing ever lasts, *güey*. Don Miguel and his associates were *los jefes de jefes*, but their reach exceeded their grasp. Drunk on their own power and believing themselves above all law, they murdered an undercover DEA agent named Kiki Camarena, retribution for his success in undermining their criminal enterprise.

The Americans were outraged—convincing the Mexican government to arrest both Caro Quintero and Ernesto Fonseca Carrillo—but *El Padrino* was beyond their reach; his connections ran too deep for him to be extradited over something as trivial as a murder of a single DEA agent.

## An Unholy Alliance

Yet...Don Miguel was eventually brought to heel. In 1989, PRI decided that *El Padrino* was more useful as a *perro* than a *lobo*. He was arrested, and his connections within the cartels—men like El Chapo and the Arellano Felix brothers—were given their regions and territories, allowed to keep their holdings in exchange for their fealty and payments to PRI.

Separated from his empire, *El Padrino* struggled to retain control. He tried repeatedly to escape prison or earn parole, but PRI's plan required his absence. He has spent the last thirty years in a maximum security cell.

## LOS NUEVOS NARCOS

After *El Padrino's* arrest, the *jefes* warred against each other. The conflict was mostly hidden from public view—at least through the 90s—but Joaquín “El Chapo” Guzmán (Sinaloa Cartel) and Juan García Ábrego (Gulf Cartel) emerged as a few of the clear victors. Their organizations seized territory and control from both the failing Guadalajara Cartel and the remnants of the Colombian cartels that had survived Don Pablo’s similar fall. As *la guerra contra el narco* began to consume Mexico, these cartels defined the conflict to come.

### The Sinaloa Cartel

*Cártel de Sinaloa* (CDS) originally followed in the footsteps of Don Miguel, moving cocaine into the United States for the Colombians. But as the Colombian cartels collapsed and Mexican meth grew more popular, the Sinaloas became a force unto themselves; they were no longer mere smugglers but powerful drug lords whose operations produced millions of dollars a month in illegal revenues.

El Chapo took control of CDS in the mid-90s, using a combination of horrific violence and charming patronage to secure his hold on the organization. He oversaw the absorption of most of his rival cartels—including the remnants of Don Miguel’s Guadalajara Cartel—and evaded capture throughout the early 2000s, becoming an international kingpin and famous outlaw.

### ¿QUÉ SÉ YO?

*Narcos* know a mix of Mexican myth and cartel history—honoring *El Padrino* in the same breath as Pancho Villa—but most people care only about their immediate *problemas*; *los narcos* have more *problemas* than most!

In **Cartel**, your character may be versed in all of this history...or they may know nothing about their country and profession. There’s no right answer, *cabrón*; you don’t need to memorize history to start playing the game.

### The Gulf Cartel

By the early 1990s, *Cártel del Golfo* (CDG) had become the Sinaloa’s primary rivals, an equally sprawling and violent empire that moved millions of kilos of drugs all over the world.

The organization survived the arrest of Don Juan in 1995, but it took five years for a new *jefe* (Osiel Cárdenas Guillén) to assume full control. Don Osiel recruited Mexican Army Special Forces soldiers—Los Zetas—to act as CDG’s paramilitary wing (see page 26 for more on Los Zetas). Eventually, Los Zetas would prove to be poor servants, but they were a valuable asset in the early 2000s, allowing the CDG to compete on equal footing with the Sinaloa Cartel.

# LOS CARTELES

*Los carteles de México* aren't like ethnic mob organizations; the closest structure is probably a fast food franchise, a hydra of independent operators that get branding and resources while passing money up to the parent organization.

## LIFE AS A NARCO

For the most part, *narcos* know only that they work for a specific cartel...and little about the way the cartel operates or who is in charge. *Los carteles* don't hold strategic meetings or inform lower-ranking members about future plans; the less everyone knows, the less a *federal* can get out of a lowlife *sicario* or *halcón* if someone stupidly decides to talk instead of going to jail.

New *narcos* learn quickly: when you're asked to do something, you do it without asking too many questions. It's better for *todos* this way, *cabrón*. You don't really see the bigger picture.

The lack of transparency means that working for the cartels is a mess of lies and half-truths. You only know what the people directly above you think you need to know, and it's never clear who is on your side. Could be that your cousin works as a *halcón* like he says; could be that he's just a *pendejo* in over his head with the wrong people. Only way to know is to start asking questions...but anyone who asks a lot of questions is not someone any *narco inteligente* truly trusts.

## LAS PLAZAS

The cartel's criminal activity—smuggling drugs, kidnapping businessmen, fighting other cartels—is always wrapped up in territory. Drugs need to move *norte*; controlling drug corridors, especially areas that lay between labs and *El Norte*, is the top priority. Whoever holds the land controls the flow, making money no matter who is shipping drugs to the *gringos*.

Back when PRI was in control of Mexico—before “democracy” and the narcostate—the government itself organized the cartels into a relatively peaceful and equitable split of territory called *las plazas*. The cartels in control of *las plazas* paid money to the government in a system of bribes and kickbacks, and were thus free to move drugs north and money south. If a cartel got out of hand (or forgot to pay), *la policía* and *los federales* moved against them, triumphantly scattering the cartels like roaches.

When PRI lost control of the presidency in 2000—and PAN attempted to negotiate new, more favorable deals with *los narcos*—the cartels decided that they liked the *plaza* system too much to let the newly elected elites screw it up. Now the cartels run the show, taxing those who move drugs through their *plazas*, and paying bribes only when they gain more from slinging silver than slinging bullets.



## EL NARCO: THE BOSS

Given the cartel's loose structure, each *plaza* is an independent territory, a fiefdom that answers only to the *narco* in charge of that particular corner of Mexico. There are many lesser bosses in a given *plaza*, but the one and only *patrón* whose rule is absolute is *El Narco*. To him, all respect is given and fealty paid; to defy him is a quick death, and to anger him is foolish suicide. Installed by the heads of the cartel, *El Narco* is in charge of all of the cartel's activities and personnel in a *plaza*, the head *narco* who represents whatever authority can be mustered.

### Heavy is the Head

It's common in less populated regions—like Durango—for *El Narco*'s influence to extend well outside the cartel, beyond even the usual corruption you might expect in a narcostate. Yes, *El Narco* may have *la policía* in his pocket and connections within the federal government, but he also might be a celebrated businessman or a beloved mayor, his loyalty to the cartels an open secret known by all.

Such authority makes *El Narco* more of a king than a mere crimelord; all of the problems of the *plaza* are his to address. He has no escape, no one who will remove the burden of the decisions he must make, and no one he can trust. Even his closest allies are the ones most likely to betray him. *Como Judas, sí?* No one can be trusted when you have so much.

### Above El Narco

That's not to say that *El Narco* answers to no one. Quite the contrary! The real bosses, the heads of the Sinaloa Cartel, take a keen interest in whatever activities and profits *El Narco* makes on their behalf. It is expected that *El Narco* will make his payment to those who have blessed him with the right to rule in full and on time, regardless of whatever *problemas* he may have encountered running *la plaza*.

Thus, it doesn't matter what kind of business a local cartel conducts, so long as the real *jefes* believe that replacing *El Narco* is an unwise business strategy. But failing to make payments—or causing more trouble than you are worth—is a quick way to a bloody retirement, *cabrón*. Don't forget that everyone owes someone for their power...even kings and gods.



## REINAS DE LOS CARTELES

The politics of gender and sexuality in *México* map poorly onto what *gringos* think is *normal*. For example, same-sex marriage was made legal in Mexico City in 2009...but most Mexicans still hold a fairly traditional understanding of family structures and gender roles. *Es complicado*.

Violence against women is a particular problem in Mexico: there were so many *mujeres* killed along the US-Mexico border in the late 90s that the term *femicide* became a common way of discussing the murders. Few arrests were made; the victims were mostly poor women who came to the border to work at the *maquiladoras*—cheap factories—that sprang up in the wake of the North American Free Trade Agreement.

Thus, you might expect the cartels to exclude women—or anyone with an “alternative lifestyle”—from positions of power, but the *narcos* care much more about profit than they care about tradition. They are always willing to make exceptions for those who are willing to work.

Of course, women who work for the *narcos* pack drugs, count money, or ferry contraband. But there are a few who rise to power as *jefas* or gain reputations as fearsome *sicarias*. It helps if you are the widow of *El Narco* or the daughter of a famous *sicario*, but your life with the cartels is whatever you make it, *chica*.

But regardless of the fate *los mujeres narcas* are seeking, they often find the same end as any man. *El que la hace, la paga. Quien mal anda, mal acaba*. Your gender isn't much of a shield when you decide to join *la guerra antidrogas* in full.

## LOS TENIENTES: THE DEPUTIES

*El Narco* oversees *la plaza*, but he wouldn't be caught dead handling drugs, money, or murders himself. He's got *jefes pequeños* for all those illegal activities, lieutenants and bosses who keep the foot soldiers and low-level help focused on making everything profitable.

These middle managers are the primary authorities most *narcos* report to about their work. But to *El Narco*, these *jefes* are his trusted *tenientes*, the people he relies upon to handle his business and give him some safe distance from the cartels' day-to-day operations.

## A Vast Machine

But what operations do *los tenientes* oversee? The answer is a little bit of everything: extortion, kidnapping, smuggling, bribery, and violence. Whatever they can make money doing!

Usually, *los tenientes* focus on transferring meth, cocaine, and heroin from Mexico to the United States: they supervise labs where the drugs are made, warehouses from which those drugs are shipped, and secret places in which the money is counted and secured. If a cartel gets cash from kidnappings, extortion, or other schemes...*los tenientes* will oversee all that too.

Ideally, *la plaza* is a machine that turns purchased (or stolen) chemicals and materials into drugs, which are then converted to cash at an industrial scale, all while taking a cut of whatever else happens in the territory the cartel controls.

## LOS SICARIOS: THE ENFORCERS

*El Narco's* lieutenants take care of the ordinary work of running *la plaza*, but any kingpin who leaves the entirety of his empire in the hands of his underlings is a *pendejo*. In addition to whatever thugs he has in his employ, *El Narco* also keeps a few *sicarios*—cartel assassins—on hand to deal with special problems that arise.

Named after a group of Jewish assassins called “The Sicarii” who attempted to drive the Romans out of Jerusalem around 50 AD, *sicarios* are more than mere gunmen or gangsters. They are the gunfighters of the drug war, *caballeros* who have sworn fealty to the kings of México. Their names are legendary, and the exploits of *sicarios* frequently appear in *narcocorridos*, the *música norteño* that celebrates *los narcos* and their mysterious cartel assassins.

### Armed y Dangerous

Since it's difficult to get your hands on a firearm in Mexico, most cartels get their weapons from the United States. *Los sicarios* often delight in obtaining brash American weaponry, including assault rifles, fully automatic pistols, and the occasional rocket propelled grenade launcher.

As you might guess, *sicarios* solve problems by murdering them...but that doesn't make them fools. *Sicarios* are the trusted agents of *El Narco* for a reason; they are often smart, clever, tenacious foes who lure their enemies into traps and disrupt the odds when facing larger groups.

## LOS HALCONES: THE LACKEYS

Not everyone involved in the cartels has such glamorous work. *Los halcones*—the hawks—are at the bottom of the organizational hierarchy, usually impoverished children and teenagers who surveil the city, spying on *los federales* and other enemies of *los narcos* in exchange for petty cash and minor favors.

A few *halcones* end up with larger roles in the cartel, but only if they can show *los jefes* some promising skill or capacity for murder that earns the *halcón* in question a better position. Moving up isn't impossible, but *los te-nientes* would rather recruit a fresh *sicario* than train a *pendejo halcón* to shoot straight.

## COYOTES, COCINEROS, Y MÁS

In addition to the above personnel, the cartel also makes use of various smugglers (*coyotes*), drug cooks (*cocineros*), and other manual labor. For the most part, these people are disposable, trusted to handle only their part of the process and little else. The people who pack and weigh the drugs for shipment or prepare the chemicals for cooking meth are easily replaced if something goes wrong, the kind of people who mostly just follow the routine instructions.

Occasionally, a cook or smuggler is so proficient that they can demand extra pay or better working conditions. But *los jefes* despise negotiating with their own workers more than they enjoy the benefits of excellent work...

# LA LEY DE MÉXICO

*Los carteles* may not exactly fear the law, but only a *pendejo* ignores the schemes of government officials. Remember, *cabrón*: *El Padrino* found himself in a cell at the end of his illustrious career...

## LA POLICÍA

The Mexican municipal police department—*la policía*—is allegedly the first line of defense against the criminal activities of the cartels. In reality, however, the local cops are powerless to do much in the face of the *dinero y violencia* that *narcos* leverage to get things done, often standing by helplessly as the cartels seize the day.

And who can blame them? An incredibly good salary for a *policía* might amount to a few hundred dollars a month, a fraction of what a successful *narco* brings home in just a few days. Why bother standing against *los carteles*, *cabrón*, when you can take a month's pay to look the other way when *narcos* move drugs to *El Norte* and sell them to those *pinche gringos*?

Faced with such cruel logic, even the best cops bow to the realities of the drug war. Truth be told, everyone is on the take, *cabrón*...even the good cops. It's better to take the bribes than to stand out in the crowd of obviously corrupt officers; the honest *policía* know how to look dishonest enough to stay alive even if they don't want to be complicit in it all.

## Agents of El Narco

In most places like Durango, the vast majority of *la policía* end up working directly for *los carteles*—semi-official muscle who take care of things for whichever *narco* pays them. Beat cops might even escort *El Narco* around town, providing protection to an esteemed member of the community, while high-ranking officers regularly join *El Narco* for dinner to talk business.

The corruption of the *la policía* ensures that *los carteles* can smuggle, threaten, and even kill with impunity. Who can you go to for help, *güey*, when *los narcos* ask you for protection money? Who will help you when they kill your *hijo* or *hija*? The people who swore *juramentos* to protect you? They work for the cartels too!

## Wearing the Mask

Cops who want to do good have two choices: put on a mask or end up dead. In a twist straight from a *cómic*, some police pursue justice by wearing a mask when they do their real work. If *todas las policía* take bribes during the day, who can say which officer confiscated all those drugs? No one knows. And if the cop in question is lucky, no *narcos* will ever, ever find out. Of course, the masks also protect *la policía* from accountability; citizens can't file complaints about police brutality when they don't know which cop to blame.



## LOS FEDERALES

Mexican federal police are *los federales*, officers similar to agents from the Federal Bureau of Investigation in the United States. A *federal* is better paid and trained than any Durango *policía*. They aren't heroes exactly, but *los federales* also aren't the obvious *cobardes* that *narcos* usually push around and ignore.

In fact, *narcos* dismiss the federal police at their own peril: an honest *federal* is always looking to make his career arresting prominent *narcos*...and a corrupt *federal* will demand a significant bribe to look the other way if they catch a *narco* in a bad spot. *Los federales* go toe-to-toe with *los carteles* and sometimes find themselves in charge. ¡Órale!

## Corruption Within

The prior federal police agency—*Policía Judicial Federal* (PJF)—was closed down in 2002 after widespread corruption within the organization finally came to light. More than 20% of officers serving in PJF ended up in jail, their arrests a supposed indicator of PAN's commitment to cleaning up *los federales* after PRI's defeat.

But nothing ever changes. Right, *cabrón*? The new agency—*Policía Federal Ministerial* (PFM)—is rumored to be just as corrupt as PJF ever was. *Los federales* might have to keep bribes a bit more secret now, but *los carteles* know that keeping a few *federales* on the payroll is cheaper than fighting them in the courts...or facing them in the streets.

## LOS AMERICANOS

Obviously, the Americans have their claws in all of this, *güey*. They almost can't help themselves, promising money to some agencies while undermining others to accomplish the real objectives of *El Norte*. ¡Chingale!

If you want to know how *Los Americanos* operate, and even include the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) or the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) into your game, check out *El Águila y La Serpiente*, as a digital download or an appendix in the special edition of *Cartel*.

## Special Missions y Taskforces

Calderón's election in 2006 prompted all manner of changes in Mexico's strategy to defeat *los carteles*, including raids by the Mexican Army. But President Calderón also demanded that new efforts be made by the PFM as well to combat narcotics throughout *México*.

PFM dedicated new resources to special operations and taskforces, often working in concert with American agents and local *policía*, but efforts to apprehend important *narcos* was repeatedly undercut by PFM's own officers and leaders, many of whom were still on the payroll of the Sinaloa Cartel in particular...

# DIABLOS Y ÁNGELES

Cops and robbers may make up the frontline of this conflict, but this is *México*! We have to talk about heaven and hell if you want to get the full picture of *la guerra contra el narco*.

## LOS ZETAS

The *historia* of Los Zetas, like the story of all *diablos*, begins with a fall. As PRI began to collapse in the late 90s, the Gulf Cartel recruited Mexican special forces to serve as cartel enforcers, calling them “Los Zetas” after the soldiers’ government call signs (Z-37, Z-74, etc.). Lured by the promise of riches—and eager to avoid *los platos ratos* for war crimes during PRI’s rule—these elite operatives immediately put their Israeli and American training to work terrorizing *otros carteles*.



## Devil May Care

And how did a small collection of military commandos intimidate entire drug cartels? Simple, *cabron*: Los Zetas escalated *everything*. They filmed themselves cutting off the heads of their enemies and posted the videos online, kidnapped and tortured *narcos*’ family members, and struck hard and fast at any organized opposition with military precision.

By 2007, Los Zetas had become the bogeymen of the bogeymen, a group whose efficiency made them loathed and feared by all, even their masters within the Gulf Cartel. Cops that worked with them began to be called “polizetas,” and their influence only seemed to grow and grow. On paper, they were an organization managed by *Los Golfos*; in reality, they had already become a cartel unto themselves, terrifying and ruthless.

## Diablos, Todos

Los Zetas are flesh and blood, *muchacho*, just like any other *narcos*. Just don’t ever forget that their real power is their moral imagination. They are already thinking of ways to hurt you that you would never even imagine possible. The *narcos* who work for the Sinaloa Cartel aren’t exactly pacifists, but even the most hardened Sinaloa *sicario* would balk at the acts of cruelty the Zetas regularly perform...

## THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

You might expect the Catholic Church to harbor an ironclad opposition to the activities of *los carteles*. After all, even the least violent *narcos* traffic in addictive substances and regularly engage in extortion, blackmail, and kidnapping!

But *los narcos* hail from the most devout, rural areas of Mexico, and they are careful to offer money and protection to the *padres* and parishes in their *plazas*. *Sicarios* have their weapons blessed after mass; *narco* funerals are elaborate—and expensive—affairs. In short, the *narcos* are largely religious, and the Church cannot help but value their patronage.

## Revolutionaries, One and All

The Church's position makes more sense in the broader context of the Mexican political experience. Many Mexicans believe that “the people” have never truly been represented by any Mexican government. Emperor Iturbide, President Porfirio Díaz, President Calderón? None of these elites have truly cared for the rural poor or their poverty and problems!

The heart of *México*, for many Mexicans, lies in the intersection of the indigenous people and the Catholic Church, in the rural *campesinos* who toiled in the fields and joined Emiliano Zapata during the Revolution. Who would you trust, *cabrón*, if you were the Catholic Church? *Los narcos* who hate the government or the government that has always hated you?

## SANTIFICADO SEA TU NOMBRE

Benito Juárez, an indigenous politician elected President of Mexico in 1857, is famous for leading “the second transformation,” a secular revision of the Mexican public sphere. The first transformation—the war for independence—freed Mexico from direct European control, but it was Juárez who attempted to limit the Catholic Church, a major obstacle to progressive reforms.

Yet the Church was not so easily removed from Mexican life. Reforms led by Juárez removed a measure of its political power, even confiscating Church lands...but the Church never truly conceded. When anti-clerical reformers tried to restrain the Church after the Mexican Revolution—a third transformation itself—thousands of Catholics *went to war* with the government.

The Cristero War, fueled by broad support for the Church among the poor, killed nearly 100,000 Mexicans, including Álvaro Obregón, the Mexican president-elect who was assassinated in 1929 just before taking office. PRI rose to power in the wake of *La Cristiada*, but they only brought peace by making concessions to the Church.

*Los carteles* understand such power. While the politicians in Mexico City might despise the Church's reach and influence, *narcos* drape themselves in crosses and pray to Santa Muerte. *Los jefes* aren't technocrats or lawyers; they come from the stocks of rural poor who have always felt the church offered more than the state. *A donde el corazón se inclina, el pie camina, cabrón*. Do you really expect the *narcos* who hide in the mountains to think differently?

# DURANGO, MX

The Free and Sovereign State of Durango, one of the largest and least populated provinces of Mexico, is a northwestern state immediately south of Chihuahua. Arid deserts to the east and rugged mountains to the west frame a valley region that contains most of the state's cities, including Durango City—*Victoria de Durango!*—the state's capital and home to over a million Mexicans.

## FREE AND SOVEREIGN

Durango (the state and the city) is known for outlaws, both because of the Hollywood Westerns shot outside the city in the 60s and 70s...and because of the drug trade that's made use of the region's value to smugglers and *narcos*. Since its founding in the 1600s, Durango's distance from Mexico City—and the federal government—has nurtured an independent streak in the people of the area.

Yet the state government—led by the elected governor and legislature in Durango City—relies on the federal government for revenue and personnel. Local industries include logging, farming, mining, and manufacturing, but the state is *muy grande, güey*, and the tax revenue gets split up among many towns and municipalities. Without federal support, local efforts to govern the State—let alone deal with narcotrafficking—are unlikely to get adequate funding.

## DURANGUENSES O HUEVONES?

People who are from Durango—the city—are called *duranguenses*, but some folks who live in nearby areas like Gomez Palacio or Lerdo have a less flattering name for them: *huevones* (loafers). In their view, the *huevones* who run things in Durango are lazy, greedy, and corrupt! ¡*Chingale!*

To be fair, the *duranguenses* have an outsized influence over the surrounding areas, one that ensures that Durango City comes first when money is doled out by the state. The city is the governmental center; everyone knows that the people in charge there are going to take their cut—no matter how much rural areas dislike it.

## CATHOLICISM IN DURANGO

While the Catholic Church's hold on Mexico as a whole has slipped in the last few decades, most *duranguenses* in 2007 are still traditional Catholics. Meat is rarely sold on Fridays during Lent—some *taquerías* even close completely for the day!—and Ash Wednesday is a community event attended by most, if not all, parishioners.

But times are changing. Not *everyone* goes to mass *every* Sunday, and the younger generation is starting to question the strict rules that older generations took for granted. While 90% or more of the population of Durango is Catholic, what it means to be Catholic in Durango varies a bit.



## SIGHTS Y ATTRACTIONS

Durango is a relatively homogenous urban area punctuated by colonial architecture—modern *edificios* right next to cathedrals and old plazas. Bounded on all sides by freeways that run to nearby cities, the metro area drops off to desolate desert just outside of town. The weather is warm and dry year-round, and the mountains to the west are only obscured by smog and pollution.

Visitors often come to see such sights as:

- ▶ **Local Universities:** Durango City is home to a number of prestigious universities, such as *Universidad Juarez del Estado de Durango*. Many residents of the state come to the city to study, assuming they can afford to do so.
- ▶ **The Revueltas Festival:** Named after an early 20th-century composer—Silvestre Revueltas—the Festival celebrates art and culture, but often defaults to pop concerts.
- ▶ **The National Fair:** Held every July just outside the city, the Fair celebrates the city's founding and features agricultural and cultural events for more than two weeks.
- ▶ **Hollywood Soundstages:** Famous Westerns were shot on soundstages near the city. Consistent weather and easy access to unique environments—deserts, mountains, etc.—made Durango City a movie hotspot for many years.

## LOCATION MOVES

If you want to make Durango a more vivid part of your game, write a few custom moves tied to specific locations in the city. Pick up the **Deck of Locations** for **Cartel** for a prepared set of custom moves or check out the chapters on creating custom moves in **Apocalypse World** or **Urban Shadows**!

## DEMOGRAPHICS Y RACE

Durango is a modern city, but it isn't really cosmopolitan; nearly everyone in Durango is Mexican, a mix of Indigenous and Spanish ancestry. Half of the city is "white," but not in the way *gringos* think. Fairer *mexicanos*—likely wealthy and powerful—trace their roots to Europeans, but they are undeniably, culturally Mexican. Their whiteness is defined in opposition to Indigenous groups (and rural *narcos*), not ordinary *mexicanos*.

The number of Asians, Europeans, and American expatriates living in Durango is low. There are immigrant groups—Ukrainians, Japanese, Mennonites—but these are small communities in the broader population. Durango is filled to the brim with Mexicans who grew up in the city (or in the surrounding regions), and outsiders stick out like a sore thumb.

# CHAPTER THREE

MECÁNICAS Y JUGADAS



# ¿PLATA O PLOMO?

Roleplaying is a conversation, *cabrón*. You sit down at a table—with some dice, a few pencils, a few sheets of paper—and you start talking. You might take turns, or interrupt each other, or all go silent for a moment, but the conversation keeps moving, each player pushing it forward by describing what the characters do and say.

All the rules in **Cartel** are about structuring the conversation, giving you the tools to keep the story interesting and guiding your group to unexpected places. I want you to be shocked and surprised at the turns the story takes, to be scared sometimes when the dice are rolled and the fate of your character hangs in the balance. To feel something.

This chapter contains everything you need to understand those rules and play **Cartel** with your group, including:

- ▶ **The Basics:** This chapter begins (page 32) with advice on how **Cartel** works in play, including a review of the core dice mechanics and a primer on structuring interesting scenes with other players.
- ▶ **Move Explanations:** Moves are the core of **Cartel**, and this chapter details each type—basic moves (page 36), stress moves (page 58), and Heat moves (page 64)—including examples and explanations.
- ▶ **Other Rules:** In addition to moves, **Cartel** relies on four systems: stress, harm, lifestyle, and keys. I cover each system at the end of the chapter (page 68), explaining how each one functions in a session.

This chapter is focused on the mechanical side of **Cartel**, but the instructions for making characters are in Chapter 4 (page 77). Look there if you'd like to learn more about making *narcos* of your own!

# SCENES Y STORIES

The best way to keep the conversation moving is to **frame scenes**: propose a setting and situation that puts important characters—PCs and NPCs—in conflict about things that matter. The MC has the final call on scene structure and flow, but everyone is responsible for ensuring that scenes go somewhere meaningful in the fiction.

You're familiar with this technique; it's been used since the dawn of time to turn tales of ordinary people into *telenovelas y corridos*. Skip the boring *mierda* and get to the meat of what's happening or what's about to happen next.

*I start the second session of my Cartel game by framing a scene that puts a few narcos together.*

*"How about we start at a dinner party? Justin's Polizeta, Gustavo, has been trying to convince Katherine's La Rata to help him find the mole..."*

*Justin nods, but Katherine proposes an alternative.*

*"Santiago told me that he thought Marissa's Sicaria might be the traitor. Can I bring Gustavo that information directly? Maybe at his place?"*

*"That sounds great," I say, "Let's start there!"*

Scenes end when they aren't interesting any longer. The MC might call for a scene to be over, or the players in the scene might realize that the scene's played out. It's better to cut scenes too short than let them run too long.

## HARD SCENE FRAMING

On occasion, the MC might want to jump right to a tense or difficult situation. Maybe the consequences of an earlier decision come to bear—hard and fast—or perhaps the tone of the story calls for a more aggressive scene.

We call this technique **hard scene framing** because there's less room for negotiation: the scene starts and the PCs need to react as best they can manage. Such a situation isn't an open invitation for conversation; it's a demand for answers and actions aimed at your heart.

*While Katherine's Rata manipulates Gustavo, I hard frame a scene for Marissa's Sicaria, Mina:*

*"Mina, you said last session that you wanted to get your truck fixed up and running again, right?"*

*"Yes, there's a garage by my house. I'd go there."*

*"Makes sense. As you hand your truck key to the chamaco at the counter, you look out the window to see another truck pull up. It's filled with guys you don't recognize. Guys with guns."*

*"Fuck. Have they seen me?"*

*"Maybe? A few of them jump down and start heading toward the garage. What do you do?"*

Keep up as best you can, *cabrón*. The drug war comes at you fast; think quickly and you just might make it through to the end.





## FICTIONAL POSITIONING

The setup of scenes is important; it plays into the **fictional position** of the characters, the place they occupy in the fiction you have created. Each twist, each reveal, each bit of dialogue pours into this fictional world you're building, painting a picture of your characters and their lives. We call this world we're creating together **the fiction**, the collection of everything that's happening—and has already happened—in our story, our version of Durango and the drug war.

Sticking to what you've contributed to the fiction, even if it's hard for your character, takes practice. You've got to let the past define the future, even if you didn't know what you were committing to when you defined the past.

.....  
*"I'm not going to go out there to deal with these guys until I know what's going on," Marissa says.*

*"You're going to wait here in the garage?" I ask.*  
*"Yup. These guys look like trouble."*

*"Got it. You take up a position by the door, one eye on the window, when you hear a weapon cock. The kid at the counter—Juan, maybe?—has a large revolver pointed at you. He's freaked out. Scared."*

*"Whoops. Maybe I should have gone outside..."*  
*"Too late. He raises the gun. What do you do?"*  
.....

You can't take it back. No matter what it costs you, no matter how close you are to drowning in the terrible river of your own bad decisions. Once it's done, it's done. Remember that, *güey*.

# MOVES Y DICE

Framing scenes is the first step in an interesting conversation, but it's the moves that connect your characters to the fiction in exciting ways. Each move is a set of rules that resolve conflicts, answer questions in the fiction, and push the story forward. Moves are like the programming language of **Cartel**—"When you do x, then do y"—shaping and defining the fiction when your characters take decisive action.

## TRIGGERING MOVES

Everyone can trigger the basic moves at the start of the game, *muchacho*, but you also get special moves attached to your playbook and might add new moves to your characters as the game goes on. In general, the basic moves cover situations that come up all the time while other moves cover situations that are character specific or more rare.

Moves don't just go off whenever you think it might be interesting; they have to be triggered by something you say in the conversation, usually an action your character takes. **If you want to trigger a move, you have to do the thing that triggers it.** You can always avoid a move, but then you have to avoid taking that action. Since every move is tied directly to the fiction, we often say that moves are all governed by the same idea: *if you do it, you do it.*

When you commit to a course of action that triggers a move, you usually end up rolling dice. You don't roll dice any other time. If a move calls for dice, roll them and consult the move for what happens next. Sometimes *cabrones* snap up the dice, ready to roll and do a thing... but the fiction always comes first. Say what you do, then figure out the move that follows.

*Sarah's Cocinera, Yolanda, is a sculptor whose art workshop hides a drug lab. When her usual stock of químicos came up short, she arranged to meet a new "morally flexible" supplier to cover the gap.*

*"The woman from ChemiMex—Lupe—is sharply dressed, carrying clipboards, and wearing a hard hat," I say. "She gets right down to business: 'I don't think we can ship such chemicals to this...facility.'"*

*Sarah frowns. "Can I try to bribe her?"*

*"Sure. What does that look like? Are you trying to **pressure her** by letting her know this is for Don Santiago? Or are you trying to **propose a deal**?"*

*Sarah nods, and says, "**Propose a deal.** I say 'I can handle the chemicals. And I'll make sure you get a little extra money for the trouble. Okay?'"*

Not all moves use dice. Some moves—such as **Me Lo Chingué** (page 93) or **Matador** (page 97) tell you and the MC what happens when they trigger. No dice needed. No dice rolled.

## HITS Y MISSES

If a move asks you to roll dice, roll two six-sided dice (2d6) and follow the outcomes of the move. Traditionally, moves ask you to roll with a stat—like “roll with Grit” or “roll with Heat”—meaning you add that stat to the total. A character with Grit +3, for example, adds +3 to the total when “rolling with Grit.” There are ways to get bonuses, but you never add more than +4 to a roll.

### Weak Hits y Strong Hits

Move outcomes are usually straightforward: anything totalling 7 or more is a **hit**, anything totalling 6 or less is a **miss**. Some moves give additional options on a 10+ or give you more description for what happens on a 7-9 or miss. Just follow what the move says, *güey*.

In general, a hit means you get what you want. It’s not always pretty, but when you roll 7+, you get *something*. Not everything, *cabrón*. Don’t be selfish! When you get just a 7-9—a **weak hit**—there might be some serious costs or complications, but your roll is not a failure.

A 10+ is often described as a **strong hit**. If a move tells you to do something on a 10+, it usually means that you get some kind of bonus or strong result, well beyond what you get with a 7-9 result. Most of the time, you’re hoping for a 10+ when you pick up the dice and roll, especially if the costs associated with a 7-9 aren’t costs you want to pay.

## Misses y Failure

A miss isn’t a failure: it just means that the MC tells you what happens. It’s likely that your character won’t like what the MC says, since the MC’s job is to push the fiction in interesting directions, but—as a player—you will often find yourself enjoying the way the MC ramps up the tension.

.....  
*Sarah decides that Yolanda is using her De Calidad move—referencing her training as a cook—when proposing the deal to Lupe. She’s got Grit +2, so it’s more likely she hits than if she just rolled Face:*

*“I’ve been using these chemicals for years, señora. I haven’t had any problems,” says Sarah. But Sarah’s roll is a problem. Snake eyes. Her total of four is far short of the seven she needs to hit.*

*“You can tell Lupe is not fooled,” I say. “It’s obvious you’re making meth in your workshop. She says, ‘Years? Well, then you won’t mind training some of our staff. We’ve got new investors that want to see us expand into growing markets.’”*

*Sarah groans. El Narco isn’t going to be happy if she is training other cooks, but she doesn’t want to end up with more debts to los carteles...*  
.....

The MC never rolls dice. Instead, they tell you what’s happening and respond to your actions. If you’re the MC, see **Chapter 5** on page 116 for more on your role during a session of Cartel, including making your own moves and resolving conflicts between players during the game.





## BASIC MOVES

Every player character makes use of the basic moves throughout each session. Your playbook has other moves that might come into play (or even alter the basic moves), but the majority of the moves characters make during a session are basic moves. These moves are the core narrative triggers that bring the rules into play, pushing forward the story and defining the fiction.

In this section, I explain each of these basic moves in greater detail, detail some of the options the moves present to players, and provide some helpful examples to show these basic moves at work in a session of **Cartel**.

Here's a list of the basic moves, along with a primary stat or method of rolling for each:

- ▶ Justify Your Behavior (Face)
- ▶ Propose a Deal (Face)
- ▶ Push Your Luck (Grit)
- ▶ Get the Truth (Hustle)
- ▶ Pressure Someone (Hustle)
- ▶ Turn to Violence (Savagery)
- ▶ Size Someone Up (Savagery)
- ▶ Get Fucking Shot (Questions)
- ▶ Help or Interfere (Wager Stress)
- ▶ Strain Your Finances (Questions)



## WHAT DO YOU DO?

The question “What do you do?” is at the center of **Cartel**. Your characters are in over their heads, *los lobos* are at the door, and there’s little time for you to plot and plan. No one—not your fellow *narcos*, not *la policía*, not even *la Santa Muerte*—can help you decide your path.

The basic moves are designed to give you tools to *act*. Right now. Not later, not when you have a better plan. *¡Ahorita, cabrón!*

You might find it interesting to have long conversations about where your characters go for dinner or about the local architecture of Durango. Those conversations can be pleasant, but they can lull you into a false sense of security about your position in the world. They may mislead you about the reality of your situation.

**Cartel** is not about that kind of innocent conversation. The rules, these moves especially, push you to take action, make decisions, and somehow find your way through the *pinches* consequences. You can have those precious moments of sentimental wonder, *muchacho*, but know that they merely fill the space between the moves that matter, that they are fleeting and precious, that they are lies that will not last. *Efímeros. Fugaces.*

As you read through the basic moves, know that each of them is an answer to that original question—“What do you do?”—a way for you to seize the moment, to take control, to survive.

So... *what do you do?*

## MARKING STRESS

Some of the basic moves involve **marking stress**. Stress is explained in full on page 69, but it might be helpful to know a few things before you read through the moves.

Stress is a measure of your character’s mental state; the more stress you mark, the closer your character is to losing control. You can clear stress through basic moves, but you often need to make stress moves (page 58) to actually clear the track. Your stress track comes with five boxes you can mark. Don’t waste them.

## UNCERTAINTY MOVES

If you find the moves limiting, *you’re right*.

They do limit you, focusing you on the *mierda* that matters. You don’t need rules for tying your shoes or making *tamales*; you need rules for lying to your wife about the drugs you stole or wrestling a gun away from a deadly *sicaria*.

The moves are the locus of uncertainty, the moments in the fiction when we need dice to tell us what happens next. Do whatever you want in **Cartel**—the MC will tell you what happens—but the uncertainty of some situations invokes the moves...and their inevitable choices, complications, and consequences.

## ✦ JUSTIFY YOUR BEHAVIOR ✦

When you try to *justify your behavior* to someone, roll with Face. For NPCs: On a hit, they accept your logic. On a 7-9, they have a few questions; mark a stress if you answer with anything other than total honesty. For PCs: On a 10+, both. On a 7-9, choose 1:

- if they accept your reasoning, they mark xp
- if they keep their own counsel, they mark stress

*Justify your behavior* triggers when you try to explain your behavior...even if you're telling the truth. In a world of shifting alliances and double-dealing *cabrones*, any explanation you offer is bound to be suspect. When people ask you tough questions, you've got to be confident.

When you get a hit while *justifying your behavior*, NPCs broadly accept your answers as true. On a 7-9, they ask you for details; you have to mark stress to mislead them about the situation. PCs always get to make up their own minds about how they respond to your story.

Some outrageous explanations are bold gambits instead of justifications; if you've been missing for days and tell your family that you simply "lost track of time" when you return, you are *pushing your luck* (page 42) instead of *justifying your behavior*. They would have no reason to believe your story, but they might be so thankful for your recovery that they are willing to overlook your odd actions.

## Options for Justify Your Behavior

If you're trying to *justify your behavior* to another PC, they still get to choose what they believe. Those who choose to *accept your reasoning* aren't just going along with whatever you're saying. They have to commit to believing your story, even to the point of lying to themselves if there is obvious evidence that you're not telling the whole truth.

On a 7-9, you can offer them an xp—a step toward advancing their character—to *accept your reasoning* or make them mark stress if they *keep their own counsel*. One is a carrot; one is a stick. On a 10+, you get both options. Either way your target has to decide the outcome. You can read more about xp and advancement on page 73.

Note that they can't choose to mark the stress if their stress track is completely full (page 69)! If you want to put someone in a tough spot, wait to *justify your behavior* until they can't afford to (or just can't) mark stress.

## Examples for Justify Your Behavior

Sofía, La Esposa, moved back to Durango with her federal husband, Gustavo, but coming home reawakened her feelings for Santiago, an old flame. Gustavo has been busy with work, and Sofía has used the time to sneak out to Santiago's palatial estate, leaving their teenage daughter at home alone.

Sofía—played by Brendan—returns home one morning to find her daughter, Ana, waiting. I say, “Ana is sitting in the living room recliner. You see that she hasn’t slept, dark circles haunt her eyes.”

Brendan tries to play it cool. “I say, ‘Oh, hija. What are you doing up? It’s so early!’”

I smile. “She says, ‘Where were you? I woke up in the middle of the night and you were gone. And Dad was gone too! What’s happening?’”

Brendan thinks for a second. “I’m going to **justify my behavior**: ‘I’m sorry, honey. Your Tía Luna needed me, and I had to go over to her place. She’s going through a really bad breakup.’”

He rolls with Face +2 and hits a 9. Brendan smiles and says, “Whew. She believes me?”

I nod. “Sure, she loves Tía Luna. She does get to ask a few questions, though. Ana sighs and says ‘Oh, okay. Is Tía Luna okay? What happened?’”

“She’ll be fine, hija. She just always picks jerks.”

“Ana nods and heads to bed, but you’ve got to mark a stress, right? Not the complete truth!”

Brendan smiles and marks the stress. “At least she hasn’t already told her father I was missing!”

Katherine’s Rata, Luna, is an undercover federal whose cover is so deep that only one or two people in the anti-cartel task force know she’s a cop. While meeting with her handler, Delgado, in a dive bar, she spots Beto, a Halcón played by Derrick, drinking at the bar with his pandilla.

“They haven’t seen you yet,” I say, “but it’s only a matter of time before one of the four of them catches you with Delgado. What do you do?”

“Can I get out of here without being seen?” asks Katherine. “Maybe I’ll just sneak away.”

“It’s tough. They are between you and the door, and you’re not sure what kind of attention you’ll attract if you try to go out the back. Definitely **pushing your luck** either way.”

Luna’s Grit is +1: not bad, but not great. “Okay, I’ll try to **justify my behavior** instead. I get up from the bar and walk straight toward the pandilla. ‘Hey, cabrones!’ I say as soon as they see me. ‘I’ve been looking for you pendejos.’”

Derrick laughs. They were looking for her! Katherine rolls with Face +2 and gets a 12. ¡Órale!

“Looks like you have to mark stress if you want to keep your own counsel, Beto; Luna is quite convincing. But if you believe her, you get an xp.”

“I’ll take the xp!” Derrick says. “I’ve only got a box or two of stress clear, and I totally buy that she was looking for me. I’m important!”

## ❖ PROPOSE A DEAL ❖

When you *propose a deal* to get what you want, roll with Face. On a hit, they choose: take the deal or mark stress. On a 7-9, they can instead choose one:

- 🎲 impose a condition on your offer
- 🎲 adjust the price (+/-30%) and accept
- 🎲 point you at an interested party

*Propose a deal* lets you put an offer on the table that carries weight with your target. Most of the time, you name your price in dollars, but other things—drugs, guns, favors—might also trigger the move, provided that what you’re offering is something your target actually wants. You can’t offer a *sicaria* fifty pesos to kill *el narco*!

*Propose a deal* stands in contrast to *pressure someone* (page 46). The former move is *todo* business and opportunity—“I’ll give you \$10,000 to introduce me to Doña Eleña”; the latter move is personal or coercive—“Come on, *chica*! Take me to meet *la jefe*! You fucking owe me!”

Note that you can *propose a deal* as a buyer or seller; you can put a price on the thing you’re trying to sell or put down cash for the thing you want to buy. Either way, if the target of your offer turns you down—*jpendejo*!—they mark stress or weasel their way out. If you get a hit, your offer puts pressure on them to say yes and take the deal, and the move imposes costs if they decline.

## Options for Proposing a Deal

When someone *imposes a condition on your offer*, it means they have an opportunity to modify the deal with a counterproposal. They can’t throw the whole deal out—they’d have to mark a stress and *propose their own deal*—but they can ask you to do something for them as part of the arrangement. You get a chance to say yes or no before the deal is done, but what you want is in reach.

If they choose to *adjust the price*, you’re in luck, *güey*. Your target asks for a more favorable deal (+/-30%), but they say yes. They can’t alter it too much if they select this option, but you can’t get *tacaño* and withdraw the offer either.

Anyone who *points you at an interested party* has to know in advance that the person they name is actually interested in what you’re offering. If they send you on a wild-goose chase by pretending they know a buyer or seller, they have to mark stress to shut the deal down before they lie to you about their contact.



## Examples for Propose a Deal

Yolanda, La Cocinera, is desperate to secure the missing chemicals she needs for her lab and reaches out to the only person she thinks can trust with cartel business: El Halcón, Beto. She calls him on her burner phone:

“Beto, I need some help getting some chemicals,” says Sarah, Yolanda’s player. “I thought I had another supplier, but things fell through.”

Beto’s player, Derrick, smirks. Finally, someone thinks he’s useful! He decides to play coy.

“¡Hola, chica! I don’t know if I can help. I’m pretty busy. Why don’t you ask Santiago for the chemicals? The drugs are his anyway, right?”

I look at Sarah. “Is that an option?”

“You were fucking there when he told me to solve these problems on my own, Beto. I can’t give him an excuse to be angry with me. Not now.”

“Okay, okay,” says Derrick. “I say, ‘If I help you, maybe you can make some extra meth for me and my crew?’ I think that counts as **proposing a deal**...” Sarah and I both nod. Seems right to us.

Derrick hits an 8 with his roll. Sarah can choose an option instead of taking the deal. She looks at the list for a bit, then says, “I think I’ll **impose a condition**. I say, ‘Fine. But you tell no one about this. No one. Not even Mina.’”

Derrick doesn’t hesitate. “Deal. What do you need us to do, chica? We’re ready to help!”

Santiago, El Narco, is tired of the Zetas who have been challenging him for control of the plaza. He manages to capture a Zeta leader, Guillermo, but Santiago knows that killing Guillermo isn’t going to get him very far. Santiago needs a deal.

“I tell him that he needs to tell his people to knock off their shit and leave me alone,” says Jahmal, Santiago’s player. “I don’t want to kill him.”

“That sounds like **pressuring someone**,” I say. “You’re threatening him with violence, right?”

“Uh... I think I’d rather **propose a deal**. I offer him cash to take his people and leave Durango.”

“Yeah, that could work,” I say. “You’ll have to **strain your finances**, but your extravagant lifestyle justifies that kind of cash.”

Jahmal rolls with Face, scoring a total of 11. Guillermo needs to take the deal or mark a stress. I say, “He looks up to you and sighs. ‘Fine. There’s no need for violence here, right? Get us the money and you can keep your pinche plaza. We’re done.’”



## ❖ PUSH YOUR LUCK ❖

When you *push your luck*, roll with Grit. On a 10+, fortune favors the bold. On a 7-9, things don't work out like you hoped; the MC will tell you how you can turn things around if you act quickly, make an ugly choice, or tough it out.

*Push your luck* is the catchall move for any action that doesn't fit one of the other moves. If you're striding into enemy territory, hoping to rescue a friend before the Zetas spot you, then you're *pushing your luck*. But you're also *pushing your luck* if you're racing home to clean up a meth lab that exploded in your *cochera* before your husband gets home from work. ¡Ándale!

When you roll a hit while *pushing your luck*, you manage to see the situation through: you dodge the bullets, navigate rush hour traffic, and avoid *desastre*. The MC isn't obligated to make the entire problem go away—the Zetas might still be after you, you may have a trunk full of dangerous chemicals—but you avoid the negative outcomes that were set as the stakes for the move when you rolled.

But on a 7-9, you've got some tough choices to make—the MC will always provide a way forward, but you might not like the costs or consequences. *Dar el alón y comerse la pechuga, muchacho*. You should have expected trouble when you got yourself into this mess.

## Options for Push Your Luck

Unlike most of the other basic moves, you might try to *push your luck* and end up in a situation where the costs are greater than you actually want to pay. On a weak hit, the MC must give you an out—a way you can avoid the consequences by *acting quickly*, *making an ugly choice*, or *toughing it out*—but you aren't obligated to take what's on offer, *cabrón*.

You can always negotiate a little with the MC, especially when everyone at the table feels that the cost isn't in line with the fiction. But that's not the same as turning the MC down. If the MC offers you a fair choice—"You'll take a bullet while you run, but you will get away"—and you decline to accept...that's on you. Get ready for the storm that follows your choice.

But if you do it, if you accept the MC's offer and suffer through, then it's done. You pay the cost *and* get the benefit, both. The MC can't use the cost you paid as an excuse to undermine your roll, as if you missed. You took the deal, and you get what you wanted.

## Examples for Push Your Luck

Gustavo, *El Polizeta*, rolls into the daily briefing a bit late, his eyes still bloodshot from last night's stakeout. As he enters, he sees that the mole inside the cartel has delivered some crucial information: the location of *El Narco's* daughter, Mina—the task force's primary target in the investigation.

"You see Delgado up at the front of the room, his pointer fixed on a slide with one of the few pictures the federales have of Mina. He says, 'We're close, folks. We're going to get her, and she's going to take us to el narco.' What do you do?"

Justin, Gustavo's player, panics a bit. "Uh... I get up, I think, and I leave the room."

"You just walk out a few minutes after arriving?"

"Wait. No, that would be weird. I wait a few minutes, then excuse myself. I need to call Mina. I still have that other SIM, right? I swap it out."

"At your desk? That would be pretty suspicious."

"No, bathroom. Somewhere no one is watching."

"Sounds like **pushing your luck**." Justin nods and rolls with Grit +1, hitting a 7. Just barely a hit!

"Your hands are shaking; you swap in the cartel SIM, but you fumble the other one and drop it. You hear it skid across the floor... just as the bathroom door opens. It's Delgado. You'll have to abandon the other SIM for now to avoid suspicion here."

"Fuck. I can't do that. I need that SIM," says Justin. "I'll start looking for it and live with whatever Delgado thinks of me..."

### ¡NO TE RINDAS!

*Push your luck* only triggers when your character is under serious pressure and no other move is a better fit. That said, leaping off a three-story building to tackle someone on the ground below isn't **turning to violence**; you are throwing yourself off a ledge in the hope that your good luck carries the day! Use *push your luck* whenever the outcome is more reliant on the whims of fate and luck than your character's skills or strategy.

Yolanda, *La Cocinera*, has grown suspicious of Santiago. When his enforcers show up at her place, she knows she's not going anywhere with them...

"How far away is the building next door? Could I jump there from the roof of my building?"

"Yeah, they're built close together," I say. "You gonna jump? Definitely **pushing your luck**."

Sarah nods and picks up the dice, rolling a 9.

I say, "You run across the roof and jump to the balcony on the next building. Just before you jump, you realize that it's a lot further than you thought. You're going to end up marking stress when you crash-land on the other side. That cool?"

Sarah nods. She's gotta get out of here!

## ❖ GET THE TRUTH ❖

When you try to *get the truth out of someone*, roll with Hustle. On a hit, clear one stress. On a 10+, pick 2. On a 7-9, pick 1.

- 🔊 they can't mislead you with the truth
- 🔊 they can't confuse you with falsehoods
- 🔊 they can't stonewall you with silence

*Get the truth* is the only way you're going to make sense of this fucking mess, *cabron*. You can't make saints out of sinners with a roll, but you can demand answers from someone who is susceptible to your words. They might be moved because you have a gun or because they are *familia*, but either way you've got to take some action in the fiction that goes beyond small talk to the point that they must answer you.

Of course, *getting the truth* out of someone doesn't ever guarantee you *the full truth*. Instead, it structures the conversation you have with your target, telling the opposition what avenues are closed off if they try to lie to you or mislead you with false impressions and dead ends.

Any time you get a hit while rolling *get the truth*, you get to clear a stress. Even if you don't actually get your target to come clean about whatever you're investigating, the fact that you've gotten them to be somewhat honest for a moment keeps you from going over the edge.

### Options for Get the Truth

The options you choose for *get the truth* do more than just influence how your target immediately responds; your choices echo throughout the conversation, structuring not only what the target *can* say, but also what they can *avoid* saying. Consider any options you choose in effect until the topic changes.

*They can't mislead you with the truth* means your target can't omit any important information or give you a misleading picture based on what really happened. They've got to tell you the whole truth if they tell you any truth at all.

*They can't confuse you with falsehoods* means that your target can't tell you any lies. Truth only, even if it's not the whole truth. Simple.

*They can't stonewall you with silence* means that your target can't avoid the topic or change the subject. They have to say something!

Mix and match these options when you roll a 10+. They work well together!



## Examples for Get the Truth

After catching her husband, Gustavo, with the dead body of a fellow federal, Sofia—La Esposa—needs answers. She confronts him in their kitchen, demanding Gustavo tell her what's going on:

"What is happening, Gustavo? Why did I come home to find Delgado's body in my living room?"

I think she's clearly trying to **get the truth** out of him. I point at the dice. Brendan, Sofia's player rolls a 12. Looks like she's getting some answers.

"I pick... **can't confuse me with falsehoods and can't stonewall me with silence.** No lies. And you have to say something meaningful!"

Justin, Gustavo's player, laughs and thinks for a minute. "Hold on, just gotta think of what I'm going to say here. Okay, I say, 'This mierda is complicated, Sofia. You don't know what it's like. It's not clear who we can trust, who has our best interest at heart. Delgado worked for the other side!'"

Brendan looks at me, as if to ask me to tell Justin he's got to be more truthful. I say, "No, that checks out. Delgado did work for 'the other side.' So far, Gustavo hasn't lied or stonewalled you. He just said a true thing that might mislead you!"

Brendan laughs. "Okay, I say, 'Which side is that, Gustavo? Did you kill him? How can I trust you?'"

Justin leans in close. "Everything that I've done is for this family, for us, mi amor. Trust me."

"That sounds like you're **justifying your behavior,** Gustavo!" I say. "Roll with Face!"

## I'M JUST SAYING...

Like many moves in **Cartel**, *get the truth* triggers nicely over text message or in casual conversation. Make sure the MC and the other players know you're triggering the move—"I want to know where you hid the body, güey"—and not just making idle conversation—"Cómo está mi tía, primo?"

Her cover nearly blown and her handler dead, La Rata—Luna—is in some serious trouble. She turns to her ex-boyfriend, a CIA agent named Erick who she thinks might be able to get her away from the cartel before Santiago figures out her betrayal.

"I say 'I don't have time for games, Erick. I need to know if you can help me or not. Now.' I want to **get the truth** out of him." Katherine, Luna's player, picks up the dice and rolls. Only a 7. Mierda.

"What do you pick from the list?" I ask.

"I'll take **can't mislead me with the truth.**"

"Cool. Erick leans back in his chair, and lets out a long sigh. He says, 'Fuck it. I can't lie to you. My mission here doesn't have shit to do with you. And until I finish my business, there's nothing I can do to help you. You're on your own. Sorry.'"

## ❖ PRESSURE SOMEONE ❖

When you *pressure someone* to go along with you, roll with Hustle. On a hit, they see your point; they have to follow your lead (for now) or mark stress. On a 7-9, you let something important slip as you bring your pressure to bear.

*Pressure someone* triggers when you try to get someone to do something without making an explicit offer of recompense. If you are relying on a previous relationship, the threat of violence, or merely pleading with someone to help you out of the goodness of their heart, you are *pressuring someone* to go along with you. In contrast to *propose a deal* (page 40), *pressuring someone* means you are trying to get them to do what you want without giving up anything substantial in return.

In order to *pressure someone*, you have to give them a reason to listen to you and ask for things they can give you. The move only triggers if you establish some influence over the target and ask for something reasonable—a stranger is unlikely to betray her lover just because you asked nicely.

In fact, if you don't have a strong relationship with someone or an immediate consequence you can bring to bear, you're far more likely to get your way by *proposing a deal* instead of *pressuring someone* into doing what you want. You can catch more flies with *miel*, *muchacho*.

## Options for Pressure Someone

If your target wants to avoid your pressure, they have to mark stress to put off your request. NPCs and PCs can both mark stress to ignore your demands, provided they have room on their stress track to mark it. Either way, it's clear to you they aren't going to go along with you right now.

Anyone who concedes to your pressure agrees to do whatever you've asked them to do, but the situation is fluid. If things change enough, their mind can change, too. It doesn't hurt to keep an eye on them, *güey*, just to make sure they follow through on their word. Trust no one.

On a 7-9, you choose what sensitive information you let slip to your target; the MC can demand you give up more if you try to be coy. In general, this is your moment to hint at your mysteries and lies. If you want to bring up a part of your character that hasn't gotten much spotlight, letting something slip when you *pressure someone* is a great way to get other characters to focus on your secrets.

## Examples for Pressure Someone

Beto, El Halcón, earned himself a kilo of meth for helping Yolanda. His pandilla is **connected**, so he knows a buyer, Osita. He decides to meet her at a local taquería to make the deal.

I say, “Osita pulls in on a Harley wearing her usual biker’s outfit, complete with leather jacket and a calavera bandana. What do you do?”

“I don’t trust her at all, so I want to make sure Azul is sitting at a different table with a gun. When Osita gets close, I’m going to nod over to him so that she’s sees we’re not fucking around.”

“Okay, cool. What are you hoping for? You just want her to be cool or do you want something?”

“If she’s setting me up, she will probably have people watching this place. I want us to go for a walk so it’s obvious if anyone is following us.”

“Got it. Do you say that when you nod at Azul with the gun?” Derrick nods. “Sounds like **pressuring someone** to me, with the threat of violence.”

Derrick rolls and hits an 8. He’s put on the pressure, but he’s got to let something slip. Derrick thinks for a minute, then says, “I think I let it slip that I’m on my own here, no backup from the cartel.”

“What does that look like?”

“I say, ‘I’m not estúpido, chica. Eyes everywhere. Let’s go for a walk. I don’t need trouble with this.’”

I nod. “She says, ‘Okay, cabrón. This better not be a waste of my time.’ She follows your lead and starts to walk away from the taquería onto the street...”

Santiago, El Narco, is missing a cook. He sent a crew to pick Yolanda up from her workshop, but she vanished from the scene. Santiago texts his most trusted sicaria to find her—his daughter, Mina:

“Santiago’s texts are short,” Jahmal says, “Something like ‘Find Yolanda. Zetas looking for her, but she ran off. Get back to me when it’s done.’”

I turn to Marissa, Mina’s player: “Juan Carlos told you that your father was responsible for your abuelita’s death. Is that on your mind here?”

“Uh, yeah. I text back.” Marissa mimes texting while she says, “People always ‘run off,’ Dad? Like Abuelita Elena ‘ran off’ to Los Estados Unidos?”

Jahmal groans. I ask, “Are you trying to **get the truth** out of Santiago?” Marissa nods and rolls. Her total is only a 5, though. Not enough for a hit.

I turn to Jahmal. “Mina’s attempt at inciting a response from you doesn’t work. If you’d like, you can **pressure her** as if you rolled a 10+.”

“I’ll take it!” he says. “I’d like to **pressure her** to do her job and find Yolanda right away.”

“Cool. What does that look like?”

“I text back, ‘We can talk later. Do your job.’”

I look back at Marissa: “You’ve got to go along with him or mark a stress. What do you choose?”

“I mark the stress. If my pinche father wants to find Yolanda, he can find her himself! I text back, ‘Find her yourself. I’m fucking done...’”

## ✧ SIZE SOMEONE UP ✧

When you **size someone up**, roll with Savagery. On a hit, ask their player questions. When you act on the answers, take +1. On a 10+, ask 3. On a 7-9, ask 1.

- 🔍 what are your current weaknesses / strengths?
- 🔍 how can I show you dominance / submission?
- 🔍 what do you intend to do next?
- 🔍 what do you wish I'd do right now?
- 🔍 how could I get you to \_\_\_\_\_?

**Size someone up** allows you to get information about other characters—PCs and NPCs—by observing them for a short time. In order to trigger the move, you have to narrate how you watch or observe your target, including what kinds of things you're looking for in their behavior, demeanor, or appearance.

Note that you get to ask the player of the character your questions, gathering data that your character takes in from the environment, even *señales* that might be unspoken or subtle. You can ask the question in character as well, but the player has to respond truthfully to the question, even if you're **sizing up** an NPC and the player answering is the MC.

When you hit with a 10+, you get to ask three questions; a 7-9 gets you only one question. Either way, you take a +1 to all your rolls that rely on the information you've obtained.

## Options for Size Someone Up

Asking someone about their weaknesses or strengths can point to physical assets—"I'm wearing a gun, and I've got a guy in the next building"—or emotional pressure points. The player should answer the question as you intend it, so let them know what you're most interested in learning from what you've asked.

Players should strive to be consistent in their answers to questions about dominance, submission, or intent. If a player says, "I would totally cower if you got out a gun," then they are agreeing to cower when *pistolas* hit the table.

You can ask the same question off the list more than once by changing the variables. You might ask, "How can I get you to *leave me alone*?" and then follow it up with "How can I get you to *kill mi padre*?" Those are distinct questions, even though both have the same root in the move.



## Examples for Size Someone Up

La Sicaria, Mina, just wanted to get her truck fixed. When strange hombres with guns rolled up on the garage, Mina took cover...only to find herself with a freaked out kid leveling a large revolver at her.

"The kid is sweating bullets, Mina," I say. "You're not sure if he knows about the guys outside, but his finger is on the trigger. What do you do?"

"I don't want to kill him," Marissa says. "I guess I'll **size him up**. I'm looking him over for some indication he's working with these guys, maybe like some tattoos?" I nod. She gets an 11 on her roll, earning three questions.

"What does the kid wish I'd do right now?"

"He's scared. He wants you to leave, especially if these narcos are looking for you."

"How can I get him to give me the gun?"

"He's never shot it before. You might be able to close the distance and take the gun before he reacts."

"Perfect. What does he intend to do next?"

"Shoot you? Run? He's totally lost right now."

"Okay, I walk calmly toward him and take the gun from his hand."

"Great. Sounds like **pushing your luck**, but you've got a +1 to the roll!"

El Narco, Santiago, is ready to **size up** Luna as soon as she walks into his house. There's a mole somewhere in the cartel, and Santiago has questions. I tell him to roll with Savagery. He hits an 8: he only gets to ask Luna one question. Jahmal says, "I'll go with 'How can I show you dominance?'"

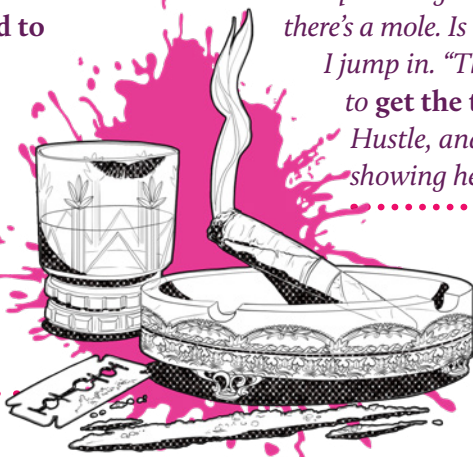
Katherine, Luna's player, says, "I'm already afraid of you! But if you wanted to really terrify me, I think you would just need to get me alone."

Jahmal nods. He turns back to me: "Okay, I want to send all my staff and enforcers out of here. I say, 'Leave us. Luna and I have business to discuss in private. Get out, cabrones.'"

"Everyone clears out. One of the sicarios, Ramón, shuts the door to your study, and there's a long moment of silence as the two of you look at each other."

"I keep hearing things, güey. I keep hearing that there's a mole. Is it you?"

I jump in. "That sounds like you're trying to **get the truth** out of Luna. Roll with Hustle, and don't forget your +1 for showing her dominance!"



## ❖ TURN TO VIOLENCE ❖

When you **turn to violence**, roll with Savagery. On a hit, mark stress and trade harm as established. On a 10+, choose 3. On a 7-9, choose 2.

- ☞ you inflict terrible harm
- ☞ you suffer little harm
- ☞ you resist marking stress
- ☞ you avoid collateral damage

Sooner or later, *cabrón*, there is no surer solution than a bullet: either for a problem you have or for the problem you've become. And when you—or those who hunt you—pull the trigger, **turn to violence** covers the costs and consequences.

Of course, you don't have to be using a gun to **turn to violence**. A fist. A bat. A crowbar. A vehicle. Anything can be a weapon if you point it in the right direction with the intent to harm the person on the receiving end. Many situations in **Cartel** may require you to defend yourself with less than optimal tools.

*Trading harm as established* means that both parties do harm to each other as makes sense in the fiction. If you're fighting with nothing but your empty fists, you do a lot less damage than if you are wielding a sharp *cuchillo*. Just remember that playing with guns means that **getting fucking shot** (page 52) is on the table, by far the quickest way for you to slip this mortal coil.

## Options for Turn to Violence

*Inflicting terrible harm* means your attack is truly deadly, even if you're not using a lethal weapon. If you're a *sicario* who beats people to death with a metal baseball bat, this option is for you. *Inflicting terrible harm* means *cabrones* stay dead.

*Suffering little harm* works similarly; you avoid the harm you would usually receive. Picking this option means you usually can't **get fucking shot**, but it doesn't always mean you get away cleanly. See page 70 for more on suffering harm.

*Resist marking stress* allows you to avoid the normal stress that comes with inflicting harm on another character. Read more about this option in the section on stress and harm on page 70.

*Avoiding collateral damage* keeps the chaos to a minimum: your bullets strike your target and not much else. Not all collateral damage is physical; the MC might decide your violence inflicts emotional harm or exposes your true nature to others.

## Examples for Turn to Violence

On the run, Yolanda heads to Luna's apartment, hoping that Luna can hide her from El Narco:

"The hallway of the apartment complex is dimly lit," I say, "but you see two of Santiago's enforcers outside Luna's door: looks like you're not the only one interested in her. What do you do?"

"Is there a janitor's closet? I want to use my playbook move, **Ciencia, Cabrón**, to make a smoke bomb." I nod, and Sarah, Yolanda's player, hits a 7.

"Awesome! You mix a few chemicals you find in a water bottle. It's messy, so mark a stress."

"Okay. The move lets me **create an opportunity**. I throw the bottle down the hall at the enforcers and charge them! Is there a weapon in the closet?"

"Nothing like a gun, but there is a metal pipe."

"Cool," Sarah says, "I'll **turn to violence** with that." She rolls with Savagery +I, hitting an 11!

I say, "The smoke gives you plenty of cover, spilling up out of the bottle into the air. What three options do you choose for **turn to violence**?"

"**Inflict terrible harm, suffer little harm, and avoid collateral damage.** I don't want them to shoot someone through a door or something."

"You emerge from the smoke already swinging the pipe. You hit the first guy in the head, spraying blood all over the wall. The second guy gets his gun up, but he's not sure where you are in the smoke; you hit him in the arm before he gets off a shot. He drops the gun, and you smash him in the face with the pipe. He's down too. Mark a stress!"

### YOU SHOT ME!

*Turning to violence* is one of the main ways that PCs **get fucking shot** (page 52). Many of the options for this move directly address harm—covered in depth on page 70—but they apply to PCs and NPCs equally. If you shoot at a PC and *inflict terrible harm*, your target is almost certainly **getting fucking shot**; if someone is shooting back and you *suffer little harm*, you avoid their bullets.

Gustavo, El Polizeta, is trying to catch Pepe, a narco who escaped his custody...after Pepe heard Gustavo betraying the federales to El Narco:

"Pepe is running across the parking lot for the nearby neighborhood. What do you do?"

Justin, Gustavo's player, says, "I shoot him." Justin rolls and gets a 7. Barely enough. "I'll take **inflict terrible harm and resist marking stress**. I only have one stress box open!"

I nod and say, "Your first bullet catches him in the back and he stumbles, falling to his knees. Your second shot hits him in the head. You don't suffer any harm—he wasn't shooting back—but you see that you attracted an audience. There are a few kids who were riding bikes nearby that stopped at the sound of gunfire. They definitely saw you..."

## ❖ GET FUCKING SHOT ❖

When you *get fucking shot*, roll. Add +1 for each:

- 🎲 it's a handgun or other small weapon
- 🎲 the shooter is an amateur or isn't trying to kill you
- 🎲 you have cover, body armor, or a bodyguard

On a hit, you'll live. On 10+, it's a minor but heroic wound. On a 7-9, you choose one and the shooter chooses one:

- 🎲 it's bloody; you'll die without immediate aid
- 🎲 it's messy; the wound will leave an impressive, ugly scar
- 🎲 it's painful; -1 ongoing until you get medical attention

On a miss, you're pretty much finished, *pendejo*. The MC will tell you when you go and how it happens.

Sticks and stones might break your bones, but bullets end *narcos*. Anytime someone—PC or NPC—actually shoots you, make this move.

But don't roll with a stat. Instead, you get bonuses to this roll if the shooter is using a *small weapon* or you have *cover*. You can also get a +1 if the shooter is *an amateur* or *isn't trying to kill you*. These bonuses are cumulative, so you can get a +3 if some *pinche halcón* takes a shot at you with a handgun while you're wearing a vest.

A miss here means you're finished, though. When the guns come out and bullets start flying, know that one wrong choice could mean that you've come to the end of your story, no matter what business you still have left to finish.

## Options for Get Fucking Shot

*You'll die without immediate aid* means that you've got to stop the bleeding within the next scene or two. There's no hard and fast rule for how long you've got, but...it's not long.

*The wound will leave an impressive, ugly scar* means that your character is forever changed by this injury. You might lose a hand or an arm or you might struggle with physical activity you once considered easy. Bullets leave their mark.

*-1 ongoing until you get medical attention* means you take a -1 to all moves regardless of type, until you get real medical attention from someone who actually knows how to treat gunshot wounds. Until then, you're hurting, *cabrón*.



## Example for Get Fucking Shot

.....  
After leaving Santiago's estate, Luna—La Rata—realizes she's being followed by one of his sicarios, Gabriel. Katherine, Luna's player, decides she's got to get away before Gabriel kills her:

"Can I try to get on the freeway and lose him there?" she says. "He's not that bright."

"Go for it! Maybe you can **push your luck** and ditch him before Gabriel realizes you're gone."

Katherine rolls and gets a 4. No luck. She's not getting away from this sicario so easily.

"He keeps pace with you. Within a few minutes, he's not even pretending to keep his distance."

"Uh... I think I'll try to call Mina."

"Hold on. As you start looking for your phone, Gabriel puts on the gas and slams into the back of your car. You lose control as the car starts spinning... and you slam into a post. You live! Take two stress."

Katherine marks down two stress. She's got a few boxes left open, but things look grim.

"You're dazed and stunned," I say, "But you're aware enough to see that Gabriel brought his car to a halt a little ways ahead of you. He's getting out now, 9mm in hand, walking toward you."

"Fuck. I don't have a gun. Uh... I guess I'm going to try to play dead and wait for him to get close."

"Okay, but he might just open fire into the car rather than check to see if you're dead first." I turn to Jahmal—he plays Santiago, Gabriel's boss—and ask, "Is Gabriel the kind of guy who will just open fire into a car to 'make sure' someone is dead?"

Jahmal smiles: "Oh, yeah. That's why I sent him!"

"I think playing dead is my best shot. I'll just leave my head slumped down on the wheel and **push my luck**." I nod, and she rolls. Total of 7!

"Okay, you see him coming up to the side of the car. He stops about 10 feet away and raises his gun. You can tell he thinks you're already dead. He just wants to tell Santiago that he shot you."

"So I'm **getting fucking shot**?"

"You can try to move out of the way, but he'll know you're still alive. You gotta tough this one out. Good news: it's a **small weapon** and you're in the car that acts as **cover**, so you get a +2."

"Maybe he isn't trying to kill me?" she asks.

"Yeah, that's fair. He thinks you're already dead. Take a +3 to your roll!"

"Okay...I'll tough it out." Katherine rolls and gets a total of 7. Whew! She'll live!

"Pick off the list! You won't die, but this is ugly."

"I'll take **it's painful**. I take **-1 ongoing**."

"Great. He'll take **it's bloody**. You'll die **without immediate aid**," I say. "The shots ring out loud. He empties the magazine, sending a half-dozen bullets into the car. Most miss or get stopped by the door, but you feel a sharp pain in your side: one must have caught you in your ribs. Satisfied, Gabriel leaves. You're in a lot of pain, and you're bleeding heavily from your side. You need help bad, chica. What do you do?"  
.....

## ❖ HELP OR INTERFERE ❖

When you help or interfere after a PC has rolled, wager stress (max+3) and roll with stress wagered. On a hit, give them a +1 or -2 to their roll, your choice. On a 7-9, you mark however much stress you wagered. On a miss, mark the stress you wagered and prepare for the worst.

Each move in **Cartel** is an event that needs to resolve before the story can move forward. Only one character can have that spotlight at a time, so resolve each move before moving on to the next. If you **turn to violence** against some *chico*, we need to see how that resolves before you can **push your luck** to get away from his *amigos*.

After a player rolls, however, other players can jump in to **help or interfere**, provided they are fictionally capable of intervening. It's hard to help someone **turn to violence** over the phone, but you can probably help **pressure someone** or **make an offer** using text messages.

In order to **help or interfere**, you must wager at least one stress. The number you add to your roll is the amount of stress you've wagered. If you get a 7-9 or a miss, mark the stress you wagered; if you get a 10+, you don't have to pay anything!

The amount of stress you wager should indicate the riskiness of the action you're taking. Wagering three stress to **help** is a huge deal. Always say what your interjection looks like given the amount you're putting on the line.

Sometimes the actions that **help or interfere** would normally trigger a basic move, but since the spotlight is still on the original character, **help or interfere** triggers instead, allowing the interjecting character to affect the outcome before the instigating move is resolved.

The outcomes available for help or interfere tell you when they're useful—you can't help when someone has rolled a 4, and you can't interfere when someone has rolled a 12. Your modifier won't change the result of the roll!

If you can't affect the roll with this move, your character can still take whatever action they deem appropriate, like providing cover fire or talking down an angry *sicario*. But **help or interfere** only triggers when it can have mechanical meaning. Whatever you want to do is just the next move you make in the fiction.

Finally, you can't **help or interfere** with stress moves (page 58) or Heat moves (page 64). Those moves are made solely by the character making the move, and no one—*ni siquiera Dios*—can help them when they trigger.

## Examples for Help or Interfere

*Gustavo, El Polizeta, once believed Yolanda, La Cocinera, to be an old friend, but he saw her leaving Santiago's place...and now wants to know what her relationship is with the drug lord. He invites her to a dinner party, unaware that she has grown suspicious of him as well:*

*"While we're eating," says Justin, Gustavo's player, "I want to ask Yolanda a few questions: 'How's your new job? Are they treating you well?'"*

*Sarah, Yolanda's player, smiles. "Are you trying to get the truth out of me or just making small talk?"*

*"I want the truth!" Justin rolls and gets an 8.*

*"Can I interfere with that?" asks Sarah.*

*"Sure," I say, "What does that look like?"*

*"I'm going to try to shift the conversation toward all the hours that Gustavo is working. I know his wife hates his job with the task force, so hopefully that keeps the pressure off of me."*

*"That makes sense," I say. "How much stress are you going to wager? Maybe just one?"*

*"Yeah," says Sarah. "Just one for now." She rolls with a +1 and gets a 7. She has to mark a stress, but she brings Justin's roll down to by 2 to a 6, a miss!*

*"Can I interfere with her interfering?" asks Justin.*

*"Um... no." I say. "Someone else could help you, but it doesn't look like anyone wants to assist: you rolled a miss, my friend. If you want, Sarah, you can get the truth out of Gustavo as if you rolled a 10+ on the move..."*

## TOO MANY COOKS

Only one character can successfully **help** on a given roll, and only one character can successfully **interfere**. Any character can try to interject, but you can't rack up more than one +1 and one -2 when someone **helps** or **interferes** on a single roll. If a player misses while **helping or interfering**, other players can jump in and try to **help or interfere** as well, provided the interjecting players are wagering stress.

*Injured and exposed, Luna, La Rata, goes to her sister, Sofía, for help. Sofía, La Esposa, bandages Luna's gunshot wound, but it's not long before Santiago calls looking for Luna:*

*Jahmal says, "Sofía, mi amor, I need to speak to your sister. We have business to discuss."*

*"Luna?" Brendan says, "I'm taking Ana to school, but I'll keep an eye out for her." He rolls with Face to justify Sofía's behavior, but hits a 9.*

*"I can help!" says Katherine, Luna's player. "I whisper, 'Tell Santiago I was supposed to come for lunch and didn't show up!'" Katherine wagers 2 stress and rolls: 12! She adds +1 to bring Brendan's total to a 10. But Jahmal could decide to interfere as well; a -2 would bring Brendan's roll down to an 8!*

## ✦ STRAIN YOUR FINANCES ✦

When you *strain your finances* to get what you want, roll. Add +1 for each:

- ▮ you've recently come into a large sum of money
- ▮ you will accept something counterfeit/stolen
- ▮ you have an *amigo* with useful connections

On a 10+, you have enough cash on hand to make your purchase. On a 7-9, you scrape together enough *dinero*...but someone notices your largesse. On a miss, your purchase remains frustratingly out of reach. The GM will tell you why you find yourself unexpectedly short at the last moment.

Your character's lifestyle (page 72) is mostly relevant when it comes time to *strain your finances* to get what you want. Your lifestyle sets the parameters for your purchases, telling the MC what's obviously affordable to you and what requires you to make this move.

An impoverished *sicaria* *strains her finances* when she covers an unexpected car repair or bails *su vieja amiga* out of jail. *El jefe*—living a life of luxury—only strains his finances when he reaches for something grand: \$1,000,000 in cash, a brand-new sports car, an exotic animal or two.

You might secure a loan, steal some cash, or look for friends with connections as you try to ensure your success. Don't make this move until the moment you are ready to put cash on the barrel and actually make the purchase. That's the moment that matters, *güey*.

## Options for Strain Your Finances

*A large sum of money* is always dependent on your lifestyle. A destitute *halcón* has come into a large sum when they find a few large bills, but a stable *cocinero* needs a briefcase of cash.

*Accepting something counterfeit or stolen* means you don't care if your purchase is exactly what you want or if the person you're buying it from got it illegally. This option is only available if it makes sense; you can't get something counterfeit if you're trying to take your *chico* out to dinner.

Going to *an amigo with useful connections* means you've got a specific character in mind who can help you out—a *narco* who deals in stolen goods, a bank manager who can fast track a loan, etc. It's fine to introduce someone new when you make the move, but expect the MC to remember that you called in a favor.



## Example for Strain Your Finances

.....  
After selling a kilo of meth to Osita, Beto, El Halcón, asks her to get him a meeting with a shadowy jefe known as Z-32. Osita agrees, but tells Beto that he better come to the meeting wearing something nicer than his usual jeans and futbol jersey.

“Me and Azul are going to go clothes shopping,” Derrick says. “I want a cool suit or something.”

“What’s your lifestyle again?” I ask. “Destitute? A nice suit is tough when you’re virtually penniless.”

“Nah, I’m **impoverished**. My pandilla is **rich**, remember? We work at that taquería...sometimes! We’ve got a little bit of money.”

“Right. Okay, then **straining your finances** to get the suit makes sense. You also have a **large sum of money** from the sale you made to Osita. Are you willing to accept a counterfeit or stolen suit? Do you have an amigo with useful connections?”

“Fuck yeah! I probably have a friend or two who sells stolen stuff. I don’t care where the suit is from.”

I laugh. “Yeah, that checks out. How about we name this friend...Lola.” Derrick nods. “What does it look like when you go to buy the suit?”

“I’ll just meet her in an alley. I like the idea that she sells stuff out of the back of her truck.”

“Cool. You drop her a text, and she agrees to meet you behind the taquería. You and Azul are waiting when she pulls up in her truck, loud ranchero music blasting out of the speakers.”

“I say, ‘Hola, Lola. You got what I’m looking for? I hope you’re not wasting my time!’”

“Lola is a little older than the two of you, maybe twenty-six or twenty-seven. She smiles and gets out of the truck. The bed has a tarp over it, but she pulls it back to reveal a whole bunch of clothes and shoes. She says, ‘I’ve got what you want, chamaco. Pick one before I get tired of the way you smell.’”

“With all my bonuses, I think I’m at a +3, right?” I nod. Derrick rolls and gets a 9. “Damn. Can I get someone to help me? Maybe Mina or Yolanda?”

“They would have to be here to help you, right? You could try to call someone, but it feels like that’s interrupting this move. We’ve got to resolve this immediate situation before we can move on.”

“That’s fair. Okay, it looks like I get the money together, but someone notices. I bet that’s Lola?”

“Yeah, I think that makes sense. You pull a few bills off the stack Osita gave you, and you see her eyes widen. Lola says, ‘Where did you get that, cabrón? You in with some real narcos?’”

“I really don’t want Lola in my business,” says Derrick. “I tell her, ‘If I am in with los carteles, then you shouldn’t be asking questions. Right?’”

“Nice! Sounds like you’re trying to **pressure her** into leaving you alone with a subtle threat of violence or cartel trouble. Is that right?”

Derrick nods and picks up the dice...  
.....

# STRESS MOVES

Stress is the lifeblood of the drug trade. It's the reason drugs get made, the reason drugs get used, and the reason most druglords don't live long enough to enjoy the spoils of their empires.

In **Cartel**, all sorts of situations cause stress—getting shot, doing something horrific, fighting with a spouse—but the best way to keep stress in check is through **stress moves**. Stress moves trigger like any other move, but their primary purpose is to clear your stress track and keep you from being **overwhelmed** by stress, i.e. having all five of your stress boxes marked at once.

While overwhelmed, you can't choose to mark stress (or be forced to mark it). The MC can also ask you to make a stress move at any time; they can't request a particular move, but you've got to trigger one quickly or the MC will escalate the situation further. See page 69 for more on stress and getting overwhelmed!

## TRIGGERING STRESS MOVES

Unfortunately, stress moves in **Cartel** aren't triggered by spa days. Your life is too chaotic for that kind of restoration. Instead, you've got to seek relief through one of these moves:

- ▶ Verbally Abuse or Shame Someone (Face)
- ▶ Lose Yourself in a Substance (Grit)
- ▶ Confess Your Sins to a Priest (Hustle)
- ▶ Dish out a Beatdown (Savagery)

No one can **help** or **interfere** with a stress move; the outcome is between you, the dice, and God.

## Safety Tools and Stress Moves

The ugliness that lies at the heart of cyclical trauma in which hurt people *hurt people* means you have to pay special attention to your safety tools when invoking stress moves. It might make fictional sense for a PC to **dish out a beatdown** to a spouse, but everyone at the table may not be comfortable with that kind of content.

If you need to rewind and revise or x-card content like domestic abuse, try to avoid penalizing the player who invoked a stress move in good faith that made other players uncomfortable. Find a way to trigger the move with a different context using your chosen safety tools (page 13) and group consensus.



## ❖ VERBALLY ABUSE OR SHAME ❖

When you *verbally abuse or shame someone* you care about, roll with Face. On a hit, your words hit hard: tell them to mark stress. On a 10+, clear your stress track. On a 7-9, clear one stress. On a miss, your cowardice is clear: take -1 ongoing to Face until you make amends.

The most obvious way to clear your stress is to let it out at someone close. **Verbally abusing or shaming** another character means that you explode at them, berating them for their failures or cruelly highlighting their flaws. ¡No chingues!

You must care about the people you verbally shame or abuse for the **verbally abuse or shame** to trigger. You can yell at the waitress at the *taquería* or some random *güey* on the street all day, but you only get to clear stress when you yell at someone you actually care about.

Avoid triggering this move by saying “And then I say something shitty.” The specifics of what you say, how you say it...these are the elements of drama that haunt future scenes. If you miss, for example, you need to know what you said that requires you to make amends.

If you miss, you suffer the -1 ongoing to Face for all moves until you find some way to apologize. The person you hurt gets to judge your atonement, but an apology is usually the minimum step. You might have to go further, *cabron*, and actually do something nice!

.....  
When Gustavo's schemes come to light, Sofia is furious. He put their family in danger, lied to her about his plans for returning to Durango, and betrayed—even killed!—his fellow federales.

I say, “I think this revelation is enough to make you mark a stress, Sofia. Sound right?”

“Yeah,” says Brendan, Sofia's player. “This is pretty shocking. I've got four stress marked, so I think I'd like to **verbally shame** Gustavo.”

Brendan reaches for the dice, but I stop him: “What do you say? Before you roll, I want to make sure we're clear on how you're shaming him.”

“Hmm. Maybe something like ‘You're an idiot!’”

I look at Justin, Gustavo's player. He doesn't look particularly shamed. I gesture for Brendan to keep going, urging him to commit to the fiction.

“Okay. ‘Mi madre was right: I was a fool for marrying you. Ana and I deserve better. Get out.’”

“Perfect! Roll with Face!”

Brendan gets a 10 with his roll, but Justin can't interfere with a stress move. Sofia clears her stress track, and Gustavo has to mark a stress himself.  
.....

## ❖ LOSE YOURSELF ❖

When you *lose yourself in a substance*, roll with Grit. On a hit, clear your stress track. On a 7-9, the drugs take a toll: make a drug move off the list. On a miss, you're in deep. *Buena suerte, cabrón.*

The easiest way to take the edge off the drug trade is to sample some of the product and *lose yourself in a substance*. All of the usual suspects trigger this move: alcohol, cocaine, crystal meth, heroin. If you're wondering why marijuana isn't on the list...pot isn't nearly hard enough to make you *lose yourself*, *cabrón*.

You must use to excess to trigger *lose yourself in a substance*. You can't have a few drinks with dinner and claim to be *losing yourself*. You've got to really go on a bender, putting down enough *cervezas* to make your *esposa* wonder why you're drinking. Only then will the move trigger and your stress clear.

And it will almost certainly clear. Any hit when you lose yourself in a substance clears your entire track. Sometimes a generous MC might even let you clear your track on a miss!

But *losing yourself in a substance* is dangerous. When you roll a 7-9; you've got to pick from the list of moves appropriate for your drug of choice. The drugs get a hold of you, *amigo*, and you might not like who you are when you're high or drunk.

Here's the list of drug moves:

### Cocaine Moves

- ▶ start a fight with a mouthy *pendejo* or *puta*
- ▶ throw yourself at someone you shouldn't
- ▶ spend your money stupidly or carelessly

### Heroin Moves

- ▶ push away someone who cares about you
- ▶ overlook a crucial deadline or event
- ▶ steal funds in preparation for your next fix

### Crystal Meth Moves

- ▶ accuse a loved one of theft or betrayal
- ▶ push a place you keep toward squalor
- ▶ hurt yourself to keep your *diablos* at bay

### Alcohol Moves

- ▶ make a scene about how you were wronged
- ▶ let slip something to the wrong person
- ▶ wreck something meaningful, carelessly



## Example for Lose Yourself

.....  
After spending some time on the run, Yolanda is eventually captured by Santiago's enforcers. He drags her back to her workshop, demanding that she return to cooking and stop making trouble...or else.

"You look around your workshop, Yolanda, and you realize that this prison is all you have. I think you're full up on stress?" Sarah, Yolanda's player nods. I say, "It's time for a **stress move**."

"Since Santiago is already gone, I think I'm just going to get really drunk. I've got some wine in the back, so I get that out and start drinking. I'm not going to stop until I **lose myself** in the wine."

"Yeah, sounds legit. Roll with Grit."

Sarah gets a 7, barely enough for a hit, but enough to **clear her entire stress track**.

"Okay, so a 7-9 means you've still got to make a drug move," I say. "You've got a few options for alcohol. What do you pick?"

"I think I'm going to **wreck something**. I've got all this art I've made here, right? Sculptures and paintings? I just want to throw it all in the fire pit out back and watch it burn."

"Do you do it carelessly?" I ask.

"Oh, yeah. I just drag stuff out there, pour lighter fluid on it, and light it. I don't sort through stuff or pick things. I just let it all burn..."  
.....

## MÁS QUE DEMASIADO

Anyone who works for *los carteles* has access to more drugs than can be consumed in a lifetime, white or brown bricks stacked like construction materials in warehouses all over Mexico. Coca leaves bought for pennies in South America are worth thousands in the Midwest, but they are first stored in vast quantities where *narcos* work.

Thus, the true value of a kilo is not what it can do for someone, not what it offers in terms of kindness or comfort. No one in America pays what drugs are worth; they pay what it costs to secretly ship them from Colombia to Chicago, to keep them away from watchful eyes.

But that's the way of things, *güey*. Everything south of the border is cheap...until it heads north. Once it crosses the line that cuts the desert like a knife—separating land *Los Estados Unidos* took from *México* from the dirt the *gringos* deemed too worthless to seize—the thing becomes valuable. Cars, drugs, *Mexicanos*. All suddenly worth more to America than they were before crossing.

The cartels love borders more than anyone else; they are eager to ship drugs—and people—to satisfy the insatiable American demand for *more*. What would they do if *Mexicanos* could go north to work and return home to sleep? What would they do if Americans stopped pretending they didn't want the drugs?

Mexico is *como burro de aguador, cargado de agua y muerto de sed*. Everything you need is right here, ready for the taking, but marked for someone else because it fetches a higher price a world away. None of this is yours, *cabrón*. It never was.

## ✧ CONFESS YOUR SINS ✧

When you *confess your sins to a priest*, roll with Hustle. On a hit, you find forgiveness; clear your stress track. On a 7-9, you must perform your penance before you return to confession. On a miss, the priest sees through your false contrition; take a -1 ongoing to Hustle until you truly repent.

*Narcos* may not seem like religious types, but in Mexico...everyone is Catholic. And unless you've got some special arrangement with a priest, *confessing your sins* involves a church and a confessional, a booth in which the priest sits on one side of a screen and the penitent petitioner sits on the other. Judgement, *mijo*.

*Confessing your sins* triggers even if you aren't particularly guilty about what you've done. The act of petitioning an actual priest for forgiveness is what clears your stress, although you might have to perform the penance the priest requires—a dozen Hail Marys, reading the Bible, abstaining from vice—before you can return to the confessional booth in the future.

On a miss, however, the weight of your sin comes to bear on your soul. The priest isn't fooled by your confession, and you take a -1 ongoing to Hustle for all moves until you find a way to truly find absolution in the eyes of the Lord; the MC is the final judge of your efforts. No one said forgiveness was easy, *amigo*!

.....  
*Haunted by her double life as an undercover federal, Luna goes to **confess her sins** on Sunday morning:*

*I say, "The priest draws back the screen and waits for you to speak. What do you do?"*

*"I say, 'Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned. I have hurt people, committed crimes. I have lied to my family about who I am, and I can't keep going.'"*

*"Sounds like a confession! Roll with Hustle!"*

*Katherine, Luna's player, rolls and gets an 8. She **clears her entire stress track**, but she's got to listen closely to the penance required; she needs to atone before she can clear stress this way again.*

*"The priest nods in silence. He says, 'Mija, do you truly repent for these sins?'" Katherine nods. "He says, 'Then stop bearing false witness, mija. Tell your familia the truth. Find a new path with the Lord, and leave the lies behind. Go in peace.'"*

*"So what do I have to do?"*

*"You've got to tell Sofia the truth," I say. "You can't imagine coming back to this confessional with all the lies you have on your conscience..."*  
 .....

## ➤ DISH OUT A BEATDOWN ➤

When you *dish out a beatdown*, roll with Savagery. On a 10+, you assert your dominance: clear your stress track. On a 7-9, you hurt them, but it's not enough: clear one stress. On a miss, the violence gets out of hand. Enjoy the consequences, *pendejo*.

Some *narcos* work out their stress with their fists, seeking joy in dominance and relief in the pain of others. *Dishing out a beatdown* isn't about getting information from a witness or teaching someone a lesson; it's about inflicting your ugly will upon the bodies of other people, destroying them in the hopes that violence makes you feel powerful and in control.

Getting into a fistfight isn't the same as *dishing out a beatdown*. For a *beatdown*, the target of violence must be somehow vulnerable; perhaps weaker than you, tied up, or generally not expecting the attack. It might be necessary for you to *turn to violence* first to disable your opponent before you can trigger this move, injuring them so that they can't really fight back.

A miss when you're *dishing out a beatdown* can be catastrophic. You might find yourself seriously injuring—or even killing—the target of your violent outburst. The MC chooses how things go when you miss; once you commit to this kind of violence, it's easy for tragedy to follow in the wake of your callous decisions.

.....  
Beto, Derrick's Halcón, accompanies Mina on a mission to secure a signed contract from a local businessman—Ignacio—who owes money to El Narco. When the two of them arrive at Ignacio's factory, the businessman tries to run. Beto and Mina split up, but Beto is the one who tackles him.

"You're not sure where Mina is," I say, "but Ignacio is struggling to get away, his suit filthy from the dirt and grime on the floor. What do you do?"

"Fuck this guy," says Derrick. "I'm going to **dish out a beatdown** and clear some stress. If I rough him up, he's unlikely to keep running away, right?"

"Yeah, he's not getting far once you've beaten him up. What does this look like? Why is it a beatdown?"

"I flip the gun Mina gave me around and hit him with the handle in the head," Derrick says. He rolls with Savagery, but it's a clean miss: snake eyes!

"Whoops. Looks like things get out of hand. You start hitting him...and just keep hitting him. You're still a little high, right?" Derrick nods. "Yeah, you look down at him and there's just blood everywhere. There's no way he's still alive...or signing anything."  
.....



## HEAT MOVES

City police know better than to tangle with a real *narco*, especially when so many *policías* are already on *El Narco*'s payroll. But President Calderón's anti-cartel directives have increased attention on Durango's *plaza* to the point that even the most hardened *narcos* keep one eye open for *federales*.

In **Cartel**, such efforts are represented by **heat moves** that trigger when the PCs attempt to conceal their criminal activity or avoid tangling with *los federales*. When you roll with Heat, the usual results are reversed: you want to roll low to avoid the cops. A miss is the best outcome, and a 10+ puts you in hot water with the authorities. Here's the full list of heat moves:

- ▶ Avoid Suspicion (Heat+Questions)
- ▶ Leave a Messy Crime Scene (Heat)
- ▶ Flee from Los Federales (Heat)

Each playbook has a Heat stat that represents the interest *los federales* have in the character. *El Narco* (Heat +2) and *La Sicaria* (Heat +1) have positive stats that make it difficult for them to do business in public, but *La Esposa* (Heat -2) or *La Polizeta* (Heat -1) are almost invisible. If two characters make a heat move together—like **leaving a messy crime scene**—the one with the higher Heat makes the move and bears the immediate consequences. No **helping** or **interfering**!

Heat moves tend to be moves the MC requires you to make in response to the fiction at the table, even if you'd rather not make the move at all. After all, no one starts the day eager to **flee from los federales**!



## ❖ AVOID SUSPICION ❖

When you *avoid suspicion while handling business in public*, roll with Heat. Add +1 for each:

- ▶ you're carrying a lot of drugs or money
- ▶ you're transporting at least one body, dead or alive
- ▶ you're equipped with military weaponry

On a miss, you don't attract any attention; most civilians know better than to get in your way.

On a 7-9, only the local *policía* take an interest; make a threat or flash some *dinero* to smooth things over. On a 10+, someone dangerous has been looking for you. And here you are.

Most *narco* business is conducted in private, but sometimes you need to **avoid suspicion** and get something illegal done in a public place.

*Carrying a lot of drugs or money* means that you've got enough on you that it's noticeable: a large amount of cash, multiple kilos of drugs. Less than a duffel bag of cash or guns is too little.

*Transporting a body, dead or alive* is fairly straightforward. If you've got a body in your trunk, that counts! People tend to notice when human bodies are moved from place to place.

*Equipped with military weaponry* means that you're carrying an assault rifle, grenade launcher, or something equally obvious and scary.

If you roll a 7-9, you won't have to deal with real authorities, but a 10+ means someone—perhaps another *narco*, perhaps *los federales* or the CIA—catches you in the middle of whatever illegal thing you're doing. *Buena suerte, cabrón.*

.....  
Santiago's offer to Los Zetas—nearly a million in cash—is enough to bring them to the table, but neither side is interested in walking into a trap: they all agree a public handoff is the “safe” option:

“Santiago, you see Guillermo waiting for you in the parking lot of the market, his face still bruised from where you beat him. What do you do?”

“I tell my people to load the money into his truck. It's gotta be several bags?” asks Jahmal.

“It's a lot. Are you even **avoiding suspicion**?”

“We put the money in bags! The whole transfer is going to happen fast! I'm definitely **avoiding**.” I laugh and nod, and Jahmal rolls with Heat +2, adding +1 for the bags of money. He gets a 10.

“Ooof. Tough roll. As your thugs load the last bag into Guillermo's truck, you see an SUV parked across the street, window rolled down. Someone is taking pictures of you! What do you do?”  
.....

## ✦ LEAVE A MESSY CRIME SCENE ✦

When you try to *leave a messy crime scene* before the authorities arrive, roll with Heat. On a miss, you exit the scene; tell the MC what potentially incriminating evidence you've left behind. On a 7-9, the authorities respond before you can get away completely, but they are isolated or unprepared for what they find when they arrive. On a 10+, *la policía* arrives in force...with *los federales* or an American in tow.

Sometimes the work gets dirty. You might plan for trouble, but pretty soon you've got bodies on your hands and *los federales* on their way.

*Leaving a messy crime scene* triggers when you try to exit a scene that's definitely going to get attention from the authorities. If you knife a *narco* in an alley, there might be blood, but you can casually walk away before anyone is the wiser. *Leaving a messy crime scene* is for when there are gunshots, bodies, or property damage on a noteworthy scale that can't be ignored.

*Leaving a messy crime scene* is never without cost. Even on a miss, you leave something behind: shell casings, fingerprints, your own blood. But on a 7-9 and 10+, you have to contend with *la policía* before you can exit the scene. You might still be able to keep your head down—or shoot your way out—but don't expect to walk away without doing something like *pushing your luck*, *proposing a deal*, *pressuring someone*, or *turning to violence*.

.....  
After Beto foolishly killed a businessman who owed El Narco money, Mina does her best to try to get them both out of danger:

"Okay, I grab Beto and start to march him out the back. 'We need to leave. Right now,'" says Marissa, Mina's player. "'Goddammit, Beto!'"

"Yeah," I say, "since Beto beat him to death with a gun in the middle of the factory, it sounds like you're trying to **leave a messy crime scene**. Beto's Heat is +0, but it sounds like you're really dragging him out of here, Mina?"

"Yeah. I guess I'm rolling with my Heat, since it's a +1?" I nod. Marissa rolls, landing a total of 6!

"Nice! It looks like you're going to get out of here before any cops arrive. That makes sense: everyone here is too afraid to stop you or get in your way. What **incriminating evidence** do you and Beto leave behind, Mina?"

"Oh, all the blood and fingerprints and shit. We don't have time to clean anything..."  
.....

## ➤ FLEE FROM LOS FEDERALES ➤

When you *flee from los federales*, roll with Heat. On a miss, you get away clean. On a 7-9, you can escape the authorities by sacrificing something; the MC will tell you what your freedom will cost you this time. On a 10+, you're fucked, *güey*: mark 3 stress, get caught, or get shot, your choice. Whatever you choose, the chase is over.

*Narcos* are famous for fighting the cops, using assault rifles and body armor to go *mano-a-mano* with *federales y soldados*. But you're probably wiser than that, *güey*. You know when to run.

*Fleeing from los federales* triggers when all else has failed but simply running away. You might be on foot or in a car, sneaking quietly or beating the street, but you're bound and determined to avoid the consequences *los federales* bring to bear.

On a miss, your tactics work, maybe because you're smart and clever, maybe because the average *federal* isn't that motivated. On a 7-9, you get away provided you're willing to give something up: a gun, the briefcase full of money, your friend. Pay the price or do the time, *cabrón*.

Things get a bit more complicated on a 10+: you've got to pick one of three bad options. You can only *mark three stress* if you've got three empty stress boxes to mark, so sometimes it's a choice between *getting caught* and *getting shot*. Everyone knows that sometimes it's better to take one bullet than fifty years in a cell.

.....  
Sofía, Brendan's Esposa, and Gustavo, Justin's Polizeta, tried to get rid of Delgado's dead body, but things went south when a neighbor saw them loading the federal into the back of their car.

"You hear the sirens in the distance. Not far now, maybe a few minutes at most. What do you do?"

"We gotta split up," says Brendan. "Run!"

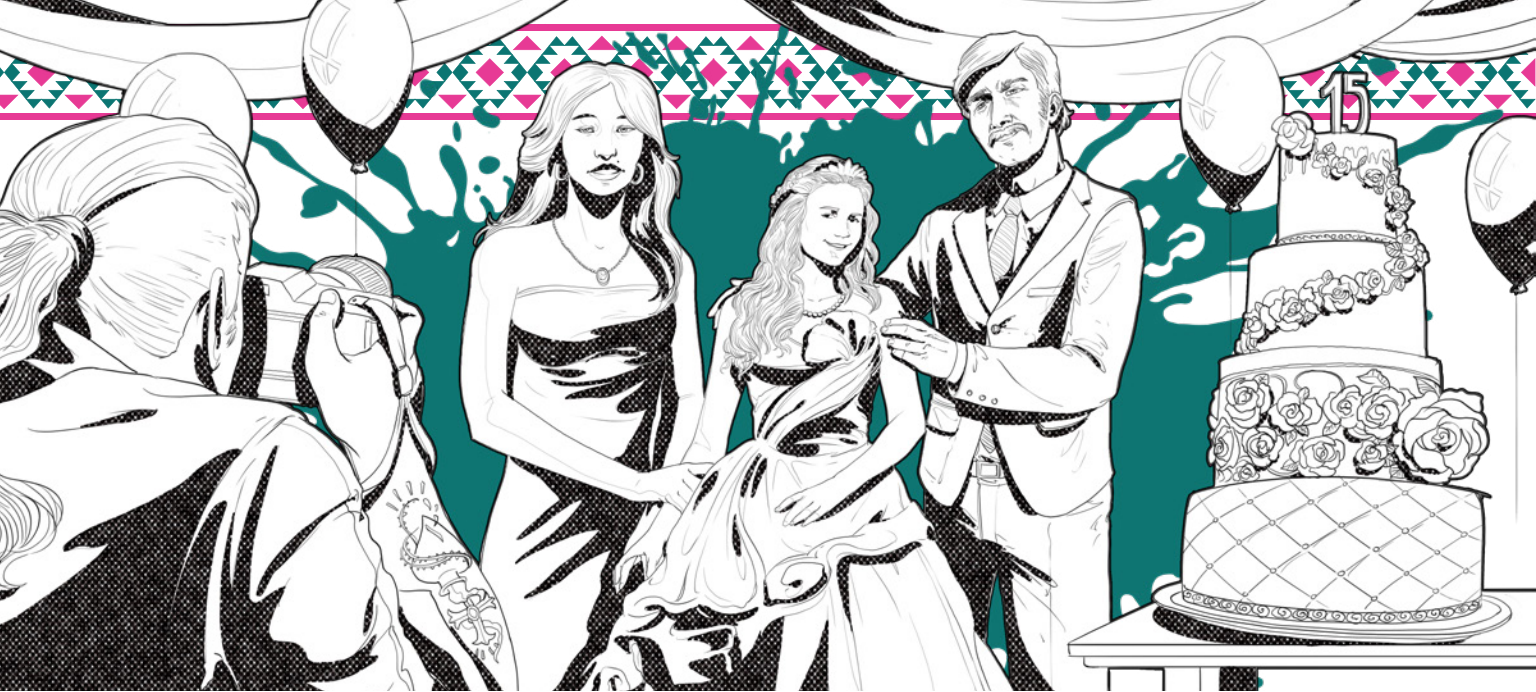
Brendan rolls first with Heat -2, scoring a 4.

"Sofía's in the clear," I say, "You walk down the block right past several police cars moving in the opposite direction. They don't look twice at you."

Justin rolls next with Heat -1, but gets boxcars for a total of 11. Gustavo's in real trouble.

"Damn. I was hoping my Heat -1 would save me. I don't have **three stress** to mark, so I think I'm **getting shot**. I can't **get caught** and blow my career."

I nod. There's never a good time to take a bullet. "You run, but the federales open fire as they get close. You feel a slug rip into you as you pound the pavement. Looks like you **got fucking shot!**"  
.....



## OTHER RULES

.....

In addition to moves and playbooks, **Cartel** relies on four additional systems to manage the fiction:

- ▶ **Stress**, a track that gauges your character's ability to manage the conflicts of the drug war.
- ▶ **Harm**, a narrative indicator of the effects of violence, especially *getting fucking shot*.
- ▶ **Lifestyle**, a measure of your character's relative financial position in Mexico.
- ▶ **Llaves (Keys)**, narrative triggers that mark your character's advancement in the story.

These systems interact with all the moves, supporting the structure they provide to the fiction. *Fleeing from los federales* might lead to *marking stress* or *suffering harm*, while your *llaves* or *lifestyle* might motivate you to take actions that trigger basic moves. And, of course, the looming threat of stress leads everyone who plays **Cartel** to inevitably seek relief in stress moves, no matter what they might cost.

The MC is responsible for many of these tools, so check out *Using Stress* (page 132) and *Managing Advancement* (page 141) in Chapter 5 for more info; this section contains all players need to know about these systems.



## STRESS

You begin each session with at least two stress marked, a reflection of the mental cost the drug war imposes upon you. As you play, you mark stress when moves—or the MC—calls for you to mark it, mostly when you are pushing yourself to get something done or trying to keep your cool in a difficult situation. If you somehow end a session with fewer than two stress marked, you start the next session back at two stress.

### Becoming Overwhelmed

You can **never** mark more than five stress. If your stress track is ever filled, you become **overwhelmed** until you get at least one box of your stress track cleared. While overwhelmed, ignore any move that tells you to mark stress.

You can't *choose* to mark stress either while overwhelmed, even if a move would normally give you the option. If someone **pressures** you or **proposes a deal** to you, you've got to go along with them and their plans. You're too stressed out to dismiss their influence, *cabrón!*

While you're overwhelmed, the MC can call for you to make a stress move at any time. It's still up to you which stress move you make—you're free to make a playbook move like **Perderse** or **Amante**—but you have to immediately address your stress track or suffer the consequences. Of course, the best way to avoid the MC demanding a stress move at a difficult time is to never let your stress get that high in the first place...

.....  
Luna, Katherine's *La Rata*, has found safety at Sofia's house, but she's been shot. And she's certain that Santiago knows she's the mole! Luna has **four boxes of her stress track** marked when Sofia tries to **pressure** her to call Sofia's husband, Gustavo.

Brendan, Sofia's player, rolls and gets a 12. Katherine can't interfere, so she's got to **mark a stress** or agree to Sofia's plan to call for help...but Luna knows Gustavo works for Santiago!

"No way I'm calling Gustavo. I'll mark the stress."

I've been keeping track, but I ask to be sure:

"That's **five stress**, right? You're **overwhelmed**?"

Katherine looks down. "Shit, yeah. I'm full up."

"Great. Time for a stress move, I think. You've got to do something about this stress. Maybe you **verbally abuse or shame** Sofia?"

"No! She's my sister! Can't I get just drunk and **lose myself in a substance**?"

I turn to Brendan and ask, "Are you going to give her alcohol when she's still bleeding from a bullet wound?" He shakes his head.

"Fuck this," says Katherine, "I'll get the alcohol myself. I stand up and go to their liquor cabinet."

"What are you...?" Brendan says. "Estás loca!"

I jump in. "Since this looks like a new conflict, Luna, I think you've missed your window to deal with your stress. You take two steps toward the kitchen, and...pass out from the pain. Sofia, you can see that something must have aggravated her wound. She's bleeding badly. What do you do?"  
.....

## UN PISTOLA PERO NO BALAS

Joaquín Guzmán—*El Chapo*—perhaps the most infamous *narco* of the Sinaloa Cartel once said, “I know one day I will die. I hope it’s of natural causes.” Of course, *El Chapo* didn’t die when he was captured in Guatemala in 1993 or when he escaped from a high-security facility in 2001. Nor did he perish while on the run for more than a decade from both Mexican and United States authorities.

Instead, the Sinaloa Cartel thrived during his time on the run. He would show up at restaurants in Sinaloa, confiscating cell phones from the patrons and staff, then paying for everyone’s meals after dining with his friends. No one is as bold as a *narco* in his home state.

The violence of the drug war has always been unevenly distributed. Murder is often a constant in illegal trades, but the line between the civilian world and the drug war held steady until 2007. Only when Calderón brought in the military and ordered the *narcos* shot instead of caught did everything spiral out of control.

But even Calderón’s orders were always about politics. The government usually works *with* the *narcos*; *El Chapo*’s escapes from prison are more about corruption than ingenuity, more about how poor the guards who staff the cells are than how loyal *El Chapo*’s own men are to his cause.

Even those who would oppose *los carteles* know the cause is foolish: most cops in Mexico carry guns, but they are only issued a handful of bullets. How would you fight the *narcos*, when there are so many of them and so few of you? *Mejor no meterse con Sansón a las patadas.*

## VIOLENCE Y HARM

Unlike stress, harm in **Cartel** isn’t marked on a track or represented numerically. Instead, physical injury shows up in three ways:

- **Stress as injury**, when the MC inflicts stress upon your character to represent harm.
- **Narrative injury**, changes to your character’s fictional position resulting from violence.
- **Getting Fucking Shot**, a distinct move that handles harm when someone shoots you.

If there is ever any doubt about what kind of injury your character suffers, the MC decides.

### Stress as Injury

The MC can **inflict stress** on characters when they suffer harm, especially when the injury is non-lethal. A punch to the nose is likely 1-stress, while a car crash might be 2-stress or more.

.....  
*Yolanda gets into a scrap with a sicario waiting in her apartment. She rolls a miss while **turning to violence**; I say, “He punches you in the head, knocking you to the ground. Mark a stress!”*  
.....

If a PC can’t mark any more stress because they are overwhelmed, the MC is free to knock them unconscious or force them to make a stress move, depending on the situation at hand.

## Narrative Injury

The MC can inflict **narrative injury** when someone suffers harm, instead of (or in addition to) inflicting stress. Narrative injury mostly imposes limits on what the character can do in the fiction, but it can kill characters if the harm is serious.

.....  
*Struggling to escape from Zeta sicarios, Gustavo decides to **push his luck** and jump out of the third story window. He rolls a 9, and I say, “You can make it, but you will break something when you hit the ground. You still want to jump?”*

*Justin, Gustavo’s player, nods. He doesn’t want to try to fight, and they’ve already blocked the exits.*

*“You jump out into the darkness. The impact is quicker than you imagined, and you feel a sharp pain in your left ankle. Mark 2-stress.”*

*“Ugh. How bad is it? Can I walk?”*

*“Yeah, you can walk. But you hear them yelling and shouting above you. They are still looking.”*

*“Okay, I’m going to try to hobble to my car. It’s still parked in the lot here?”*

*“Totally. But with a broken ankle, I think you’re **pushing your luck** to make it there unseen...”*  
 .....

If PC suffers fatal harm—a car bomb, repeated stabbings, drowning—the MC might inflict death as narrative injury. Death is an unlikely outcome, but see *Killing PCs* (page 140) for more on how characters, especially other PCs, might kill a PC without using guns. When guns are involved, of course, things are different...

## SUFFER LITTLE HARM

PCs who suffer harm when *turning to violence* can choose to “suffer little harm,” minimizing the consequences. The MC might decide that the PC marks less stress or takes a less serious narrative injury, but they might also decide the PC avoided the harm entirely. If you tackle a shooter and choose *suffer little harm*, you might avoid *getting fucking shot* even if the shooter gets off a round or two that leads to collateral damage around you.

## Getting Fucking Shot

When a character—NPC or PC—shoots a PC, they are triggering a move: *get fucking shot*.

When a PC *gets fucking shot*, that move covers the entirety of the consequences; the MC can’t also inflict stress or narrative injury when you *get fucking shot*. The move tells us what happens, including all the costs and consequences.

*Getting fucking shot* is the primary way **Cartel** characters die. Once this move triggers, rolling a miss means you’ve reached the end. Everything is on the line, *cabrón*, when guns are in play. See page 52 for more on using *getting fucking shot* during a session.

## LIFESTYLE Y MONEY

Each playbook has a **lifestyle**—assigned to the playbook or from a relationship (*La Esposa*) or an extra (*El Narco*)—a rough approximation of a character’s wealth and income, a measure of how much financial sway and monetary force a character can bring to bear on problems.

There are five lifestyles, ranging from painfully **destitute** to shamelessly **extravagant**:

- ▶ **Destitute**: nearly homeless, often unable to afford even basic staples, desperate
- ▶ **Impoverished**: cash on hand for lodging and food, but little else, “cash poor”
- ▶ **Stable**: relative comfort, regular lodging, enough resources to support a family
- ▶ **Luxury**: wealth beyond most, able to put ten thousand dollars towards a problem
- ▶ **Extravagant**: rich beyond measure, anything is accessible with enough patience

.....  
*Brendan’s La Esposa, Sofía, is married to Gustavo, El Polizeta. Her playbook says she shares his lifestyle, so they are **stable**: they have a home and a family, but money is still sometimes tight. Moving up to **luxury** would radically change their lives.*  
.....

You can roughly judge lifestyle by how much cash—in USD—someone can scrounge up quickly: a destitute *halcón* has maybe \$10 to his name, but a stable *cocinero* can get access to \$1,000 or \$2,000 in an hour and an extravagant *narca* has \$100,000 in easy reach at all times.

## Using Lifestyle in Play

Lifestyle is a strong indicator of your fictional position. Do you have enough cash on hand to bribe someone? Can you get the bullet holes in your wall repaired before your *esposo* comes home? The MC will look to your lifestyle to answer these questions. And if what you want—or need—falls outside your means, you may need to **propose a deal** to someone wealthier than you or **strain your finances**.

.....  
*Worried that Luna’s gunshot wound might turn out to be fatal, Sofía rushes her to the hospital:*

*“There’s a crush of people at the front desk,” I say, “It looks like there may have been some sort of car accident. What do you do?”*

*“I push my way to the front and demand that Luna be seen by someone right away. I’ll offer the receptionist money if it would help us.”*

*“What’s your lifestyle? **Stable**? Yeah, between your clothes and the money you flash, you have the receptionist’s attention. What do you say?”*  
.....

It’s possible that something might be out of reach for your character. An impoverished *sicaria* simply can’t come up with a million dollars by **straining her finances**. She’ll have to steal it or kill someone for it, provided she figures out who has that kind of money. In general, you can **strain your finances** to get stuff from one lifestyle above yours; everything else is probably too expensive.



## LLAVES Y ADVANCEMENT

*Llaves* (keys) are how you earn **experience points** (xp) and gain **advances**—new moves, stat increases, or other fictional benefits. Keys are simple: you *mark experience* any time you fulfill the trigger listed in the key. For example, *La Sicaria* might choose **Mercy** as her key, marking xp whenever she's able to avoid a fight instead of murdering everyone in the room.

.....  
**Mercy:** *Mark xp when you try to head off a violent encounter with negotiation or persuasion.*  
 .....

The trigger for each key is intentionally broad and open to interpretation. If *La Sicaria* convinces a friend not to start a fight, she marks an xp. She also marks an xp if she threatens someone into backing down when they come to kill her.

### Clearing Keys

You can also **clear a key** when you aren't invested in it anymore. Clearing a key means you work against the key's established narrative, earning yourself an immediate advance and a new key. The aforementioned *Sicaria* with **Mercy**, for example, would clear her key when she hurts someone who is vulnerable or unaware.

.....  
**Mercy:** *Clear this key and advance when you greatly injure or kill someone who is defenseless or unaware.*  
 .....

After you clear a key, choose a new one. Always.

## Earning an Advance

Once you've marked xp three times or cleared a key, **advance**. You can select any option off the first list on your playbook when you advance, but you gain access to a new list of improved advances once you've advanced five times.

You might want options off the first list for advances beyond your fifth, but trust me, *güey*, those improved advances are *muy buenos*. They resolve *problemas*, allow you to change playbooks, and maybe even get you a ticket out of the drug war when you retire to safety!

.....  
*After trying to avoid using violence for several sessions, Marissa—playing La Sicaria with a Mercy key—decides that she's tired of pulling her punches. She murders an unsuspecting federal with a sniper rifle, clearing the key.*

*Marissa has earned five advances previously, so she's got access to the list of improved advances. She selects "gain 2 new pieces of gear" and says, "I think it would be cool if I could get tracking and surveillance gear from the federal's car." I nod, and she adds both pieces of gear to her sheet.*  
 .....

Advances aren't the only way to get new gear or resolve problems, but each advance is defined and absolute. If you mark an advance, you gain the benefit described in full. Work with the MC to figure out how to best modify the story to explain your good fortune.

## LA LISTA DE LLAVES

Each playbook has one unique key alongside two keys that are shared with other playbooks. Here's a full list of keys presented in the original set of playbooks, including *El Güero* (CIA supplement). When you clear a key, pick from any on this list.

- ☐ **Ambition:** Mark xp when you get someone important to let you handle some business on their behalf. Clear this key and advance when you seize the day and ask for forgiveness instead of permission.
- ☐ **Arrogance:** Mark xp when you use your superior knowledge or experience to **verbally shame or abuse** someone you care about. Clear this key and advance when you admit to a loved one that you're in over your head and urgently need help.
- ☐ **Clean:** Mark xp when you try to convince someone else to do your dirty work. Clear this key and advance when you cross a line that exposes you to retribution.
- ☐ **Daring:** Mark xp when you willingly enter a perilous situation without precautions or deception. Clear this key and advance when you retreat from a messy situation instead of risking further failure.
- ☐ **Debt:** Mark xp when you take on a new loan or **strain your finances** to meet your family's needs. Clear this key and advance when you find a way—legal or illegal—out from under your obligations.
- ☐ **Dirty Hands:** Mark xp when you personally tackle a messy problem instead of sending goons. Clear this key and advance when you send someone to deal with a problem you should have attended to directly.
- ☐ **Duty:** Mark xp when you complete a task or assignment for your superiors or colleagues. Clear this key and advance when you intentionally thwart the goals of your organization or employer.
- ☐ **Family:** Mark xp when you violate your family members' boundaries to protect them. Clear this key and advance when you allow one of them to be harmed when you could have intervened.
- ☐ **Guilt:** Mark xp when you confess a recent betrayal or deception to someone you shouldn't trust. Clear this key and advance when you use a moment of intimacy to trick someone into advancing your schemes.

- ❑ **Indomitable:** Mark xp when you go into battle significantly outgunned or outmanned. Clear this key and advance when you surrender to your enemies instead of fighting your way out of a messy situation.
- ❑ **Loyalty:** Mark xp when you accept the lies or half-truths of a trusted friend or lover. Clear this key and advance when you confront a loved one with evidence of their betrayals and deceptions.
- ❑ **Mercy:** Mark xp when you try to head off a violent encounter with negotiation or persuasion. Clear this key and advance when you greatly injure or kill someone who is defenseless or unaware.
- ❑ **Paranoia:** Mark xp when you try to *get the truth* out of someone about their true loyalties. Clear this key and advance when you expose someone's betrayal to their family or employer.
- ❑ **Pride:** Mark xp when you claim an asset on the grounds that you or your family deserves it. Clear this key and advance when you give up something to keep yourself or a loved one safe from harm.

## CREATING LLAVES

The list of keys presented here isn't the final word on *llaves*. You might find your character has a story arc that requires a specific *llave* to capture, like **Revenge**. Keys are a powerful way to establish a direction for your character, so don't be afraid to work with your MC to design a new, custom *llave* if the story calls for a new arc.

You can read more about creating new *llaves* in **Designing Llaves** in *Sin Fronteras*, but the process is simple: find a main xp trigger for the key you expect to hit often and pair it with a way to clear the key that ends the arc.

- ❑ **Schemes:** Mark xp when you take advantage of someone who believes you're working on their behalf. Clear this key and advance when you openly choose one of your loyalties over the other.
- ❑ **Secrets:** Mark xp when you lie to someone close to you about your illicit activities. Clear this key and advance when you finally come clean to someone who trusts you about your lies and deceptions.

# CHAPTER FOUR

## LOS NARCOS DE DURANGO







## FIERRO PARIENTE

.....

In **Cartel**, you create characters using playbooks, templates for each major character type found in narcofiction. It might sound restrictive to limit characters to the specific archetypes described by the playbooks, but each playbook is a tool to help you bring **Cartel** characters—*sicarias*, *esposas*, and *halcones*—to life without needing to be an expert in the drug war.

But make no mistake, *güey*: each story in **Cartel** is unique. Your *sicaria* might be a vengeful killer, returning to Durango to end the man who left her for dead...or she might be a reluctant enforcer who must kill to keep her loved ones safe from the very people who employ her. A playbook is a tool to help you build characters with real stakes in the setting, but your job is to make each character you create a real person at your table.

This chapter contains everything you need to know to build your character for the first session of **Cartel**, including:

- ▶ **Playbook Instructions:** This chapter begins (page 78) with an explanation of the choices you make to fill out a **Cartel** playbook, including Name, Look, Gear, Lifestyle, Stats, Moves, Extras, y *Enlaces*.
- ▶ **Relationship Maps:** Since the drama in **Cartel** relies on social structures, I've included a section on relationship maps (page 84) to help you track the complex social environment of Durango.
- ▶ **Lista de Narcos:** You can check out the full list of playbooks on page 87—including a short description of each—followed by the playbooks themselves and tips on playing each playbook.

If you're looking for rules explanations for moves, stress, harm, or other mechanical systems, go back to Chapter 3 (page 31). You'll find all that information there, *cabrón*. This chapter is about *personajes*!

# CREATING NARCOS

Creating your **Cartel** character is best done with the other players and MC. There are parts of the process that rely on crosstalk and collaboration, but it's also fun to see the setting taking shape in front of you as your fellow players make choices. No two players can pick the same playbook, so grab a stack of *narcos* and have everyone pick their favorite...

## CHOOSING A PLAYBOOK

When it's time to pick a playbook, think about the stories you want to tell. It's fine to pick something you're used to playing—the heavy, the boss, the face—but you might want to play against type. **Cartel** playbooks throw you into the deep end of narrative drama: there are no wrong choices to be made here, *amigo*.

*I'm running **Cartel** for Jahmal, Marissa, and Derrick. Jahmal jumps on El Narco right away.*

*"This cool with you all?" he asks. Derrick and Marissa both laugh and nod. They've played **Cartel** before, and they know el jefe is always in trouble.*

*I want to make sure Jahmal knows what he's getting himself into with this playbook. "You take El Narco, you gotta be the boss. You good with that?"*

*Jahmal nods and laughs. "I can be the boss! You all better watch out. I'm in charge now!"*

## NAMES Y LOOK

After you select a playbook, start building your character by selecting a **name**. The names provided—masculine and feminine—are designed to get across the archetypal feel of each playbook, but choose something different if you're inspired. Don't worry about surnames for now. You don't know which characters are *familia* yet!

The playbook titles are gendered—*La Esposa* is feminine, *El Narco* is masculine—but that doesn't mean the playbooks limit your character to the single gender described by their names. *La Narca* or *El Esposo* makes as much sense in **Cartel** as *El Narco* and *La Esposa*, ¿entendiste?

Once you've chosen a name, move on to **look**. Your choices here inform how others see you. Are you worn down, *muchacho*? Or do you love the thrill of the conflicts at hand?

*Jahmal likes the sound of one of the names on the masculine list: Santiago. He decides on a traditional look: a **man** with **luxury clothes**, the kind of polished attire that signals power. He decides that Santiago is always in a crisp, white suit, one that matches his **warm eyes** and broad smile.*

*Jahmal also notes that Don Santiago is rarely without a cigarro. He is extremely dangerous, but always polite. No malice here, güey. Just business.*



## STATS Y DICE

Each playbook has four stats: **Face**, **Grit**, **Hustle**, and **Savagery**. You usually roll moves with a stat, so each determines your sway in a given sphere.

- ▶ **Face** measures social power, especially when you offer people money to do what you want or try to justify your behavior to others.
- ▶ **Grit** represents your tenacity and good fortune; whenever you have to take a raw risk, you'll rely on Grit to get you through.
- ▶ **Hustle** establishes how good you are at drawing people in and convincing them to go along with you or tell you what they know.
- ▶ **Savagery** describes your capacity for violence, including your intuitive sense of the strengths and weaknesses of other people.

Each playbook comes with a custom stat line: one stat rated at -1, one stat at +0, and two stats at +1. **Add +1 to any one of these stats before you play.** You can raise stats via advancement (page 73), but your playbook's general strengths and critical weaknesses usually persist through the story.

.....  
*Jahmal chooses to double down on a ferocious reputation for Santiago. He adds his +1 to Savagery, bringing his total to +2 for that stat. Santiago's other stats stay the same: Face +1, Grit +0, and Hustle -1, leaving Santiago in a tough spot when it comes to getting the truth or pressuring someone. Santiago will have to focus on making offers (Face) or direct violence (Savagery) when he faces opposition.*  
.....

## GEAR Y LIFESTYLE

All the characters in **Cartel** start with gear, at least some sort of phone and maybe even a vehicle if not a *pandilla* (crew) or a whole *plaza*. Most playbooks also have *pistolas*, but both *El Cocinero* and *La Esposa* start the game without a weapon of any kind. ¡Pobrecitos!

You get everything on the list, including a **lifestyle**, a measure of your playbook's financial security that ranges from *destitute* to *extravagant*. You can read more about lifestyle on page 72.

Some gear has a few **tags** to explain how it works within the fiction, but each tag is self-explanatory. *Loud* means a gun is loud, attracting attention from bystanders; *hi-tech* means an expensive device needs specialized repairs if it ever breaks. See page 190 at the end of the book for a full list of tags and special rules that apply.

Your playbook also includes a section where you make substantial decisions about your character's holdings or circumstances—like *El Narco's plaza*—called **extras**. See page 82 for more information on detailing extras.

.....  
Santiago gets a **sidearm**, a **car**, and a **cell phone** by default, but his **lifestyle** is based on his extra, **la plaza**. Jahmal needs to detail the plaza in full, choosing which elements of the drug trade matter most. He decides to deal with the plaza a bit later, making a few notes to describe Santiago's weapon—an old-fashioned revolver—and a fancy sports car.  
.....

## LLAVES (KEYS)

Once you've finished with name, stats, and gear, select two **llaves (keys)** from the list on your playbook. Choosing a *llave* establishes which themes matter to your character, earning you experience (xp) each time you act in a particular way.

Don't choose a *llave* that doesn't fit your concept! If you select **Mercy**—you mark experience when you choose negotiation over violence—you're telling the MC you want to encounter situations that both give you that option and create conflict when you act on it.

Each playbook has a list of three *llaves*, but you are free to choose any two out of the three. For more on *llaves*, including how marking experience leads to advancement and how to get new keys, see page 73 in the previous chapter.

.....  
Jahmal has three options for *El Narco's keys*: **Dirty Hands**, **Family**, and **Paranoia**. He decides on **Dirty Hands** right away; Jahmal is eager to see Santiago handle problems himself instead of sending goons. Jahmal also picks **Family**, since he wants to see how far Santiago will go to protect his family, plaza, and reputation; **Paranoia** doesn't feel like an interesting theme for Santiago at this point in his story. Choosing these *llaves* means Santiago's story revolves around these themes; Jahmal gets to mark an experience when they come up, and I know—as the MC—to create situations that invoke and challenge them.  
.....



## PICKING MOVES

All player characters have access to all the basic moves (page 36), as well as all the stress moves (page 58) and Heat moves (page 64). These moves trigger when the character takes an action in the fiction that match the move.

In addition to all those moves, each playbook also gets access to **playbook moves** that grant them new abilities or expand on other moves. Some of these moves require a roll, but others resolve without any dice. For example, *La Esposa* can choose **Reina del Drama** to take a 10+ instead of rolling when she *pushes her luck* while putting on a dramatic, upsetting performance.

Each playbook has instructions for how many playbook moves you get to start, including any additional moves you select at the start of play. You might want to revisit your stats once you get a sense of what stat you roll for the moves you have chosen for your character.

.....  
*Jahmal takes a look at his moves: he gets two—La Plaza and Mandamás—and that’s it. The first relies upon Control, a feature of his plaza, but Mandamás relies on one of his core stats, Face.*

*He reads Mandamás, which gives him the ability to send his enforcers and agents out to solve problems; Jahmal decides that he’s pretty happy with the +1 he added to Savagery. He would rather deal with problems himself than send out sicarios!*  
.....

## A PINCHE GRENADE LAUNCHER?

During early playtests of **Cartel**, I got a lot of questions about the gear lists, especially for a character like *La Sicaria*. No one could believe that the *narcos* had access to stuff like police uniforms and explosives, let alone military-grade sniper rifles or *pinches* grenade launchers. Some just assumed I had forgotten to update the gear from **Apocalypse World!**

Unfortunately, the cartels have used *all* the gear included on the playbooks...and more. In 2015, the Jalisco New Generation Cartel *shot down* a police helicopter with a rocket launcher to protect a convoy moving El Mencho, the cartel *jefe* who eventually rose to the top of America’s Most Wanted list after the fall of El Chapo. They followed up that attack by terrorizing the entire city of Jalisco, forcing the military to call in over 10,000 troops to regain control of the area.

El Mencho himself—Nemesio Oseguera Cervantes—is also a reminder that some of the most infamous *narcos* once served on the other side of the law. Notoriously violent, El Mencho is a former cop who served time in an American prison on drug charges, the kind of man who absolutely used a police uniform and scanner for nefarious deeds at some point in his career.

It’s a *war, pendejo*. It’s not a “drug enforcement opportunity” or a slow-moving legal case. *¡No le jales la cola al tigre!* Presidente Calderón sent in *los militares* against the cartels, and the *narcos* are happy to meet force with force. *¡A ver de qué cuero salen más correas!*

## DETAILING EXTRAS

Every **Cartel** playbook has a special part of the playbook designated as an **extra**. *La Sicaria*, for example, gets to choose from a list of more advanced custom weapons and gear, while *La Polizeta* must detail the anti-cartel task force that brought her back to Durango.

When a playbook asks you to detail an extra, look for the section dedicated to that extra on the back of the playbook. Complete that section before you introduce your character.

Many of the extras—*La Esposa's familia*, *El Narco's plaza*—are fundamental aspects of the playbooks relation to the setting and the other characters. You want to have all that figured out before you start making connections between your character and everyone else.



.....  
As *El Narco*, *Jahmal* has a ton of choices to make, probably more than any other playbook. His **extra**—*la plaza*—not only sets the stage for *Santiago's* conflicts, but also for everyone else.

*Jahmal* starts by picking **Selena** as his cartel contact, and notes that he's got a **staff (trouble: los federales)**, a **stable lifestyle**, some **loyal enforcers and crooked cops**, and **Control +1**. *Jahmal's* already worried about that **Control** stat, but he also thinks that **stable** is way too low a lifestyle for a wealthy narco like *Santiago*.

*Jahmal* decides to start picking his four **features** by bumping his lifestyle: he selects both a **profitable plaza** and **kidnappings** to raise **stable** to **extravagant**. Both those options also add new troubles, **robberies** and **vigilantes** respectively. *Santiago* is rich, but he's got cops, thieves, and "local heroes" all over his plaza, making life difficult!

But *Jahmal* has a plan to hold on to Durango! He chooses **halcones** and **local recruitment** as his final two features, bringing his **Control** to +2 and ensuring that he's got enough sicarios to deal with problems if they crop up. ¡No hay pedo!

He's got to pick two more **troubles** for the plaza, though. Two trouble options mess with his lifestyle and control, so *Jahmal* opts for the others: he's got a **mole** in his organization and a **gang war** against a rival cartel—*Los Zetas*?—moving into Durango. Sharks on all sides, *cabrón*, but *Santiago* isn't exactly a guppy. He's got plenty of teeth.  
.....

## INTRODUCTIONS

Once everyone has finished filling out playbooks, it's time to **introduce your characters**, sharing their name, look, gear, and the extras they've detailed. If your character has an important reputation or notable habits, now is a good time to share that with the group.

Since every playbook's extra tends to have a serious effect on the setting of Durango as a whole—*El Halcón's* *pandilla* tends to show up all over the place, *El Cocinero's* lab drives the drug trade for the whole Sinaloa cartel—give each player enough time to talk through all the details everyone else needs to know. After all, it matters a lot to *El Narco* exactly how the anti-cartel task force is set up in Durango.

Other players, especially the MC, might ask some questions about your character to build on what you've already decided. Answer these questions as if your character had a rich and full life beyond what you've already planned. It's fine to make stuff up—"Ah, good question! I think I met my husband while I was in college"—or to defer a bit to the group if nothing immediately comes to mind.

It's also okay to leave some answers for later or to say you don't know how something works for now. Maybe you're not sure exactly why you work for the cartel yet. You might be waiting to figure that out during the game!

## USE THE SPOTLIGHT

Your introduction sets the stage for your interactions with the other characters. Use that spotlight! Convince them your *polizeta* is a good ally in a tough spot or your *rata* is going to blow up in interesting ways. Don't be shy about sharing your assets and drama. In fact, those are the reasons that other people might want to interact with your character!

.....  
*"I'm El Narco, and my name is Don Santiago," Jahmal says, "Everyone in Durango knows me. I wear crisp, white suits, I've got warm eyes, and I usually have a cigar and a smile. ¡Órale!"*

*"My lifestyle is extravagant, mostly because the plaza is profitable and we kidnap wealthy tourists. My halcones are everywhere. And yet... I've got all these troubles! Robberies, vigilantes, the feds, a mole, and a gang war." Everyone laughs.*

*I take the opportunity to ask a question: "How did you end up with so much wealth and power?"*

*Jahmal thinks for a bit. "I think my mother used to run this plaza...but she died. And now I run it."*

*"Oh!" I think this mysterious death is fascinating. "What happened to your mother?"*

*Jahmal smiles. "I don't talk about that much..."*  
 .....

## HERMANOS POR SIEMPRE

Starting relationships in **Cartel** aren't like the ties characters start with in most roleplaying games; you aren't a gang of adventurers who have previously explored dungeons or runners who regularly hack megacorp mainframes. You don't have a formal oath to stand by each other in times of crisis or some sort of heroic quest you've pledged to complete. You're not *friends*.

No, *cabrón*. In this game, you're stuck with each other in far worse ways. You're ex-lovers, old *enemigos*, or...*familia*. You grew up together in Durango or got married as kids. You lie for each other. You've killed for each other. And those are ties that you can't ever walk away from, no matter how hard you try to leave the past in the past, no matter how hard life gets.

*México* is built on a history it cannot escape, a land that was once the center of indigenous empires stretching thousands of kilometers in every direction, smashed to pieces by the terrible Conquista that left millions dead. From *calaveras* to Santa Muerte, death haunts *México*, a grim reminder that narcostates are the inevitable end point of centuries of brutal colonialism.

The past and the *familias* built upon that past are inescapable in **Cartel**. The ties that bind are steel nooses dragged around the neck of every *narco* who hopes to make it out alive. You think *la muerte te pela los dientes*? Worry less about what Death has planned for you, *amigo*. It's the living who will do you in for good.

## ENLACES (TIES)

Once each character has been introduced, fill out all your *enlaces*, the ties that force the characters into regular conflict and engagement with each other amidst the secrecy and lies of the drug war.

Begin with the person to the left of the MC and go around in a circle, each player filling in one *enlace* at a time. Each *enlace* is a meaningful relationship between the two characters, so try to focus them on other PCs. You might find, however, that it gets difficult to make everything fit—especially for your last few *enlaces*—so it's fine to point a few at important NPCs.

.....  
*Jahmal decides to fill in the second enlace on his sheet to start: "I think Marissa's Sicaria, Mina, is familia. She's my daughter." He looks over at Marissa to see what she thinks about that relationship.*

*She's excited. "Yeah, that's great." She looks at her first enlace and says, "I think you got me back into the business, Santiago. I had left, but when my abuela died, you convinced me to come home."*

*"That's perfect," I say. "Did he tell you what happened to your abuela when you got back?"*

*Marissa shakes her head. "He told me that she was murdered, but he won't tell me anything more. He doesn't like my questions."*

*Jahmal and Marissa continue filling in enlaces with Derrick and a few NPCs, but I can tell this enlace is going to drive a lot of play right away!*  
.....



## RELATIONSHIP MAPS

The relationships spawned by *enlaces* are vital, but groups can lose track of the whole situation. Use a **relationship map (r-map)** to keep everything in one place, a tool that records the social setting including notes that can be referenced in later sessions! Here are a few tips for making an r-map work for your group:

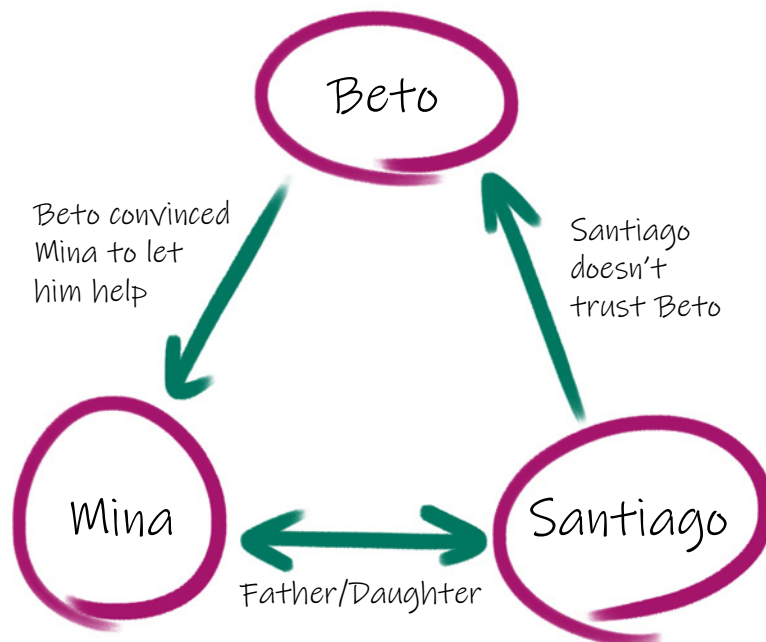
- ▶ Get a big sheet of paper, large enough to clearly write the **names** of all the PCs (and most NPCs) with a pen.
- ▶ Create a **circle** for each character with a name and any other details you want to include. Group them toward the center of the sheet.
- ▶ Connect **lines** for each *enlace*, drawing an arrow and labeling it with information about the relationship.
- ▶ Add NPCs as **rectangles**, drawing lines to and from them as necessary to explain their relationships as well. Look for opportunities to connect PCs and NPCs on the map.
- ▶ Go over the whole r-map again, looking for **implied relationships** that are revealed by the map. Keep adding to the map during play!

.....  
*After Jahmal, Marissa, and Derrick finish going through all their enlaces, I put everything on the r-map as we go over it a second time. Mina is Santiago's daughter, and Beto, Derrick's Halcón, has convinced Mina to let him drive her around while she handles things for her father. I add both those relationships to the r-map, drawing arrows.*

*"Santiago, you said that you don't trust Beto. How do you feel about him helping Mina?"*

*"I don't like it," Jahmal says. "He's trouble."*

*I add that relationship to the r-map as well.*  
 .....





## THE PLAYBOOKS

.....

The basic moves, stress moves, and heat moves work together to create tragic tales of Mexican narcofiction, but the playbooks are a crucial component for staying true to this setting. **Cartel** wouldn't be **Cartel** without these specific playbooks, aligned both with each other and with the broader fiction of the drug war.

These playbooks give you the tools you need to set up your characters in a way that aligns with Mexican narcofiction, even if you know nothing about it. Everything from the name you pick to the moves you choose to the *enlaces* you affix to the other characters, all of it is designed to ground you in this time and place: Durango.

The magic of **Cartel** is in the combinations, the way these archetypes—the paranoid *jefe*, the murderous *sicaria*, the innocent *esposa*, the clumsy *halcón*—interact in the specific arrangement your group chooses. What if *La Rata* is sleeping with *El Polizeta* this time? What if *La Cocinera* is the sister of *La Narca*, but doesn't know that her *hermana* is her employer, a murderous drug lord? ¡*No mames!*

Each playbook is an opportunity to explore a different facet of the setting, a different arena of conflict within the broader drug war. Your choice of playbook sets the stage for the conflicts to come, *amigo*. Choose wisely.

## LA LISTA DE NARCOS

Below is a roster of the available playbooks, complete with descriptions and some notes on their primary and weak stats. The complete playbooks—including information on playing each character and advice on specific playbook moves—can be found on the following pages.

### EL COCINERO

Clever, resourceful, and lucky. *El Cocinero* is a vital part of the cartel's operation: he cooks the drugs.

- ▶ **Primary Stats:** Grit, Hustle
- ▶ **Weak Stat:** Face

### LA ESPOSA

Responsible, protective, and vulnerable. *La Esposa* is an innocent tangled in a web of lies.

- ▶ **Primary Stats:** Face, Hustle
- ▶ **Weak Stat:** Savagery

### EL HALCÓN

Eager, naïve, and tenacious. *El Halcón* is “the hawk,” the little bird that reports to his handlers.

- ▶ **Primary Stats:** Face, Hustle
- ▶ **Weak Stat:** Grit

### EL NARCO

Beleaguered, wealthy, and dangerous. *El Narco* is *el jefe*, put in charge to oversee *la plaza*.

- ▶ **Primary Stats:** Face, Savagery
- ▶ **Weak Stat:** Hustle

## MORE PLAYBOOKS

You want more playbooks, *cabrón*? *La Abogángster* or *La Mariachi*? Maybe even a “hero” like *La Esperanzada*? You have to wait for the **Cartel** expansion—**Sin Fronteras**—which features those additional archetypes.

In the meantime, you can find *El Güero* in *El Águila y La Serpiente*, as a digital download or an appendix in the special edition of **Cartel**.

### LA POLIZETA

Greedy, two-faced, and corrupt. *La Polizeta* is an agent for the cartel that's playing both sides.

- ▶ **Primary Stats:** Grit, Hustle
- ▶ **Weak Stat:** Savagery

### LA RATA

Resilient, brave, and compromised. *La Rata* is a mole in the cartel whose only way out is through.

- ▶ **Primary Stats:** Face, Grit
- ▶ **Weak Stat:** Hustle

### LA SICARIA

Deadly, veteran, and cold. *La Sicaria* is a trained cartel enforcer who has survived...so far.

- ▶ **Primary Stats:** Grit, Savagery
- ▶ **Weak Stat:** Face



# EL COCINERO



*Clever, resourceful, and lucky. El Cocinero is a vital part of the cartel's operation: he cooks the drugs. But unlike everyone else involved in this pinche mess, he's got skills that might be useful to a wealthy pharmacy or even a legitimate universidad. Why risk so much for los carteles?*

## YOUR NAME

- Consuelo, Isabel, Lourdes, Magda, Rosario, Soledad, or Yolanda
- Armando, Ignacio, Joaquín, Juan, Miguel, Pedro, Ramon, or Rodrigo

## YOUR LOOK

- Man, woman, ambiguous, transgressing
- Clear eyes, cunning eyes, sad eyes, wicked eyes
- Casual clothes, filthy clothes, professional clothes, work clothes

## YOUR GEAR

- a stable lifestyle
- a decent car, two cell phones

## YOUR STATS

-1

FACE

+1

GRIT

+1

HUSTLE

+0

SAVAGERY

+0

HEAT

Add +1 to one of these stats:  
Face, Grit, Hustle, Savagery



## TUS LLAVES (CHOOSE 2)

- ☐ **Secrets:** Mark xp when you lie to someone close to you about your illicit activities. Clear this key and advance when you finally come clean to someone who trusts you about your lies and deceptions.
- ☐ **Debt:** Mark xp when you take on a new loan or *strain your finances* to meet your family's needs. Clear this key and advance when you find a way—legal or illegal—out from under your obligations.
- ☐ **Arrogance:** Mark xp when you use your superior knowledge or experience to *verbally shame or abuse* someone you care about. Clear this key and advance when you admit to a loved one that you're in over your head and urgently need help.

## LOS ENLACES

\_\_\_\_\_ is *familia*. Close family. They don't know what you do *para el cartel*, and you're not sure you can keep your secrets for long.

\_\_\_\_\_ got you into this business to help you with your financial troubles but didn't tell you the whole story. Now you're both stuck.

You and \_\_\_\_\_ have an understanding. You need each other for now, but both of you know the current situation won't last.

## YOUR MOVES

You get this one and two more:

- **Cocinar:** If you're stocked and cooking, at the start of session, roll with Grit. On a hit, you make enough to meet your commitments. On a 10+, you also make a little surplus for yourself. On a 7-9, your investment in the operation causes someone close to you to grow suspicious. On a miss, one of your lab's problems comes to bear *con todo*.
- ☐ **Ciencia, Cabrón:** When you try to juryrig something with science, roll with Grit. On a hit, you create an opportunity or buy yourself some time. On a 7-9, your efforts are messy: mark stress. On a miss, you're missing something rare and illegal or your work fills your stress track, MC's choice.
- ☐ **Chillón:** When you *justify yourself* with an upsetting emotional outburst, roll with Grit instead of Face.
- ☐ **De Calidad:** When you *propose a deal* that relies on the quality of your product or your special training and skills, roll with Grit instead of Face.
- ☐ **Afortunado:** You get +1 Grit (max+3).
- ☐ **Pozolero:** When you get rid of a body using chemicals in your lab, roll with Grit. On a 10+, all 3. On a 7-9, pick 1.
  - *you aren't forced to mark stress.*
  - *you aren't missing any supplies or equipment.*
  - *you aren't interrupted getting it done.*
 On a miss, you dispose of the body, but it haunts you. You can't clear any stress until you find a way to atone for what you've done.

## TU LABORATORIO

By default, your lab (small fixed unstable indebted) is in a basement or warehouse, set up to make cocaine, heroin, or meth, your choice.

Choose 2 features:

- ☐ *your lab is a food truck or recreational vehicle. Replace fixed with mobile.*
- ☐ *your lab has professional equipment, capable of larger cooks. Raise lifestyle; change small to medium.*
- ☐ *your lab has equipment designed to dispose of dangerous chemicals. Remove unstable.*
- ☐ *you have an assistant who prepares the chemicals in advance for your cooks. Take +I ongoing to **Cocinar**; add payroll.*

Choose 2 troubles:

- ☐ *your lab is sometimes inaccessible. Add inconvenient.*
- ☐ *your lab gives off a byproduct or odor that makes it easy to uncover and report. Add detectable.*
- ☐ *your lab is poorly secured or locked down against intruders and thieves. Add exposed.*
- ☐ *your lab relies on uncommon or illegal chemicals. Add shortages.*

## TUS MISTERIOS

You've fallen on hard times. Now you must keep your work secret from the people closest to you.

Choose 3:

- ☐ *an esposa or novio who asks too many questions.*
- ☐ *a niño who thinks you're beyond reproach.*
- ☐ *an elderly madre or tío who relies on you financially.*
- ☐ *a prima who works in federal law enforcement.*
- ☐ *an old coworker who feels badly about your troubles.*
- ☐ *a community leader who feels responsible for you.*

## ADVANCEMENT

When you fill your xp track, select an advance:

- ☐ *get +I Grit (max+3)*
- ☐ *get +I Hustle (max+3)*
- ☐ *get +I Savagery (max+3)*
- ☐ *choose a new laboratorio feature*
- ☐ *get a new cocinero move*
- ☐ *get a new cocinero move*
- ☐ *get a move from another playbook*
- ☐ *get a move from another playbook*

After 5 advances, you can choose from this list:

- ☐ *get +I to any stat (max+3)*
- ☐ *resolve a laboratorio trouble*
- ☐ *retire your character (to safety)*
- ☐ *change your character to a new type*
- ☐ *raise your lifestyle one level*

## PLAYING EL COCINERO

Beyond every other character in **Cartel**, you defy the logic of the drug war. While others are born to poverty (*El Halcón*), defined by their ambition (*El Narco*), or dragged into this mess by a loved one (*La Esposa*), you are the one *narco* whose skills are in high demand outside of *los carteles*. But you've rejected a professional career in favor of an illegal, dangerous hustle...

Your value to the cartels is thus a strength and a weakness. *El jefe* pays you well—a stable life-style!—but you must keep your secrets. A drug cook is worth his weight in meth: other cartels, *los federales*, and jealous *cocineros* all want a piece of you, even if they don't yet know who you are. Loose lips will get you kidnapped...or killed.

But your high Grit means you're at your best when times are tough. If you're in over your head, lean into the chaos and ***push your luck***; you're far more likely to walk out unscathed when you throw caution to the wind than when you try to ***justify*** your lies or ***pressure someone*** to go along with your wild plans.

And things will get tough, *cabrón*. You've got too many secrets, told too many lies, to walk through this minefield without compromise. But how far will you go? Are you prepared to match the brutality of *los narcos* to get what you want from the drug war? Or do you need to find a way out before someone you care about gets killed by your naiveté?

## Notes on Your Moves

- ▶ In order to be fully stocked and cooking with ***Cocinar***, you need access to your lab and enough supplies. If you're unable to get your hands on either, things fall apart pretty fast: consider your efforts a miss without rolling. If you end up with a *surplus for yourself*, it's an industrial quantity—at least a kilo of the main drug you've decided to produce.
- ▶ You don't need a special set of chemicals to juryrig something with ***Ciencia, Cabrón***. A janitorial supply closet in any office building is enough *químicos* for you to work your magic.
- ▶ There's no blueprint for atonement if you miss on ***Pozolero***. You just have to find a way to make it right, *muchacho*. Some way.
- ▶ Your *laboratorio* starts out as a small, immobile, dangerous location under the cartel's control. Your features might change that—making it mobile or removing troubles—but your lab is part of the broader fiction. If it's hard to access, that's always an issue, even if you don't miss when you roll ***Cocinar***.

## Inspirations for El Cocinero

- ▶ Lance & Jody, **Pulp Fiction**
- ▶ Nancy Price Botwin, **Weeds**
- ▶ Walter White, **Breaking Bad**

# ..... LA ESPOSA .....

*Responsible, protective, and vulnerable. La Esposa is an innocent tangled in a web of lies, the spouse of another character who has become enmeshed in a conflict she might not even know exists. But the drug war infects everything, and the thin veneer cannot last. What will she do when it falls?*

## YOUR NAME

- Andrea, Carolina, Dolores, Esperanza, Gloria, Paula, Sofía, or Victoria
- Alberto, Antonio, Carlos, Francisco, Manny, Martín, Pablo, or Rolando

## YOUR LOOK

- Man, woman, ambiguous, transgressing
- Bright eyes, cold eyes, focused eyes, wide eyes
- Casual clothes, hi-femme clothes, luxury clothes, professional clothes

## YOUR GEAR

- your spouse's lifestyle
- a reasonable car, a cell phone, and a cheap laptop

## YOUR STATS

+1

FACE

+0

GRIT

+1

HUSTLE

-1

SAVAGERY

-2

HEAT

Add +1 to one of these stats:  
Face, Grit, Hustle, Savagery



## TUS LLAVES (CHOOSE 2)

- ☐ **Loyalty:** Mark xp when you accept the lies or half-truths of a trusted friend or lover. Clear this key and advance when you confront a loved one with evidence of their betrayals and deceptions.
- ☐ **Family:** Mark xp when you violate your family members' boundaries to protect them. Clear this key and advance when you allow one of them to be harmed when you could have intervened.
- ☐ **Pride:** Mark xp when you claim an asset on the grounds that you or your family deserves it. Clear this key and advance when you give up something to keep yourself or a loved one safe from harm.

## LOS ENLACES

\_\_\_\_\_ and your spouse spend time together, but you'd prefer it if they weren't involved in your life. Tell them what they did to anger you.

\_\_\_\_\_ *es familia*. A sibling, maybe, or a cousin. Someone close. They mean well, but you worry about them. Tell them your fears.

\_\_\_\_\_ and you were a thing back in the day, but it never went anywhere. Most people don't know about it; you were young once *también*.

## YOUR MOVES

You get this one and two more:

- **Amor y Matrimonio:** You are the only one who can be trusted to protect *la familia*. Take +1 ongoing when you try to get one of them to do the right thing.
- ☐ **Me Lo Chingué:** When you reveal that you betrayed a lover or friend, tell them to fill their stress track; you clear one stress for each stress they mark. If their stress track is already full, they must immediately make a stress move; you clear one stress.
- ☐ **Reina del Drama:** When you put on a dramatic performance to get out of a sticky situation, you can mark stress instead of rolling to **push your luck** as if you rolled a 10+.
- ☐ **Perderse:** When you lose yourself in another person, roll with Face. On a hit, you find solace in their embrace; clear your stress track. On a 7-9, they see you truly; they can ask one question and you must answer it honestly. On a miss, your dalliance leads you to neglect a key obligation to disastrous effect.
- ☐ **Comer Algo:** When you share a meal with someone, roll with Face. On a 10+, hold 2. On a 7-9, hold 1. You can spend your hold while you're eating together to ask their player questions:
  - *What do you want from me / my family?*
  - *What threat do you pose to us / our life?*
  - *Who are you protecting / hunting?*
 On a miss, hold 1, but you let slip your secret fears about your family or spouse to your guest.

## LA FAMILIA

Ask everyone else “Who is willing to be my spouse?” Pick whomever you like. If no one volunteers, choose an NPC.

Choose 5 obligations you perform for *la familia*:

*pregnant/finalizing adoption, new baby, preschool child, high school student, stepchild, corporate job, established home business, new business, real estate license, social service job, managing family finances, elderly grandparent, troubled sibling, school association, nonprofit board, parish volunteer, dinner parties, gossip and rumors*

And choose 2 secrets you keep from *la familia*:

- ☐ +nest egg: you put away some serious cash in a secret stash (\$20,000!) for a rainy day.
- ☐ +addiction: some nasty drug has a hold on you.
- ☐ +affair: you have another love...or at least another lover you spend time with.
- ☐ +debt: your spending has put you in a tough place, beyond what your family currently knows.
- ☐ +lovechild: you have a secret child that requires attention...and money.

Whenever there is a stretch of downtime in play (or between sessions), roll with Hustle. On a 10+, you juggle your responsibilities with grace; clear your stress track. On a 7-9, one of your obligations (your choice) becomes unmanageable; the MC will tell you who might be able to assist. On a miss, your secrets and obligations clash with disastrous results; tell the MC what went wrong.

## ADVANCEMENT

When you fill your xp track, select an advance:

- ☐ get +1 Face (max+3)
- ☐ get +1 Grit (max+3)
- ☐ get +1 Hustle (max+3)
- ☐ change 2 obligations de la familia
- ☐ get a new esposa move
- ☐ get a new esposa move
- ☐ get a move from another playbook
- ☐ get a move from another playbook

After 5 advances, you can choose from this list:

- ☐ get +1 to any stat (max+3)
- ☐ permanently resolve a secret
- ☐ retire your character (to safety)
- ☐ change your character to a new type
- ☐ raise your spouse's lifestyle one level

## PLAYING LA ESPOSA

At first, *La Esposa* seems like a strange playbook to place alongside *La Sicaria* or *El Halcón*. How engaging can scenes about parent-teacher meetings or household finances be when your husband is about to be tortured by Los Zetas?

But your normalcy is exactly what makes the playbook interesting! You're tied to these foolish *narcos*—caught up in their dangerous struggle—but you have your own hopes and dreams, your own thoughts about what matters. The contrast between your mundane obligations and the chaos of the drug war makes both feel more real.

You don't have to be completely ignorant of your spouse's true role, not even at the start. You might have a fairly strong sense of what your spouse is doing, but you know that specifics come with costs. Eventually, you may find you need to seize the reins of power for yourself to chart a course for *la familia*; some *Esposas* end up as *narcos*, after all.

To that end, you have a number of tools to manipulate the stress of other PCs, **pressuring** them to meet your demands when they would otherwise ignore your influence. Your words are as dangerous as any *pistola* when used correctly.

That said, it's inevitable that all the secrets—yours and your spouse's—will come to light. When they do, will you find it in your heart to forgive and forget? Or will such honesty trigger a cascade of betrayal that ends with your *familia* shattered against the rocks of the drug war?

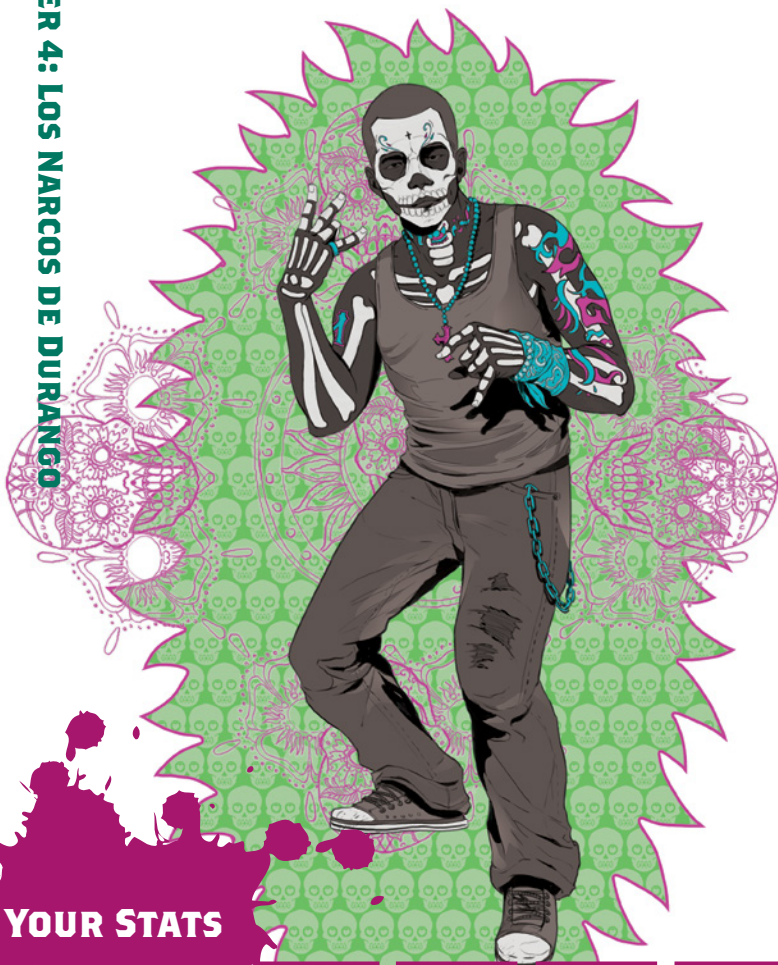
## Notes on Your Moves

- ▶ *Amor y Matrimonio* gives you a +1 ongoing to *all* moves you might use to convince a family member to take action—**justify your behavior**, **pressure someone**, **push your luck**, etc.
- ▶ The performance required for *Reina del Drama* has to be *con todos*: crying, wailing, fainting. You've got to sell it, *chica*!
- ▶ *Perderse* only triggers if you lose yourself in physical intimacy with another person. You might connect with your spouse through this move, but other lovers also suffice.
- ▶ You can choose any obligations or secrets for *La Familia*, even if they seem to contradict each other: you might be seriously in debt *and* have \$20,000 hidden behind a painting in your basement.
- ▶ If you get a 10+ on your downtime roll with Hustle, you clear all the stress you have marked, including the two stress you would normally mark at the start of the session.

## Inspiration for La Esposa

- ▶ Brianna Barksdale, *The Wire*
- ▶ Stanley Hill, *Good Girls*
- ▶ Carmela Soprano, *The Sopranos*
- ▶ Skyler White, *Breaking Bad*

# EL HALCÓN



## YOUR STATS

+1

FACE

-1

GRIT

+1

HUSTLE

+0

SAVAGERY

+0

HEAT

*Eager, naïve, and tenacious. El Halcón is “the hawk,” the little bird that reports to his handlers and ensures that no one important is ever too close to the drugs or money. But his reach exceeds his grasp. What will los jefes do when they realize that he’s in over his head...again?*

## YOUR NAME

- Ale, Britany, Carolina, Cecilia, Juanita, Lupita, Malena, or Paty
- Beto, Brayan, Diego, Enrique, Felipe, José, Mateo, Pepe, or Toño

## YOUR LOOK

- Man, woman, ambiguous, transgressing
- Lazy eyes, sharp eyes, tired eyes, quick eyes
- Casual clothes, gang clothes, street clothes, work clothes

## YOUR GEAR

- a destitute lifestyle
- a 9mm (close loud), a shit car or truck, burner phones from your handlers

Add +1 to one of these stats:  
Face, Grit, Hustle, Savagery



## TUS LLAVES (CHOOSE 2)

- ☐ **Ambition:** Mark xp when you get someone important to let you handle some business on their behalf. Clear this key and advance when you seize the day and ask for forgiveness instead of permission.
- ☐ **Duty:** Mark xp when you complete a task or assignment for your superiors or colleagues. Clear this key and advance when you intentionally thwart the goals of your organization or employer.
- ☐ **Daring:** Mark xp when you willingly enter a perilous situation without precautions or deception. Clear this key and advance when you retreat from a messy situation instead of risking further failure.

## LOS ENLACES

\_\_\_\_\_ gave you some new responsibilities lately, at your request. They have their doubts, but you'll prove them wrong soon.

\_\_\_\_\_ disapproves of your cartel work, and wants to get you out. You're not a *chamaco*; you can handle your own business.

You and \_\_\_\_\_ have a plan to make some real money. They worry it's not going to work, but you know it's a sure thing, *cabrón*.

## YOUR MOVES

You get this one and two more:

- **Hermanos:** When you try to get your *pandilla* to follow your lead on something dangerous, costly, or out of the ordinary, roll with Hustle. On a 10+, all 3. On a 7-9, choose 1:
  - *they all go along with the plan*
  - *they follow your instructions precisely*
  - *they don't demand drugs, cash, or answers*

On a miss, your *pandilla* fights amongst itself about *mierda* you thought was settled, screwing up your plans before you even start.

- ☐ **Mercado:** When you sell product on the street, roll with Hustle. On a 10+, sales are brisk; clear your stress track. On a 7-9, you make some money, but someone takes issue with your crew; clear one stress. On a miss, someone takes a run at you, and it probably isn't the cops.
- ☐ **Bendito:** When you're completely focused on escaping, *push your luck* with Hustle instead of Grit. Add +1 to your roll if you *get fucking shot* while trying to flee.
- ☐ **Vendedor:** When you *propose a deal* to someone and they pick an option off the 7-9 list you don't like, mark stress to make them pick a different option off the list. You can do this multiple times, provided you can keep marking stress.
- ☐ **Matador:** Fill your stress track—marking at least one stress—to *turn to violence* against an unsuspecting target as if you rolled a 10+.

## TU PANDILLA

By default, your *pandilla* has three loyal *amigos* you've known a while. Give them names:

Azul, Blanco, Calaca, Charo, Chino, Flaco, Gordo, Lola, Moco, Nacho, Paco, Raki, Torpe, Zanahoria

- Who is there to cheer you up when *mierda* gets tough?
- Who is a real *pendejo*, but you just can't cut them loose?
- Who is truly solid, ready to *entrarle* and get things done when you need them?

Choose 2 features:

- ☐ *your crew has crews that work for you, cabrón. Your crew becomes a gang (small untrained unequipped).*
- ☐ *your crew is down for a fiesta. Roll with Hustle instead of Grit when you all **get lost in a substance** together.*
- ☐ *your crew is down for a fight. Roll with Hustle instead of Savagery when you **dish out a beatdown** as a crew.*
- ☐ *your crew is in touch with high-level smugglers and producers from other cartels. It gets +connected.*
- ☐ *your crew is employed outside the cartel, officially or unofficially. Take +1 when you **strain your finances**.*

Choose 2 vulnerabilities:

- ☐ *your crew is on la policía's radar: +known.*
- ☐ *your crew is into heavy stuff: +addiction.*
- ☐ *your crew owes favors to someone: +obligation.*
- ☐ *your crew has enemies, cabrón: +turf war.*

## ADVANCEMENT

When you fill your xp track, select an advance:

- ☐ *get +1 Face (max+3)*
- ☐ *get +1 Grit (max+3)*
- ☐ *get +1 Hustle (max+3)*
- ☐ *choose a new pandilla feature*
- ☐ *get a new halcón move*
- ☐ *get a new halcón move*
- ☐ *get a move from another playbook*
- ☐ *get a move from another playbook*

After 5 advances, you can choose from this list:

- ☐ *get +1 to any stat (max+3)*
- ☐ *remove a pandilla vulnerability*
- ☐ *retire your character (to safety)*
- ☐ *change your character to a new type*
- ☐ *raise your lifestyle one level*

## PLAYING EL HALCÓN

*El Halcón* is always in the mix, running from task to task while trying to make the best of the messes he tends to make. If you're looking for a **Cartel** playbook that never gets boring, look no further!

As a *halcón*, you're the errand boy for the *narcos*, the first person they call when a dirty job they don't want to do needs doing. They don't trust you so much as know you probably aren't stupid enough to intentionally cause trouble. And they accept that you and your crew might cause them trouble anyway.

Your *pandilla* is a useful asset, even if those *pinches pendejos* sometimes fall to fighting with each other instead of following your lead. But if you get them on the same page, you can easily outnumber someone or catch a target in a vulnerable position. There's four of you!

At the same time, your *pandilla* is also one of your greatest vulnerabilities. You're a member of the cartel, a trusted agent—to some!—but your crew is made up of folks who think you're one of the toughest *cabrones* they know. They have no idea of the violence *La Sicaria* or *El Narco* is truly capable of unleashing. But you do, *güey*. You absolutely do.

And that's the real question: whose side are you on in this war? You have a chance to move up in *los carteles*, to prove yourself to *los jefes* when things get messy. Are you prepared to do what it takes to meet their expectations, even if it means leaving your *amigos* behind?

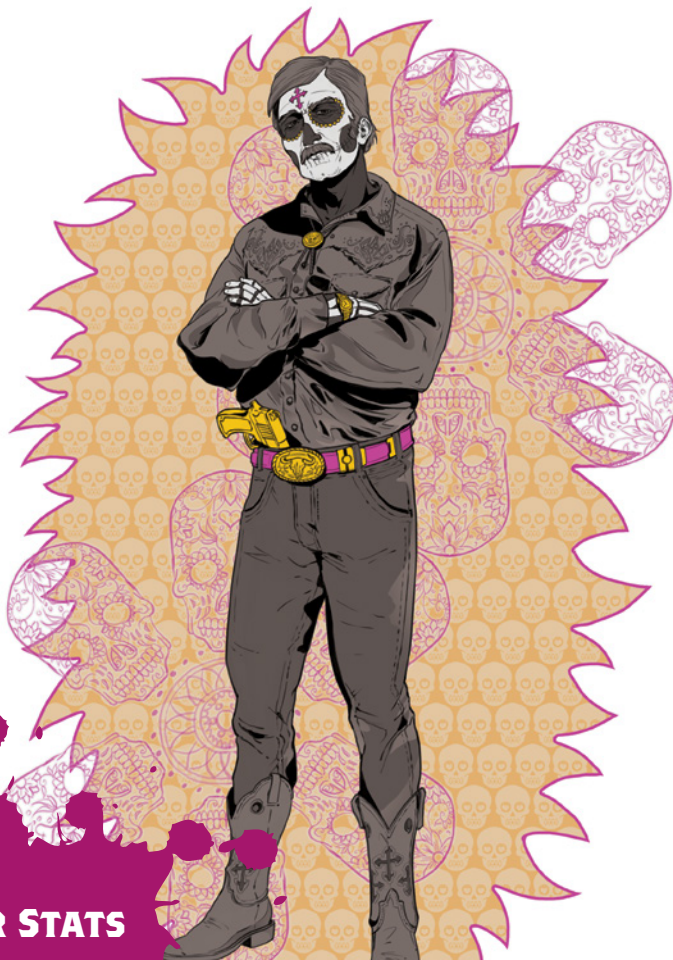
## Notes on Your Moves

- ▶ *Hermanos* triggers when you try to pressure or convince your crew to follow your lead. Use it instead of making moves individually targeting each member of the *pandilla*.
- ▶ If you generate cash with *Mercado*, it's likely that you have come into a (relatively) large sum of money if you **strain your finances**. But first you've got to get the drugs to sell!
- ▶ You are only *completely focused on escaping* if that's your sole goal in the scene. If you want to knock down a *sicario* to protect someone first, then you aren't *completely focused* on getting out of the situation quite yet.
- ▶ You can't fill your stress track to trigger **Matador** if your stress track is already full. You need to be able to mark at least one stress to claim the benefit of the move.
- ▶ If your *pandilla* is down for a fiesta or a fight, they must all be present for you to roll with Hustle instead of the normal stat.

## Inspirations for El Halcón

- ▶ Jesse Pinkman, **Breaking Bad**
- ▶ Melanie Ralston, **Jackie Brown**
- ▶ Belini, **Once Upon a Time in Mexico**
- ▶ Bodie Broadus, **The Wire**

# EL NARCO



## YOUR STATS

+1

FACE

+0

GRIT

-1

HUSTLE

+1

SAVAGERY

+2

HEAT

*Beleaguered, wealthy, and dangerous.*

El Narco is el jefe, put in charge by los carteles to oversee la plaza. He is nearly untouchable by most, but he is beset by threats large and small. Can he hold his throne in spite of the sword that looms above his crowned head?

## YOUR NAME

- Alejandra, Beatriz, Guadalupe, María Elena, María Luisa, or Raquel
- Alfonso, Damián, Fernando, Guillermo, Isidro, Juan Carlos, or Santiago

## YOUR LOOK

- Man, woman, ambiguous, transgressing
- Angry eyes, focused eyes, skeptical eyes, warm eyes
- Junta clothes, luxury clothes, buchón clothes, ranchero clothes

## YOUR GEAR

- a lifestyle based on your plaza
- an expensive sidearm (close loud), a luxury car, and a burner phone

Add +1 to one of these stats:

Face, Grit, Hustle, Savagery



## TUS LLAVES (CHOOSE 2)

- ☐ **Dirty Hands:** Mark xp when you personally tackle a messy problem instead of sending goons. Clear this key and advance when you send someone to deal with a problem you should have attended to directly.
- ☐ **Family:** Mark xp when you violate your family members' boundaries to protect them. Clear this key and advance when you allow one of them to be harmed when you could have intervened.
- ☐ **Paranoia:** Mark xp when you try to *get the truth* out of someone about their true loyalties. Clear this key and advance when you expose someone's betrayal to their family or employer.

## LOS ENLACES

\_\_\_\_\_ is *familia*, but you've tried to shield them from the worst of the cartel. Tell them what they know about your dealings.

You're sure \_\_\_\_\_ is up to something, maybe with another cartel or *los federales*. Keep your eyes open, *cabrón*. Trust no one.

You've taken \_\_\_\_\_ under your wing. You respect their skills and talents, and you want to see them thrive. ¡*Qué generoso!*

## YOUR MOVES

You get these two moves:

- **La Plaza:** At the beginning of the session, roll with Control. On a hit, you get an opportunity to engage one of your troubles (your choice) on your terms. On a 7-9, the opportunity is short-lived and risky: act quickly or you may find that you miss your moment. On a miss, one (or more) of your troubles catches you in a vulnerable spot, *jefe*, before you can adjust.
- **Mandamás:** When you order your enforcers or agents to solve a problem on your behalf, roll with Face. On a 10+, all 3. On a 7-9, choose 1.
  - they keep their wits and focus.
  - they minimize incriminating evidence.
  - they avoid collateral damage.

On a miss, everything goes to shit, but it wasn't your people's fault. You know how it is, *jefe*: no plan survives contact with the enemy.

## EL JEFE DE JEFES

You run *la plaza*, a pathway for narcos hoping to move product across the border. The city of Durango is yours as long as you hold it, *jefe*.

When you took control, the cartel gave you a contact who collects what you owe. You only know their nickname, so you can't sell them out (pick one):

*Barbie, Basura, Bruja, Chuke, Chuy, Chata, Lancha, Luchi, Mochomo, Osito, Puerca, Roco, Selena, Z-36*

## LA PLAZA

By default, you've got:

- a **staff of unsophisticated narcos**, coordinated via a network of burner phones (trouble: +*los federales*)
- a **mix of protection rackets and smuggling operations** (lifestyle: stable)
- **5-10 loyal enforcers** (gang small untrained hard) and a **few corrupt federales** (greedy informed)
- a **few halcones** to keep you informed about what goes on in your city (Control = +1)

### Plaza Features (Choose 4)

- ☐ *your plaza is profitable, bringing in substantial, obvious sums. Lifestyle: +1 level & trouble: +robberies.*
- ☐ *for income, add kidnapping. Lifestyle: +1 level & trouble: +vigilantes.*
- ☐ *your enforcers have access to military weaponry and body armor. Add armored and armed to your gang.*
- ☐ *you have a reputation for violence. Roll with Face instead of Hustle when you **pressure someone** by threatening their life, limbs, or loved ones.*
- ☐ *your enforcers have extensive military training. Drop untrained and add savage. Take +1 when you order kidnappings or ambushes.*
- ☐ *your enforcers recruit heavily from the local population, making them a medium gang (10-20) instead of small.*
- ☐ *you have halcones at all chokepoints and smuggling roads. +1 Control.*
- ☐ *only a few know your real name and appearance. -2 heat; describe the business you use as a cover for your activities.*

### Plaza Troubles (Choose 2)

- ☐ *you are in the middle of a violent dispute with another cartel, probably Los Zetas. Trouble: +gang war.*
- ☐ *your plaza has been recently infiltrated by someone working for los federales or the CIA/DEA. Trouble: +mole.*
- ☐ *the narcos you displaced to take control of la plaza remain at large. -1 Control. Trouble: +rivals.*
- ☐ *greedy agents of the Mexican tax authority (SHCP) are bleeding you dry with increasingly expensive demands for bribes and mordidas. -1 lifestyle.*

## ADVANCEMENT

When you fill your xp track, select an advance:

- ☐ *get +1 Face (max+3)*
- ☐ *get +1 Hustle (max+3)*
- ☐ *get +1 Savagery (max+3)*
- ☐ *get +1 Control (max +3)*
- ☐ *choose a new plaza feature*
- ☐ *choose a new plaza feature*
- ☐ *get a move from another playbook*
- ☐ *get a move from another playbook*

After 5 advances, you can choose from this list:

- ☐ *get +1 to any stat except Control (max+3)*
- ☐ *permanently resolve a plaza trouble*
- ☐ *permanently resolve a plaza trouble*
- ☐ *retire your character (to safety)*
- ☐ *change your character to a new type*

## PLAYING EL NARCO

Heavy is the head that wears the crown, *jefe*. And your crown is especially weighty: a *plaza* filled with opportunity and opposition in equal measure, a golden goose that lays deadly eggs that belong to you. Or rather, that belong to the *jefes de jefes* who hide in the mountains of Sinaloa.

Make no mistake: you're as trapped in all this as anyone else, caught between the top of the Sinaloa Cartel and everyone who works for you. You cannot show weakness. You cannot stumble. You may be the largest shark in these waters, but you are not the only thing with teeth.

In fact, there's nothing in your playbook that says you're a villain! You might be someone truly forced into this position, a fool who thinks he can domesticate the drug war or a visionary who wants to see things run differently. You don't have to be a monster to rule *la plaza*.

However you came to power, you must learn to wield it to keep it. Don't fall into the habit of sitting back and waiting for things to unfold. Find reasons to put your own boots on the ground, demand scenes with other characters to get what you want, and never be afraid to make a personal appearance. The streets remember the faces they see most of all.

Will your name ring out? Or will your reign as *El Narco* be a fleeting footnote next to the stories of men and women who held Durango for far longer than you?

## Notes on Your Moves

- ▶ Your *plaza*'s troubles aren't directly affected by **La Plaza**. No matter your roll, your *enemigos y problemas* plague your operation. If you hit on **La Plaza**, however, you get a chance to approach your troubles on your terms; if you miss, they catch you in a bad spot instead.
- ▶ **Mandamás** only triggers when you send out your *sicarios y matones* to deal with a problem on their own. If you or another player character goes with them, the move doesn't trigger.
- ▶ Your features and troubles for your *plaza* are cumulative: if you choose +robberies and +mole, then your *plaza* is beset by both thieves and snitches.
- ▶ You must directly **pressure someone** with violent threats if you wish to use Face instead of Hustle. Your reputation alone isn't enough.

## Inspirations for El Narco

- ▶ Frank Costello, **The Departed**
- ▶ Ma-Ma, **Judge Dredd**
- ▶ Don Barillo, **Once Upon a Time in Mexico**
- ▶ Helena Ayala, **Traffic**
- ▶ Avon Barksdale, **The Wire**

# .....LA POLIZETA.....



*Greedy, two-faced, and corrupt. La Polizeta is an agent for the cartel that's playing both sides, reporting on the work of Durango's anti-cartel task force to the very people los federales are hunting. It's a dangerous game, but she knows the truth of the drug war: no one can win, no matter the side.*

## YOUR NAME

- Coco, Isabel, Luz, Marisol, Mercedes, Silvia, Tilde, or Yoli
- Bimbo, Eduardo, Gustavo, Javi, Lacho, Luis, Teto, or Vicente

## YOUR LOOK

- Man, woman, ambiguous, transgressing
- Clever eyes, dead eyes, watchful eyes, young eyes
- Business clothes, plain clothes, street clothes, uniform clothes

## YOUR GEAR

- a stable lifestyle
- a government vehicle, a 9mm service weapon (close loud)
- a work cellphone and two SIM cards

## YOUR STATS

+0

FACE

+1

GRIT

+1

HUSTLE

-1

SAVAGERY

-1

HEAT

Add +1 to one of these stats:  
Face, Grit, Hustle, Savagery



## TUS LLAVES (CHOOSE 2)

- ☐ **Schemes:** Mark xp when you take advantage of someone who believes you're working on their behalf. Clear this key and advance when you openly choose one of your loyalties over the other.
- ☐ **Debt:** Mark xp when you take on a new loan or *strain your finances* to meet your family's needs. Clear this key and advance when you find a way—legal or illegal—out from under your obligations.
- ☐ **Pride:** Mark xp when you claim an asset on the grounds that you or your family deserves it. Clear this key and advance when you give up something to keep yourself or a loved one safe from harm.

## LOS ENLACES

You grew up with \_\_\_\_\_ on the streets of Durango. You still have a beer after work if you're both free; it's nice to know someone who isn't involved with either side of your double life.

\_\_\_\_\_ is the target of an active investigation. You're not the lead investigator, but you're regularly briefed on the case.

\_\_\_\_\_ is your main contact in the cartel. Tell them where you two go to speak directly when you need a face-to-face meeting.

## YOUR MOVES

You get this one and two more:

- **Infiltrado:** At the start of session, roll with Grit. On a hit, you get wind of a development in the anti-cartel case before things get messy. On a 10+, you can take advantage of the situation: you have access to vital evidence or witnesses, your choice. On a miss, the department catches a hot lead before you can intervene. *A la verga.*
- ☐ **Seguir:** When you follow someone through the streets, roll with Grit. On a hit, where they go, you follow. On a 7-9, you overstep; mark a stress to avoid being spotted. On a miss, you end up exposed without backup or cover. ¡Mierda!
- ☐ **Verdadero:** When you *get the truth* from someone during an official interrogation, pick an extra option, even on a miss.
- ☐ **Siempre Listo:** Mark stress to show up in a scene alongside *la policía* or *los federales*, assuming that you aren't unavailable. Mark three stress to show up instead of the authorities; you'll have a few minutes *solo* in the scene before anybody else arrives.
- ☐ **Escolta:** When you draw attention away from someone, they can roll with your Heat instead of their own. On a 10+, they suffer the consequences...but you attract *demasiada* attention: raise your Heat by 1 until the end of the next session.
- ☐ **Entrenamiento:** When you *turn to violence* after declaring yourself as a *federal*, roll with Grit instead of Savagery. If you get shot, take +1 forward.

## ANTI-CARTEL TASK FORCE

You work for *los federales* on an anti-cartel task-force assigned to Durango. You've been a *federal* for a while, but you were recently assigned to this region and city. Tell the MC why you've returned to your hometown.

You work closely with 5 NPCs (at least) in the unit:

*Delgado, Moreno, Ortiz, Reyes, Zamora*

Who is your new partner? \_\_\_\_\_

Who is suspicious of you? \_\_\_\_\_

You also work with a few NPCs from the cartel:

*Elisa, Esteban, Gata, Tomás, Zola*

Who almost gave you away? \_\_\_\_\_

Who offered to scam *el narco*? \_\_\_\_\_

## Equipo Federal

The anti-cartel task force has acquired some new toys—*¡gracias, Calderón!*—you can use, provided you have some “official” business (pick 2):

- ☐ *military-grade body armor (resilient bulky)*
- ☐ *full-scale surveillance van (hi-tech expensive)*
- ☐ *tracking devices or bugs (hi-tech concealable)*
- ☐ *court-approved wiretap (hi-tech persistent)*
- ☐ *network of criminal informants (informed costly)*

## ADVANCEMENT

When you fill your xp track, select an advance:

- ☐ *get +1 Face (max+3)*
- ☐ *get +1 Grit (max+3)*
- ☐ *get +1 Hustle (max+3)*
- ☐ *choose a new department toy*
- ☐ *get a new polizeta move*
- ☐ *get a new polizeta move*
- ☐ *get a move from another playbook*
- ☐ *get a move from another playbook*

After 5 advances, you can choose from this list:

- ☐ *get +1 to any stat (max+3)*
- ☐ *get promoted to lieutenant*
- ☐ *retire your character (to safety)*
- ☐ *change your character to a new type*
- ☐ *raise your lifestyle one level*

## PLAYING LA POLIZETA

In some ways, *La Polizeta* is the most familiar character in **Cartel**: roleplaying games often focus on the work of law enforcement, brave men and women fighting for *la comunidad* amidst crime, chaos, and corruption. But the truth of the drug war is never so simple.

You grew up in Durango, but you've returned with new eyes. You see the inevitability of all of this, the way the drug war turns *hermano* against *hermano*, *madre* against *hija*. You know that nothing will change until everything changes, until it all comes crashing down.

But your reasons for turning against your fellow *federales* are your own. Perhaps you convinced yourself earning *El Narco's* trust is the best way to strike a blow against him; maybe you like the lifestyle that comes with briefcases full of cash. No matter your logic, you've committed. No going back, *cabrón*. Not outside of a coffin.

Your only hope is to stay ahead of both sides long enough to get what you want, *justifying yourself* when things get messy. You know everything they know, and you see what they cannot see. You can offer just enough to *los federales* and *los carteles* to make sure they both think of you as a vital to their operation.

Can you live with what you have to do—who you have to kill—to fill the void in the hearts of both sides? Or will you come up short at the last moment with a sudden burst of conscience?

## Notes on Your Moves

- ▶ When you follow someone using *Seguir*, a 7-9 result means that you've drawn too close to your target or otherwise alerted them. If you don't mark a stress, they both know you're there and have an opportunity to react.
- ▶ You need to get your target into a formal interrogation to use *Verdadero*. It doesn't count as an interrogation unless it's on the record, at a station, in front of cops, etc.
- ▶ You can use *Siempre Listo* any time the MC declares that *la policía* or *los federales* are entering the scene. If you mark three stress, you enter instead of the authorities; the MC has to wait for a bit before any other cops can arrive in the scene.
- ▶ You must openly (and loudly) declare that you're a *federal* to get all the benefits of *Entrenamiento*. If things go to shit before you get out your badge, you're out of luck.

## Inspirations for La Polizeta

- ▶ Colin Sullivan, *The Departed*
- ▶ Capitán Ramírez, *El Infierno*
- ▶ Norman Stansfield, *The Professional*
- ▶ Alonzo Harris, *Training Day*
- ▶ Ajedrez Barillo, *Once Upon a Time in Mexico*

# LA RATA



## YOUR STATS

+1

FACE

+1

GRIT

-1

HUSTLE

+0

SAVAGERY

+1

HEAT

*Resilient, brave, and compromised. La Rata is a mole in the cartel whose only way out is through. Los federales—maybe the Americans too—have made promises, offers to help her escape from los carteles with life and limb intact in exchange for her help. Can she collect what she's owed before el narco discovers her betrayal?*

## YOUR NAME

- Adriana, Fiona, Laura, Luna, Maite, Micaela, Teresa, or Verónica
- Álvaro, Arturo, César, Jorge, Marco, Oscar, Rafael, or Ricardo

## YOUR LOOK

- Man, woman, ambiguous, transgressing
- Clear eyes, pained eyes, sad eyes, worn-out eyes
- Casual clothes, gang clothes, street clothes, uniform clothes

## YOUR GEAR

- an impoverished lifestyle
- a reliable car, an old revolver (close loud), and a burner phone

Add +1 to one of these stats:  
Face, Grit, Hustle, Savagery



## TUS LLAVES (CHOOSE 2)

- ☐ **Guilt:** Mark xp when you confess a recent betrayal or deception to someone you shouldn't trust. Clear this key and advance when you use a moment of intimacy to trick someone into advancing your schemes.
- ☐ **Mercy:** Mark xp when you try to head off a violent encounter with negotiation or persuasion. Clear this key and advance when you greatly injure or kill someone who is defenseless or unaware.
- ☐ **Paranoia:** Mark xp when you try to *get the truth* out of someone about their true loyalties. Clear this key and advance when you expose someone's betrayal to their family or employer.

## LOS ENLACES

\_\_\_\_\_ knows you're an informant. They haven't told anyone, but they've started to blackmail you to get what they want.

\_\_\_\_\_ works with you regularly on cartel business. You don't trust them, but you're confident they don't know your secrets...yet.

You and \_\_\_\_\_ started sleeping together a few weeks ago. Tell them why you haven't been able to end things, despite the dangers.

## YOUR MOVES

You get this one and two more:

- **Conectada:** When you go looking for a cartel *güey* in *la plaza* to help with a problem, name them and roll with Face. On a hit, you track them down and they've got what you need. On a 7-9, pick 1. On a 10+, both.
  - *They aren't caught up in their own problems.*
  - *You don't owe them a favor or apology.*
 On a miss, something has made them suspicious. Tell the MC what you did to make them *nervioso*.
- ☐ **Escapar:** When you try to exit a tense situation, roll with Face. On a 10+, you're gone! On a 7-9, you leave something behind or take something with you, your choice. On a miss, you're exposed *por completo*...
- ☐ **Amante:** When you share a night of intimacy with a lover, roll with Face. On a hit, clear your stress track. On a 10+, ask 2. On a 7-9, ask 1.
  - *What do you know about \_\_\_\_\_?*
  - *What do you want from \_\_\_\_\_?*
  - *What is \_\_\_\_\_ planning to do?*
 On a miss, you let them get too close: they uncover a secret you were hiding before you intervene.
- ☐ **Chismosa:** When you betray a friend or ally to the authorities, roll with Face. On a 10+, your treason is useful and valued: clear your stress track. On a 7-9, your handler is pleased...and demands more: clear one stress. On a miss, the authorities act on your info in a way that puts you in the crosshairs.
- ☐ **Mentirosa:** You get +1 Face (max+3).

## EL TRABAJO SUCIO

You are one of *el narco's* trusted lieutenants...but you've decided to betray the cartel.

Choose a reason:

- ☐ *you're tired of all the killing and death.*
- ☐ *you lost family or a loved one to el narco.*
- ☐ *you want to move up in the organization.*
- ☐ *you were arrested and flipped to avoid jail.*
- ☐ *you're an undercover cop on assignment.*

You work regularly with 5 narco NPCs (at least):

*Elisa, Esteban, Gata, Tomás, Zola*

Who is always asking for help? \_\_\_\_\_

Who suspects your treachery? \_\_\_\_\_

You go wherever they send you, but your crew tends to a few parts of *el narco's* business in *la plaza* on the regular.

Choose 2 sets of duties:

- ☐ *cutting, packaging, y preparing drug shipments*
- ☐ *counting money, tracking payments, y accounting*
- ☐ *organizing el narco's enforcers, sicarios, y halcones*
- ☐ *collecting protection money from businesses, los ricos, y los políticos*
- ☐ *protecting el narco's esposa, niños, y padres*

## SUPERVIVENCIA

You are a survivor, a *rata* who will not be drowned just because this sinking ship of a *plaza* is finally dragged beneath the surface of the drug war.

You can mark stress to:

- take a 10+ instead of rolling when you **interfere** with someone trying to **get the truth** out of you.
- offer a PC an xp to accept your reasoning when you **justify your behavior**, even on a miss.
- take +1 **when you get fucking shot** by another narco who suspects your treachery.

## ADVANCEMENT

When you fill your xp track, select an advance:

- ☐ *get +1 Face (max+3)*
- ☐ *get +1 Grit (max+3)*
- ☐ *get +1 Savagery (max+3)*
- ☐ *get an NPC ally (detail with MC)*
- ☐ *get a new rata move*
- ☐ *get a new rata move*
- ☐ *get a move from another playbook*
- ☐ *get a move from another playbook*

After 5 advances, you can choose from this list:

- ☐ *get +1 to any stat (max+3)*
- ☐ *get 4 weapons y 4 gear (La Sicaria)*
- ☐ *retire your character (to safety)*
- ☐ *change your character to a new type*
- ☐ *raise your lifestyle one level*

## PLAYING LA RATA

Every playbook in **Cartel** is caught in a bad spot, trapped between irreconcilable interests and motivations, but few are as lonely as you. You've abandoned one side of the war for the other, but you haven't yet crossed enemy lines. You awaken each day surrounded by death.

But you chose this path. It was not thrust upon you without reason. Whether you have simply tired of the game or have an ideological reason to undermine *el narco*, your betrayal has a purpose. You are meant to accomplish something and you cannot rest until it's done.

Your only saving grace is that you slid your knife into the ribs of people *who still trust you*. You count their money, protect their children, handle their drugs, recruit their *sicarios*. As long as you keep up appearances (and keep marking stress), you can maintain the illusion of loyalty. You're a survivor. ¡*No hay pedo!*

But *los federales* might screw it all up. They're lurking in the background, asking questions, demanding more information. They are allies, in a sense, but you have to hold them to their promises; they are no more trustworthy than you are, and you're a rat on a sinking ship.

Before you drown, you must answer the toughest questions of all: who do you trust? Is it *los federales*, the people who say they can help you escape? Or is it some *narco* you've known for decades, an *amigo* who might save you from all this? The clock is ticking...

## Notes on Your Moves

- ▶ You don't need a previously established NPC *narco* to go looking for help with **Conectada**. Just tell the MC whom you're looking for and what they do for *los carteles*. From that point, the MC will make the NPC a part of the *plaza*.
- ▶ You have to give *los federales* or the Americans useful dirt to trigger **Chismosa**. Even then, they might still fuck it up or demand more.
- ▶ You must mark the stress before rolling to get a 10+ on **interfering** with someone trying to **get the truth** out of you. You can't roll and then decide you would have marked the stress for the 10+ instead of rolling. You must likewise mark the stress before rolling to get a +1 when you **get fucking shot**.
- ▶ On the other hand, you can mark stress to offer a PC an xp to accept your reasoning anytime after your roll to **justify your behavior**.

## Inspirations for La Rata

- ▶ Billy Costigan, **The Departed**
- ▶ Jackie Brown, **Jackie Brown**
- ▶ Ava Crowder, **Justified**
- ▶ Stringer Bell, **The Wire**
- ▶ Billy Chambers, **Once Upon a Time in Mexico**

# .....LA SICARIA.....



*Deadly, veteran, and cold. La Sicaria is a trained cartel enforcer who has seen the worst of the drug war and survived...so far. She's retired before, but it's hard to find peace if you've developed a particular set of skills. Is there a future for her in Durango or just a violent death that's long overdue?*

## YOUR NAME

- Alma, Alicia, Josefina, Leticia, Mina, Pera, Raquel, or Rocio
- Ángel, Gabriel, Héctor, Jesús, Lorenzo, Ruy, Tiburón, or Vibora

## YOUR LOOK

- Man, woman, ambiguous, transgressing
- Blank eyes, somber eyes, quiet eyes, wild eyes
- Casual clothes, luxury clothes, military clothes, street clothes

## YOUR GEAR

- an impoverished lifestyle
- a reliable car or truck, and a few burners
- specialized weapons and gear (extra)

## YOUR STATS

-1

FACE

+1

GRIT

+0

HUSTLE

+1

SAVAGERY

+1

HEAT

Add +1 to one of these stats:  
Face, Grit, Hustle, Savagery



## TUS LLAVES (CHOOSE 2)

- ☐ **Indomitable:** Mark xp when you go into battle significantly outgunned or outmanned. Clear this key and advance when you surrender to your enemies instead of fighting your way out of a messy situation.
- ☐ **Mercy:** Mark xp when you try to head off a violent encounter with negotiation or persuasion. Clear this key and advance when you greatly injure or kill someone who is defenseless or unaware.
- ☐ **Duty:** Mark xp when you complete a task or assignment for your superiors or colleagues. Clear this key and advance when you intentionally thwart the goals of your organization or employer.

## LOS ENLACES

You owe \_\_\_\_\_ for getting you out of a tight spot. You won't die for them, but you both know you need to settle up soon.

\_\_\_\_\_ got you back in the business, after you had retired. Tell them how you feel about your return to the game, and don't be shy.

\_\_\_\_\_ fucked up something crucial; you had to clean up the mess before things got messy with *los federales* or a rival drug cartel.

## YOUR MOVES

Choose three moves:

- ☐ **Mirar:** When you read a charged situation, roll with Savagery. On a hit, ask the MC questions; take +1 when you act on the answers. On a 10+, ask 2. On a 7–9, ask 1:
  - *where's my escape route / way in / way past?*
  - *which enemy is most vulnerable to me?*
  - *what should I be on the lookout for?*
  - *what's my enemy's true position?*
 On a miss, ask one...but you reveal your position.
- ☐ **Narcocorrido:** When you meet someone *importante* (your call), roll with Savagery. On a hit, they've heard of you. Say what they've heard, and they will act accordingly. On a 10+, you also take +1 forward to dealing with them. On a miss, your reputation convinces them that you're something you're not.
- ☐ **Levantón:** When you track down an NPC, roll with Savagery. On a hit, you catch them exposed or vulnerable. On a 7–9, they have backup or it's public. On a miss, someone you're avoiding finds you first.
- ☐ **Rematar:** You get +1 Savagery (max +3).
- ☐ **Encobijado:** When you ditch a body somewhere, roll with Savagery. On a hit, you lose the corpse, and it stays lost; clear one stress. On a 10+, dust to dust; clear your stress track. On a miss, the body surfaces, but without any obvious ties to you or your crew.
- ☐ **Duro:** When you *get fucking shot*, add +1 to your roll. On a miss, you have time for an act of vengeance or kindness before you fall to your wounds.

## WEAPONS (CHOOSE 4)

- ☐ *sniper rifle (far hi-tech loud)*
- ☐ *assault rifle (close loud autofire)*
- ☐ *grenade launcher (close area messy)*
- ☐ *shotgun (close messy)*
- ☐ *submachine gun (close area loud)*
- ☐ *magnum (close reload loud)*
- ☐ *gmm (close loud)*
- ☐ *stun gun (close reload)*
- ☐ *fireman's axe (close messy)*
- ☐ *machete (hand messy)*
- ☐ *garrote (hand grapple)*
- ☐ *knives (hand infinite)*

## GEAR (CHOOSE 4)

- ☐ *Armor Piercing Ammo (+ap to all weapons): Sometimes putos wear vests. Gotta be ready.*
- ☐ *Body Armor (+armored): You want to live, right? Put on the fucking vest, pendeja.*
- ☐ *Explosives Kit (close loud area reload): You can create improvised explosive devices if you've got time.*
- ☐ *Tracking Device (hi-tech far concealable): They can't hide if you plant this somewhere on them.*
- ☐ *Secure Police Scanner (hi-tech hand): You can listen in even when they try to keep you out.*
- ☐ *Silencer (remove +loud from any weapon): Quiet as a mouse. Dead as a doornail. Eh, cabrona?*
- ☐ *Surveillance Gear (hi-tech close concealable): You can install cameras somewhere and watch all you want.*
- ☐ *Police Uniform (official wearable stolen): Who is who anymore? You look like them and they look like you.*

## ADVANCEMENT

When you fill your xp track, select an advance:

- ☐ *get +1 Grit (max+3)*
- ☐ *get +1 Hustle (max+3)*
- ☐ *get +1 Savagery (max+3)*
- ☐ *choose 2 new weapons*
- ☐ *get a new sicaria move*
- ☐ *get a new sicaria move*
- ☐ *get a move from another playbook*
- ☐ *get a move from another playbook*

After 5 advances, you can choose from this list:

- ☐ *get +1 to any stat (max+3)*
- ☐ *choose 2 new pieces of gear or 2 new weapons*
- ☐ *retire your character (to safety)*
- ☐ *change your character to a new type*
- ☐ *raise your lifestyle one level*

## PLAYING LA SICARIA

You left the drug trade once before, *chica*: maybe for your own safety, maybe for love. Maybe you got tired of all the killing, no matter how good you are at taking a life. But Durango makes fools of us all, and now you're back.

Honestly? You're sure many *narcos* are happy to have you return. You're one of the best that's ever lived, a *sicaria* whose legend is matched only by her ability, an *ángel de la muerte* who offers certainty in these troubled times. You kill. The world turns. All is right.

But you're back in Durango for your own reasons. Perhaps you think *el narco* isn't really capable of running *la plaza* or that you have an opportunity to right an old wrong. Perhaps you missed the work, bloody as it is. Perhaps you don't work for *los carteles* at all anymore and spend your time robbing them blind. Your playbook leaves all those details up to you.

Whatever has prompted your return, know that your special weapons and gear are not a plan. They are fancy toys, *sí*, but you didn't live this long relying on a silenced *pistola* or official *uniforme*. You can **get fucking shot** like anyone else, *cabrona*, and you bleed the same *sangre*.

What will you bleed for? What cause is worth your return? You got yourself out once. Are you strong enough to drag yourself out of the drug war a second time? Or did you come back to die? Killing is easy. It's the living that's hard.

## Notes on Your Moves

- ▶ The situation must be charged to use *Mirar*, but your penchant for violence is reason to declare any situation tense and difficult. Remember that the max bonus for a roll is +4, including bonuses from other PCs **helping** you or you **sizing someone up**.
- ▶ If you take *Narcocorrido*, tell the MC what your *corrido* is about. See page 9 for more on *narcocorridos* if you need ideas!
- ▶ *Duro* gives you time for “an act of kindness or vengeance” if you miss while **getting fucking shot**, but you don't have all day, *cabrona*. The MC will give you a scene or two to get things done, but you're living on borrowed time. If you get shot again, you don't have to roll; you're already a dead woman walking. What can mere bullets do to you?
- ▶ Much of your special weapons or gear comes with specific tags. See page 190 for the full list of tags, including specific rules for *area*, *reload*, *infinite*, and *official*.

## Inspirations for La Sicaria

- ▶ Mike Ehrmantraut, **Breaking Bad**
- ▶ El Mariachi, **Once Upon a Time in Mexico**
- ▶ Alejandro Gillick, **Sicario**
- ▶ Felicia “Snoop” Pearson, **The Wire**

# CHAPTER FIVE

## EL MAESTRO DE CEREMONIAS





# ÉSTA ES LA NETA

**Cartel** works in a fairly traditional way, *cabron*; your players tell you who they are and what they do, what goals they pursue and what they feel. As the *Maestro de Ceremonias* (MC), you tell them **everything else**. How will Los Zetas react when Santiago kills one of their *sicarios*? Who is going to betray Luna to *los narcos* at the worst moment? It's up to you!

For me, the best part of **Cartel** is watching my players grapple with the *consecuencias* of their decisions, blank looks on their faces as something shocking and inevitable takes hold in the story. Or the moment they realize that they have to turn against each other just to stay alive. I have a ringside seat to the drama either way, my bloody fingerprints all over the mess, pushing and pulling and tweaking to create the perfect disaster.

This chapter explains *todo lo que necesitas* to know in order to run that kind of session—or even a full campaign—of **Cartel**, including:

- ▶ **Core Tools:** This chapter covers the core tools you use in a session of **Cartel**, including your agendas (page 118), principles (page 120), moves (page 123), and other systems (page 130) like Heat and stress.
- ▶ **PCs y NPCs:** **Cartel** is a melodrama of human tragedy; I cover how to help your players get the most from their characters (page 134) and how to use NPCs to the fullest as antagonists (page 142).
- ▶ **First Session y Examples:** I offer advice for the first session of your **Cartel** game (page 146) and a long example of play (page 150) that showcases all the tools the MC uses in one place.

If you want to review a particular move or specific rule, head back to Chapter 3 (page 31). And if you need a primer on the drug war, you can find a full summary of **Cartel's** setting in Chapter 2 (page 15).

# YOUR AGENDAS

As the MC, you must balance three broad goals—**agendas**—when you run **Cartel**:

- ▶ Make the drug war seem real.
- ▶ Keep the player characters' lives exciting.
- ▶ Play to find out what happens.

Everything in this chapter—the principles that help focus your engagement with the fiction, the moves you make in response to the characters' actions, etc.—is designed to help support these goals. When you evaluate your success as an MC, look first at your work in each session through the lenses of your agendas.

## WAS YOUR DRUG WAR “REAL”?

It's your job to bring the drug war to life around the player characters, to portray a convincing world of money and power filled with duplicitous allies and constant uncertainty. Your players need to feel the danger around them, the deadly threat that lurks in every conversation. *Siempre*.

But you can't make the drug war “seem real” by bombarding your players with history. Create an atmosphere of dread and paranoia through your descriptions of the world...and the actions your characters—the NPCs—take within that world. Your players need to understand how (and why) their characters are in danger *right now*.

## WERE THEIR LIVES EXCITING?

The drug war is dangerous, but the day-to-day of *narcos* is often quite boring—drugs are shipped to *el norte* and everyone makes money. **Cartel** isn't about the economics of the drug trade, though; it's about the tumultuous lives of the player characters and their *amigos y familia*!

Focus your story by keeping the characters' lives on edge, pushing on their secrets and adjusting the temperature to keep them on their toes. Don't worry about creating an adventure or plot for them to work through. Push on their weak points, and the inherent chaos of the drug war will keep things exciting.

## DID YOU PLAY TO FIND OUT?

The discipline required to focus on the player characters has to continue all the way to the end of their narrative. There will be times in which you might think you know how the story should go. Cut that shit. Let the story breathe. Trust that the narrative is going somewhere meaningful.

In those moments—when the dice hit the table and everything is on the line—you will find the beating heart of **Cartel**, the tragic breaking point in the lives of these doomed people who tried to defy the odds of the bloody drug war that haunts *México*. But you can't get there if you try to control the story!



## ALWAYS SAY

When you MC **Cartel**, you might find yourself without a clear path forward, caught between multiple agendas with competing priorities. ¡*Lo siento, mi amigo!* I know that pain. When you find yourself in such a spot, always say:

- ▶ ...what the rules demand.
- ▶ ...what the drug war demands.
- ▶ ...what honesty demands.

The rules of **Cartel** are the backbone of your story. If a move says to shoot someone, shoot them; if a roll comes up short, accept it. Say what the rules demand, no matter how it breaks your heart. The players need your discipline, *cabrón!*

But *la guerra antidrogas* has its own rules. Drugs must flow *norte*, and *los jefes* must be paid in *respeto y sangre*; kindness is no different from weakness to most *narcos*. If the PCs fail to deliver on their promises, let those they failed respond in kind. Stay true to the logic of *los carteles*, no matter how it breaks your heart. The players crave your ruthlessness, *cabrón!*

But be generous with the truth. The players only know what you tell them, so make things obvious. If an NPC is in love with a PC, announce it often; if an NPC is going to betray a PC, let the PC know. The world has to be *claro y directo*, no matter how it breaks your heart. The players deserve your honesty, *cabrón!*

# YOUR PRINCIPLES

The agendas are your goals, but *los principios* show you how to move from the ideal to the actual. How do you **make the drug war seem real** and **keep the player characters' lives exciting**? **Cartel's** principles show you the way.

These principles are rules for you as the MC, guardrails that keep you on the right path as you work with your players to create an exciting, tragic tale of Mexican narcofiction in Durango:

- ▶ Ground the story in Durango, Mexico
- ▶ Speak to the characters, not the players
- ▶ Make your move, but never speak its name
- ▶ Name everyone, give them drives and instincts
- ▶ Treat everyone as expendable and suspicious
- ▶ Fill the characters' lives with secrets
- ▶ Make the authorities a persistent presence
- ▶ Be a fan of the PCs and their schemes
- ▶ Embrace the language of *la guerra antidrogas*
- ▶ Sometimes, declaim decision making

Follow these principles, and you'll find that **Cartel** runs itself, each move you make arising naturally from the core themes of the game and the fiction your players present to you. Ignore these *principios*, *muchacho*, and the mess that results is on your hands alone...

## GROUND THE STORY IN DURANGO, MEXICO

**Cartel** is set in Durango—not Mexico City or Baltimore or any other place. Fill the story with local *cantinas* and *catedrales*, *taquerías* and *talleres*, the stuff that makes this a narcofiction story set in Durango instead of a *gringo* fantasy about heroic law enforcement south of the border.

Durango isn't that *grande*, either. PCs can run into each other at the bank or end up at the same store without straining credulity. See page 28 for more on using Durango as a backdrop for situations that demand action.

## SPEAK TO THE CHARACTERS, NOT THE PLAYERS

Your players aren't hiding from *sicarios* in an auto shop or lying to a spouse. The player characters are the ones in trouble, *cabrón*, so talk directly *to them*. Say "Beto, where do you hide the gun?" instead of "Derrick, where do you think Beto would hide the gun?" Speaking directly to the characters pushes the players into thinking and talking as those characters.

And don't be *tacaño* with what they see or hear: "Beto, the guy you were avoiding is here in the bar; he *clearly* saw you when you entered." Give the players the info as if you were both in the room, looking at the same scene together.



## MAKE YOUR MOVE, BUT NEVER SPEAK ITS NAME

When you make a move—we'll talk about moves soon, *güey*—don't call out its name. Don't be a *pendejo* who says, "I guess I'll **disrupt someone's routine**." You've got to make things seem real!

Your moves need to look like they come from the fiction, like there's a fictional cause for the fictional effect. When you **disrupt someone's routine**, say something like "*¡Chingale*, Yolanda! Diego, the guy who usually picks up drugs from the lab, just rolled up with four *mafiosos* you've never seen before." Make it look like the fiction is choosing the move—not you—and you're just relaying the terrible news to the players.

## NAME EVERYONE, GIVE THEM DRIVES AND INSTINCTS

"Making the drug war seem real" can be tough, but a good first step is giving everyone actual names. I've given you a list of names on the MC worksheet, and you can pull more names from any unused playbook. Names are crucial for earning player engagement; the players usually can't care about characters they can't name!

But a name isn't enough. You also want to give your NPCs **drives**—motives that offer them a path in the fiction, like "serve *El Narco*" or "stay out of trouble"—and **instincts**—reactions they turn to when under pressure, like "shoot first" or "call a superior officer." See page 142 for more on using drives and instincts in your game.

## TREAT EVERYONE AS EXPENDABLE AND SUSPICIOUS

Obviously, naming a *pendejo halcón* doesn't mean he matters more to the cartel. Everyone, even *El Narco*, is expendable in the context of the Sinaloa Cartel's broader business plan. No one is beyond *la guerra* itself, not even *los jefes*.

Constantly reinforce this truth: everyone is replaceable, and no one is truly an ally. Portray most NPCs as keenly aware of their position and deeply suspicious of the activities of the PCs, taking any opportunity they can to be on the better end of a deal or bad situation. Make it memorable when some *cabrón* is too trusting or foolish to see the doom that awaits him ahead.

## FILL THE CHARACTERS' LIVES WITH SECRETS

Many characters in **Cartel** are already lying to loved ones, concealing cruel murders and simple affairs in equal measure. Don't treat the secrets PCs get at character creation as a limit; give them new reasons to keep things from their family, allies, and each other: "Your brother looks sad and desperate, Luna. He says, 'Please hide me, *hermana*. Don Santiago is looking for me. Please.'"

And don't feel like cartel or drug secrets are the only ones that matter! *La Esposa's* secrets—secret lovers, hidden money, drug addiction—are *peligrosos* in their own way; when you can't trust anyone, evidence of any betrayal is a frightening twist that demands investigation.

## MAKE THE AUTHORITIES A PERSISTENT PRESENCE

The law has a complicated relationship with *los narcos* (page 24)—they are partners often and enemies always. Make your players roll with Heat (page 64) when their characters conduct business in public; show them *la policía* and *los federales* are always just around the corner.

But the law isn't the only authority. *El Narco's* reach is just as long and considerably more dangerous: "As you try on the necklace, Sofia, you see Alma, one of Santiago's *sicarias*, behind you in the mirror. She's clearly following you."

## BE A FAN OF THE PCs AND THEIR SCHEMES

No one—not you, not the players—wants to see the characters suffer at every turn. It's *aburrido* and dull, *amigo*, to watch failure upon failure. Being a fan means introducing *problemas* that challenge the characters in meaningful ways... *and* hoping the characters occasionally win.

You control the whole world that isn't them. You have to create real opposition, *sí*, but honor their clever plots and bold gambits; don't thwart them with stray obstacles they could not have foreseen. Encourage them to take risks and reward them when—sometimes—everything goes their way. There will always be *más problemas*.

Remember that a miss is not a failure, *amigo*. It's an opportunity for you to make your move, as hard (or as soft) as the situation demands.

## EMBRACE THE LANGUAGE OF LA GUERRA ANTIDROGAS

The logic of *la guerra contra el narco* may be money, but the language is violence. There are no peaceful resolutions to territory disputes, no way but the gun to settle arguments between former friends or associates. In a world without rules, only the strongest *cabrones* survive.

Remind your players that the business of *las drogas* isn't really a business at all. It's a death sentence that arrives when you least expect it. They must never feel safe, never feel beyond reach—even when they rule a *plaza*—until they retire to safety (page 141) somewhere else.

## SOMETIMES, DECLAIM DECISION MAKING

"Playing to find out what happens" means you have to declaim your choices, turning them over to the dice or fate—or even the players—instead of trying to control the story. *Getting fucking shot* is a perfect example; once you go to that move, the PC's destiny is out of your hands.

Handing control to players is a powerful tool. Ask them what normal looks like and build on their answers, disrupting or supporting their routine as appropriate: "Mina, does your father post guards around his estate? Are they obvious when you drive up?" Whatever answer she gives informs the world and consolidates the fiction. Use that fiction in scenes to convey normalcy...or signal danger for PCs by suddenly removing it.

# YOUR MOVES

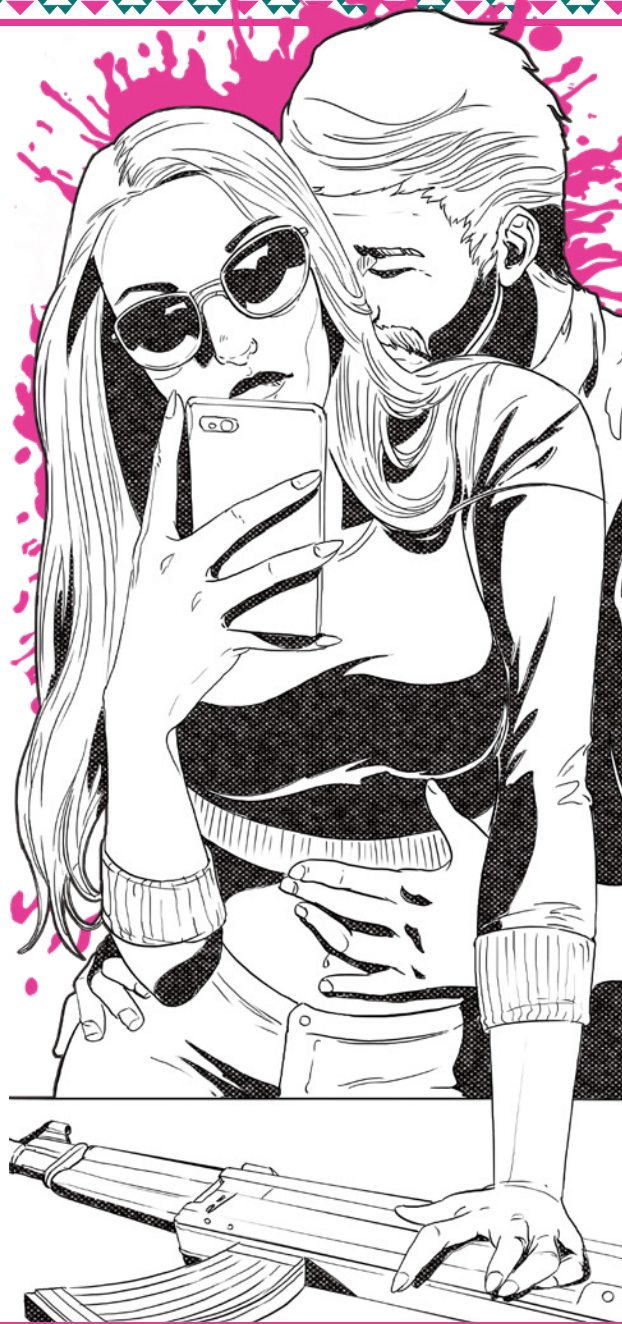
Principles are guidelines for your work; your moves are the direct actions you take to add new fiction to the story. The players hit the ball to you by making moves, and your job is to hit the ball back to them in ways that reinforce the setting and the system, offering opportunities to make more moves based on the fiction you create together.

Often, the players (and their moves) directly drive that fiction forward all by themselves. The players make moves, they hit (rolling 7+) on those moves, and you interpret what happens in the fiction according to whatever their moves tell you to do, following your agendas and principles.

But sometimes you need to step in to keep things moving. Perhaps the player's actions haven't yet triggered a move or they've rolled a miss on a move they've made. Or maybe things are just fucking slow! Regardless, *muchacho*, when you're needed you **make an MC move** to push the story forward! You've got to **keep their lives exciting**. ¡Órale!

*Gustavo, El Polizeta, is trying to get to his car after jumping out of a window to evade some Zeta sicarios. He's hurt; he nearly broke his leg falling several stories to the ground! He **pushes his luck** to run to his car, but misses. It's time for me to make a move!*

*I could choose to **shoot someone** (page 127)—probably Gustavo—but I want to **be a fan of the character**. I decide I'm going to **lean on a secret** (page 129) instead: "As you get close to the car, you can see your partner, Ruiz, standing next to it. You told him that you were taking the night off to watch your kids, but maybe he followed you here? What do you do?"*



## SOFTER VS HARDER MOVES

Not all moves have the same impact on the fiction: when the game calls for you to make a move, you have to decide how hard a move to make. **Softer moves** focus on setting characters up for future moves—threats, opportunities, and foreshadowing—while **harder moves** focus on changes in the fiction that force the characters to react *right now* to keep disaster at bay.

There is no rule for how hard a move to make in any given situation, but you aren't a fan of the player characters and their schemes if you make disastrously hard moves every time someone rolls a miss. There's got to be a balance, *muchacho*, one that you strike scene by scene, move by move, each time you run **Cartel**.

### Softer Move Examples

.....  
*"As you attempt to drag the body into the car, you hear a low whistle from across the street. It's a kid—maybe ten years old—eyes wide at the trail of blood you've left behind you. What do you do?"*  
 .....

.....  
*"As you lie to him, El Tiburón smiles. He says, 'Lo siento, cabrona. You know how it is. I can't trust anyone these days. Money goes missing? I have to ask.' You can tell he's still suspicious, but he's going to let it go for now. What do you do?"*  
 .....

## NO "HARD" MOVES?

Dividing moves into two categories—"hard" moves vs "soft" moves—can confuse you about your role. A miss means that it's your turn to talk; you make as hard (or as soft) a move as is needed for the story. MCing is like cooking, *güey*. You've got to keep it all at the right temperature instead of blindly following someone else's recipe...

### Harder Move Examples

.....  
*"As you attempt to drag the body into the car, you hear a low whistle. You pivot just in time to see a woman bring the butt of a gun into your face, knocking you flat. Mark a stress! What do you do?"*  
 .....

.....  
*"As you lie to him, El Tiburón smiles. He laughs loudly, and says, 'Lo siento, cabrona. I was testing you. I already know it was your pendeja amiga, Ana, who took the money. I just needed to know if you were in on it. I'll send my guys to get her, and we can kill her together.' What do you do?"*  
 .....



## MAKE YOUR MOVE!

The players have it easy. You tell them what's happening and they get to make whatever move they like. You make your moves—as hard or soft as you like—only when:

- ▶ ...there's a lull in the action.
- ▶ ...a player misses a roll.
- ▶ ...a player hands you a golden opportunity.

### Lulls in the Action

It's your job to keep the story moving. If the fiction ever stalls out, gets boring, or drags, it's time for you to make a move. Generally, moves you make when there's a lull in the action are softer moves, designed to get the characters moving and push the story forward, but you might need harder moves to get the characters to stand up and take meaningful action.

.....  
*Santiago knows Luna is the mole, so he's sent Alma to pick up Sofia—Luna's sister—in the hopes that he can get her to tell him where Luna went.*

*But there's a bit of a lull; Santiago's waiting to talk to Sofia! I decide to make a move, something hard enough to divide his attention and **keep his life exciting**. I decide to **disrupt his routine** (page 127):*

*"Santiago, you're waiting to hear from your sicarios when you get a text from Bruja, your Sinaloa handler: 'Coming to town today, cabrón. We need to talk. Make time.' What do you do?"*  
 .....

### Acting on Misses

If a player misses a roll, it's time for you to make a move. The moves you make should always flow from the fiction—a fictional result rooted in a fictional cause—so the player can understand the fictional source of the fictional outcome.

.....  
*Santiago tries to **pressure** Bruja into waiting, but misses his roll. The situation is already complicated; I tell him to **mark a stress** (page 126)—a fairly soft move—as Bruja berates him for his insolence.*  
 .....

If the move tells you what to do on a miss, follow through on that promise; otherwise you're set to make a move, as hard or soft as you like.

### Golden Opportunities

If a player gives you a golden opportunity—blowing off an immediate problem, opening up to a dangerous foe, or acting without regard to their social or emotional security—it's time for you to make a move. Golden opportunities usually demand harder moves: if the characters ignore obvious dangers, one of their enemies gets to act against them with impunity.

.....  
*Santiago tells Bruja to fuck off. He's got problems right now. I smile and take note. Bruja is happy to **escalate this situation to violence** (page 126) offscreen to remind Santiago who is in charge...*  
 .....

## BASIC MOVES FOR THE MC

Here is the list of basic moves for the MC, followed by some information, advice, and examples for using the moves in play:

- ▶ Inflict stress (as established)
- ▶ Escalate a situation to violence
- ▶ Shoot someone
- ▶ Award an advantage
- ▶ Threaten someone's interests
- ▶ Disrupt someone's routine
- ▶ Offer a difficult compromise
- ▶ Turn their move back on them
- ▶ Lean on a secret
- ▶ Announce future danger
- ▶ Demand someone play their part
- ▶ Always ask, "what do you do?"



### Inflict stress (as established)

Stress is your main tool for escalating tension. You can inflict it against people (NPCs) close to the characters—*amigos, familia, enemigos*—or directly against the PCs themselves. Start by inflicting one stress, but sometimes require characters to mark stress multiple times as the situation unfurls. See *Using Stress* (page 132) for more on inflicting stress during play.

.....  
*"You hear the crackle of a submachine gun as you push the car into gear. Paco tries to return fire through the passenger side window, but you can tell he's terrified. He can't turn the safety off..."*  
 .....

### Escalate a situation to violence

A throbbing pulse of violence underlies nearly every messy situation in the drug war, a seductive promise that there is no better solution to problems than dead enemies. When will your NPCs decide to strike out and end a situation in their favor? What will the consequences of such violence look like? What if it already happened?

.....  
*"Your criminal informant, Jesús, said to meet at the rundown hotel, but you know something is wrong when you arrive. There's blood oozing from under the door of his room, and the smell of gunpowder. You already know what occurred here, cabrón..."*  
 .....

## Shoot someone

Knives, fists, and explosions are all dangerous to *narcos*, but bullets are the real killers. Shoot someone—a PC or an NPC—when it's time to drop the hammer and bring real consequences to bear. But don't shoot a PC if you aren't ready for their story to come to a close, *cabrón*. If someone **gets fucking shot**, the outcome of their injury is no longer in your hands as the MC.

.....  
*"How about I just kill you, güey? Then no one knows what happened here.' Zola raises her gun... and pulls the trigger. The flash of light blinds you for a moment, but you feel the bullet hit. Mierda."*  
 .....

## Award an advantage

Many conflicts in **Cartel** pit two characters against each other. Sometimes it's enough to simply award an advantage to one side, allowing them to press forward with new resources. In a conflict between two player characters, this move is powerful; give either a free 10+ to **get the truth** or **justify their behavior** and you put a lot of pressure on their opposition.

.....  
*"You've got your hands around Beto's throat, but he knees you in the chest—knocking the wind out of you—and rolls to the left. He looms over you as you try to catch your breath. Beto, take a 10+ to **turn to violence** instead of rolling if you'd like..."*  
 .....

## Threaten someone's interests

Above all others, this is your best move for raising the tension in a scene. You can put the player characters in a tough spot directly or threaten the NPCs they care about onscreen and offscreen. The drug war is a dangerous, sprawling mess; bring danger to bear and give the player characters a chance to respond.

.....  
*"Your phone buzzes. It's your wife: 'Two men with guns are outside the apartment! They are yelling for you. ¿Qué pasa, Héctor? What did you do?'"*  
 .....

## Disrupt someone's routine

The drug trade is built on regularity: ideally, everything goes smoothly and everyone gets paid. Interfere with any part of the system, and things start crashing down. Look for opportunities to push the player characters to action by messing with whatever normal looks like for them. Make this stuff obvious; the players ought to be the first to know when things have gone *a la mierda*.

.....  
*"You can tell by the look on Flaco's face that something went wrong with the drop. He starts babbling before you can even ask: 'Someone knew we were coming. They took everything. All the drugs we were supposed to drop off, the money, our car...all gone. What are we gonna do, man? Don Santiago is going to kill us! ¡Put a madre!'"*  
 .....

## COINCIDENCIAS Y CASUALIDADES

In the Mexican novel **Pedro Páramo**, Juan travels to his mother's hometown in the hopes of finding his father, Pedro. Seeking to fulfill the promise he made on his mother's deathbed, Juan realizes too late that her hometown is now populated by ghosts, a literal ghost town; he dies halfway through the story—terrified of the ghosts he walks among—leaving the dead to carry the tale.

Fragmented and tragic, **Pedro Páramo** is a novel that many claim as one of the earliest works of magical realism, a genre that mixes mundane and fantastic elements without clear delineations or boundaries. In stories like **Pedro Páramo**, magic is a strange constant, an everyday occurrence that requires no special remarks.

But for most Mexicans, there has never been a line that necessarily separates the fantastic from the mundane. It doesn't matter if you believe in ghosts; everyone in Mexico has a story about seeing a ghost whether you believe in them or not.

Narcofiction tends not to deal in magical realism explicitly, but there are themes and situations that call upon the genre. Coincidences and accidents are common—moments in which someone is in just the right place at just the right time—as are fantastical twists of fate that leave someone alive when they would have otherwise died.

You can't expect something as surreal as the drug war to be bound by *gringo* attempts to categorize everything. *Mal que no tiene cura, quererlo curar es locura*. The truly crazy are those who see the world as sane; the rest of us have to get by within the surreality of day-to-day life in México.

## Offer a difficult compromise

Everyone in Durango is trying to get ahead, and often willing to come to a deal. Be direct with what NPCs want; don't wait for the players to exhaust themselves guessing what a *halcón* might want in order to switch sides and betray his *jefe*. Same goes for messy or difficult situations—tell players directly what compromises are possible.

.....  
*“The sicario at the other side of the bar opened fire too early; the bullets ripped through your two friends instead of you. You might be able to sneak out the back door, but it means that one or both of your amigas is likely to die. No one's jumping up to provide medical care for them...”*  
.....

## Turn their move back on them

Sometimes the best move is to give a player everything they want...and more. *Mucho más*. A miss isn't a failure; show the players how their actions lead to consequences they may not expect, and make it clear to them that they are the ones driving the fiction forward. Even when they miss, their actions truly matter.

.....  
*“Don Carlos is impressed with your product. It's clearly superior. But when he nods at his goons, they don't step forward with dinero. All they have is a set of restraints; it looks like they want you more than they want the drugs you had for sale...”*  
.....



## Lean on a secret

The player characters' lives are riddled with lies, all hiding truths they don't want to come to light. Push, even just a little, and the player characters have no choice but to try to protect themselves. Lean harder, and they might even kill to keep themselves safe from their own previous mistakes and betrayals.

.....  
*"Mónica, the head of the nonprofit, is furious: 'You don't know anything about the money that's missing? You mean to tell me you don't have any records?' She glares at you, unwilling to let it go and waiting for you to respond..."*  
 .....

## Announce future danger

Be clear, early and often, about the dangers the player characters face. Talk about the larger threats and the small details—*El Narco's* fearsome reputation and the type of gun a *sicario* is carrying—long before you deliver on the promise of such warnings. By the time the hammer falls, your players will know exactly where and how it will land upon them.

.....  
*"You overhear Erica talking on the phone about you before she realizes you're there to meet her: 'Yeah, I don't know why el jefe keeps her around. People say she's been talking to los federales and shit.' You thought you could trust her, cabrona!"*  
 .....

## ¡DIVIÉRTETE!

**Cartel** is a serious game, but...it's supposed to be fun. Your moves must create pressure, but don't confuse the fiction the game creates—heartbreaking tragedy—for what the game should feel like to play. Embrace moments of black humor or shocking twists of fate. If the players can't laugh, then all they can do is cry.

## Demand someone play their part

Sometimes the hardest move is merely asking the player characters (or NPCs) to do what is expected of them, no matter how painful. The drug war is built on shared, horrific compliance.

.....  
*El jefe opens the door to reveal Lupita's body laying on a table. 'I assume,' he says, 'that you won't have any problems cleaning up the mess you made?'"*  
 .....

## Always ask, "what do you do?"

Each time you make a move, put the focus back on a player by asking, "What do you do?" Make it clear who gets to act next and what conditions they face. Do this enough times, and the players will be ready to run with the narrative as soon as you hand it back to them.

# MOVES UPON MOVES

The moves in **Cartel** are designed to snowball, the outcomes of each move leading into the next set of moves. You don't need to plan out each session as the MC because the moves give you all the narrative momentum you need. All you have to do is push a little, and the players will make moves that carry the narrative forward.

This is especially true when players roll a 7-9; their opposition gets to act on them or they must pay some cost to get what they want. It may not always be obvious—what does it cost to mark a single stress?—but these small sacrifices tighten the noose and give you new opportunities to turn up the heat.

*Diego—one of Santiago's couriers—has decided to kidnap Yolanda for Los Zetas, embracing the language of la guerra. She tries to pressure him:*

*"This is suicide, Diego. We both know Santiago will kill you if you do this. Don't be stupid." Sarah, Yolanda's player, rolls and gets an 8. Her pressure lands, but she's got to let something slip. "I think I'll let it slip that I hate Santiago. Is that enough?"*

*I nod. Diego will be stunned to hear that Yolanda, Santiago's favorite cook, hates him. Yolanda's pressure also means Diego has to make a choice—mark a stress or back off—but his decision will be informed by the information he just got...*

## PACING YOUR MOVES

Ultimately, it's your job to modulate the chain reaction. Early in scenes, create drama—answer players' questions in ways that prompt more questions or put characters into danger in ways that encourage the players to take action. As scenes reach their peak...change it up! Focus instead on bringing threats to bear quickly in order to force the players to make hard choices.

The key to running **Cartel** is to keep the drama at a constant boil...without ruining the pot. There must always be a chance for these *pendejos narcos* to come out ahead. Push hard, but ease up when things are about to turn too hopeless for the player characters to bother fighting back.

*Seeing that Diego is distracted by her confession, Sarah decides to seize the moment: "Can I use Ciencia, Cabrón to juryrig a smoke bomb?"*

*I love the idea. Diego was dumb enough to try to kidnap Yolanda at her workshop! I get to be a fan of Sarah's character by saying yes. "Of course!"*

*Sarah rolls a 3. ¡Chingale! Ciencia, Cabrón gives me two options on a miss: I can tell Sarah she's missing something or fill her stress track. I choose the stress track: there's no need to put her in a tight spot when things are already this interesting. Let's see what she does with more stress and a bomb!*

## USING HEAT MOVES

Heat (page 64) is one tool you have to set the pace of the game and remind the players that their actions have consequences. *La ley* may prioritize cash over any sort of legal duty, but *los federales* are around every corner, waiting to put *narcos* who slip up into a tough spot.

But it's your job to remember Heat moves, *cabrón!* The players rarely want to make such moves, since the outcomes are almost entirely negative. If you let them, the players will gladly conduct *narco* business in public or leave a messy crime scene without rolling any dice. If the player characters get in a spot that calls for a Heat move, don't let them blow it off.

.....  
*After a shootout at the autoshop, Mina considers her options. The pendejos that attacked her are dead, but she doesn't know if more are coming.*

*"What's your plan, Mina? You're pretty sure the kid in the office is already calling the police," I say, making the authorities a persistent presence.*

*"Fuck it. I'm out of here," says Marissa, Mina's player. "I don't need any more trouble. I get in my truck and take off."*

*"Sounds like you're trying to leave a messy crime scene before the cops get here?"*

*"Uh...dammit. Yeah, I am." Marissa rolls with her Heat +1 and gets a 7. Looks like she's not going to be able to flee so easily; the cops are going to show up, but they won't be prepared for what they find.*  
 .....

## USING LIFESTYLE

Lifestyle (page 72) helps you define the limits of a PC's financial resources. If they reach a bit beyond what they can usually afford, they are probably ***straining their finances*** (page 56).

But PCs can't ***strain their finances*** to buy expensive things way beyond their means. The move covers them extending themselves; it doesn't mean they get to roll to buy anything!

.....  
*Luna, La Rata, tries to purchase some new tracking equipment to follow Santiago around. I say, "I don't think you can just buy that kind of gear with your impoverished lifestyle. Maybe you can see if your contacts within los federales can get it for you?"*  
 .....

## Improving Lifestyle

Players might choose to *raise their lifestyle* as one of their advances. Work with them to explain how their financial situation has improved:

.....  
*Katherine, Luna's player, decides to raise her lifestyle with her sixth advancement. We agree that she's now receiving a regular stipend from los federales for bribes and gear they can't provide to her directly.*  
 .....

It's possible events in the fiction—or changing playbooks—might also improve a PC's lifestyle. In both cases, make sure that the fiction is in line with the new financial position. See *Managing Advancement* on page 141 for more details.

## USING STRESS

Stress (page 69) is the lifeblood of **Cartel**, the main hook you set in your players to drag them further into the drama of the drug war.

### Inflicting Stress

Players only mark stress when the moves tell them to mark stress or when you **inflict stress** upon them as one of your moves. Don't be shy about piling the stress on to the PCs! It's their job to find a way to manage the chaos of the drug war, so inflict stress whenever appropriate.

Remember to misdirect from the move itself; always give a fictional reason for the stress first.

.....  
*As Luna collapses to the floor in Sofia's living room (page 69), I decide to **announce future danger**. "Luna's still breathing, but you see she's bleeding from her side. It looks like she's been shot, and you're not sure how much time she has. I think you probably need to mark a stress, Sofia."*

*Brendan nods and marks the stress: "Sofia is going to have a lot of questions for Luna later," he says, "but she's terrified her sister is going to die."*  
 .....

Stress is subtle, but it's one of the core engines of the game, the main reason that things spiral out of control in the third act of narcofiction stories. If all the players have to do to survive is keep their cool and avoid trouble, then you aren't **making the player characters' lives exciting** or **making the drug war seem real**.

### Forcing Stress Moves

When PCs become overwhelmed (page 69), you may force them to make a stress move at any time. It's up to the PC to select the stress move when you call for one, but try to avoid cutting them off from multiple options by forcing a move on them at the wrong time.

.....  
*As Brendan considers options, I ask about his stress track: "Sofia, are you overwhelmed right now?"*

*"Yeah, that was my last stress. You want me to make a stress move before I deal with Luna?"*

*I consider the stress moves; Sofia can't **verbally abuse or shame someone** or **dish out a beatdown**—there's no one else in the scene—and she's unlikely to try to **confess her sins** or **lose herself in a substance** when her sister's life is at stake. If I force a stress move, I'm not following my agendas or principles at all. I'll have to wait for a different moment!*

*"No," I say, "not yet. What do you do for Luna?"*  
 .....

PCs are already extremely vulnerable when they are overwhelmed: they can't refuse an offer when another PC **proposes a deal** or avoid concessions when another PC **pressures** them, nor can they lie when they **justify their behavior** and hit a 7-9. All of their options that rely on stress are gone!

Pace yourself when a PC is overwhelmed. Wait for the right movement to push them over the edge into chaos; you don't have to rush them into a stress move right away!



## Stress y Golden Opportunities

If you call for a stress move and the PC balks, however, hit them hard. It's the ultimate **golden opportunity**; the PC is refusing to address an immediate danger, and that failure should have serious and immediate fictional consequences.

The PCs might overlook things, overextend themselves, pass out, or make some other crucial error. On occasion, you might even temporarily seize control of a PC, driving them forward like a stolen car in search of some solace or relief. You can't make them make a stress move, but anything else is fair game!

.....  
*After Sofia calls for help, I decide to push on her stress: "Sofia, you're still **overwhelmed** with anxiety and grief. It's time for a stress move!"*

*Brendan grimaces. "What can I even do here? I'm not going to **dish out a beatdown** to Luna."*

*"Obviously! Maybe you could **lose yourself in a substance** while you wait...or call your lousy husband and **verbally shame** him on the phone?"*

*"No, I need to be here for her. No distractions."*

*Brendan's handing me a golden opportunity! I'm **a fan of Sofia**, so I need to incorporate her focus on Luna in my move, acting with my principles.*

*I decide to **lean on Sofia's secrets**: "All you can think of is Luna. You move her to the front room; better to have her there when help arrives. But you forgot that your daughter is home... '¡Mamá,' Ana shouts, 'what happened to Tía Luna?! Is she okay?'"*  
.....

## ADICCIONES Y TRATOS

Surprisingly, the rate of drug addiction and abuse in *México* is far below that of *Los Estados Unidos*. The cartels sell drugs domestically, but the lower demand (and poorer clients) means that there is always more money to be found shipping drugs across the border and selling them there. *Las drogas son para los gringos*.

• Cities like Tijuana—*ciudades fronterizas* flooded daily with meth, heroin, and cocaine bound for *El Norte*—are the places hardest hit by drug abuse. As the Americans tighten the border, the drugs pool on the Mexican side, their persistent presence a temptation for the young people working the drug trade or other low-paying jobs.

*México's* public services for the poor have always been insufficient, but the vast majority of rehab facilities are privately owned, putting them well beyond the reach of all but the wealthiest Mexicans. The government promised to expand treatment in 2009, but a lack of funding has kept them from delivering on that plan.

Like so many aspects of *México*, drug abuse is a paradox: the problem is manageable, but there are too few resources to manage it. *Los carteles* aren't going to fund such programs, and no one believes the government's empty promises.

Thus, most narcofiction leaves addiction at the margins of the story. *Al vivo la hogaza y al muerto, la mortaja*. People who are grappling with addiction need treatment—a slow process that lies outside the pace of a narcofiction narrative—while *los carteles* wrestle with each other for the right to profit from such tragedy.



## ENGAGING THE PCS

.....

The difference between a boring session and a great session for most players is whether or not they felt like their choices mattered. At some level, that's why **we are playing to find out what happens**: if you aren't pushing players down a scripted adventure, then every choice they make takes the story in a new direction.

But all the work you do behind the scenes is designed to make a session of **Cartel** feel like a natural story. It's actually easy to accidentally convince a group of players that everything all happened exactly as you planned, even though you simply followed your agendas and principles!

Engaging your players means incorporating their contributions to the story, but you must also play to the PCs' strengths (and weaknesses) in order to make them feel central. Create situations that demand they make real decisions that have fictional weight, then follow those decisions with consequences that reflect their choices.

Pay close attention, for example, to the moves the players choose. Can you push toward a situation in which *La Esposa* eats a meal with an NPC? Is there a reason that *La Sicaria* might need to use that sniper rifle? Play to the characters they create, *cabrón*; your players will love the drama!

## BEHIND EACH PLAYBOOK

Players telegraph their interests when they choose a playbook, and it's your job as the MC to give each player a chance to shine. Here are some tips for engaging each playbook, along with some playbook-focused questions you can ask each player during character creation.

### El Cocinero

The cook has many tools for dealing with *problemas*—and a high Grit for when he *pushes his luck*—but he can get isolated if there isn't enough for him to do. Come after *El Cocinero* with direct conflicts, familial and financial, and push on his *misterios* to put him in tough spots.

Lean into the clever plans and desperate gambles that *El Cocinero* proposes. He's got one foot in the world of *los narcos* and the other in a normal life; no matter how he spins things, the two realities will eventually collide.

Be generous with the presence of chemicals and tools in a scene if *El Cocinero* takes *Ciencia, Cabrón*; as long as he can find a janitor's closet or home cleaning supplies, he can whip up something to cause a distraction or explosion.

#### QUESTIONS FOR EL COCINERO:

- ▶ Why did you start cooking for the cartels?
- ▶ How did you learn to cook drugs at scale?
- ▶ Where do you tell people you work now?

### La Esposa

Try to ensure *La Esposa* ends up married to one of the PCs; the drama will take care of itself. If an NPC is needed, make it someone important and vulnerable. A major kingpin is good, but so is a crooked cop or deadly *sicario*. Whoever she is married to needs to have secrets. Many secrets.

Only rarely will you be able to bring all five of the elements of *La Familia* to bear in a session. Try to focus on two to three—a job, one of the kids, etc.—and leave the rest as background.

#### QUESTIONS FOR LA ESPOSA:

- ▶ How did you end up with your *familia*?
- ▶ How do you manage to hide your secrets?
- ▶ Where do you think your spouse works?

### El Halcón

*El Halcón* usually has lots to do, but bring his *pandilla* to bear early and often: the crew is a double-edged sword, useful in the right situations and trouble when they are out of their element. They can push *El Halcón* toward conflicts or reveal that he's in over his head when they don't take things seriously.

#### QUESTIONS FOR EL HALCÓN:

- ▶ Why do you work for the cartel?
- ▶ What are your regular tasks and duties?
- ▶ What do people think of your *pandilla*?

## El Narco

*El Narco* will often try to resolve problems through his NPC agents; encourage him to rely on the other PCs instead. Provide a few issues that require direct attention, especially when he has to take some risks to come out on top and in control. Don't let him get too comfortable!

Use his decisions for *la plaza* to inform the entire setting. In many ways, *El Narco* has decided—in and out of character—on the tenor of everyday life for *los narcos* in Durango...

### QUESTIONS FOR EL NARCO:

- ▶ How did you acquire your *plaza*?
- ▶ What happened to the previous *El Narco*?
- ▶ What have you promised to your *jefes*?

## La Polizeta

*La Polizeta*'s start of session move gets her mixed up with trouble every session, but remember to threaten her secrets too. As a dirty *federal*, she needs to feel pressure from both the cartels and the cops. She doesn't have a side she can trust.

Aggressively reincorporate everything *La Polizeta* includes through the Anti-Cartel Task Force. Those NPCs are primed to be opportunities and liabilities for all the PCs, not just her.

### QUESTIONS FOR LA POLIZETA:

- ▶ Why did you return to Durango?
- ▶ When did you start working for *los carteles*?
- ▶ What happened to your last partner?

## La Rata

*La Rata* has plenty of moves and abilities to stay out of the immediate crosshairs: make sure to point one or more of the PCs at her betrayal early in the game. She'll have more fun thwarting their investigation than being ignored.

Use the authorities to put pressure on *La Rata* as well, and offer meaningful help if she complies with what *los federales* want from her. If she drags her feet, make their demands more acute.

### QUESTIONS FOR LA RATA:

- ▶ Why did you decide to become a mole?
- ▶ How do you contact your handler?
- ▶ What do *los federales* need from you?

## La Sicaria

Put *La Sicaria* directly in harm's way. Always. It doesn't always have to be directed at her—she might be dropping off a package to *El Halcón* or protecting *La Esposa*—but give her opportunities to use her weapons to create mayhem and chaos.

At the same time, lean into her reputation as a ruthless killer. Sometimes people won't want to fight her; will she let them live or coldly take advantage of their cowardly weakness?

### QUESTIONS FOR LA SICARIA:

- ▶ How have you lived so long as a *sicaria*?
- ▶ Why did you retire from the business?
- ▶ Where did you go when you left?



## CREATING CONFLICTS

In many roleplaying games, PCs work to solve problems together. Let me be clear, *cabrón*: **Cartel** isn't like that! In **Cartel**, conflicts between player characters are a main way you can **keep the PCs' lives exciting**!

But creating these kinds of productive conflicts can be difficult. The moves do a lot of the heavy lifting, but here are some tips for ensuring the drama between PCs is fun and interesting for all:

### Explore Their Enlaces

Many of the ties between the PCs are painfully complicated relationships, tense arrangements just waiting to explode. Press on those *enlaces*, pushing the player characters into conflicts that draw upon their previous history together.

### Divide Their Loyalties

Even characters that start as allies can't trust each other in *la guerra contra el narco*. Sow doubt whenever possible by spreading rumors, leaning on secrets, and exposing weaknesses. PCs naturally push on each other, if they think there is something to be gained by pushing...

### Place NPCs Between Them

Your NPCs are the best tool for ensuring the players' characters are constantly in conflict; they can get in the way, take sides in an argument, or merely show up at the wrong time. Read more about using NPCs on page 142.

.....  
While filling out *enlaces*, Katherine decided her Rata, Luna, started sleeping with La Cocinera, Yolanda, a few weeks ago. In the second session, I frame a scene around that relationship; it gives me a chance to lean on all their deadly secrets!

"Luna, what does it look like when you two meet up? Does Yolanda come over to your apartment?"

"No," Katherine says, "I'm trying to keep this from getting serious. I think I'd want to meet at her place." I look to Sarah, Yolanda's player; she nods.

"Okay, let's cut to you two having a drink?" I want to **keep the PCs' lives exciting here**; no need to bore everyone with Luna arriving, saying hello to Yolanda, etc. "What does that look like?"

"I have some shitty beer," says Sarah, "So I think we're awkwardly sitting on the couch drinking?" Katherine laughs and agrees. Time for an MC move!

I wanted to **lean on a secret**, but I'm **playing to find out**. Exploring their *enlaces* helps me understand what moves will create tension! I decide that it's best to **disrupt their routine** instead:

"As you two are starting to get comfortable, you hear a loud knock on the door. You can see through the window from here, Yolanda; it's your cousin, Oscar, the one who works for los federales."

"Who is that?" Katherine asks.

"Are you trying to **get the truth** out of Yolanda?"

"Absolutely. I thought we would be alone!"

"Great! Roll with Hustle. Let's see if Yolanda is going to get to keep her secrets to herself!"  
.....

## PLAYER VS. PLAYER MOVES

Since the moves are player-facing—the players trigger them and resolve them—some MCs have trouble envisioning how player vs. player fiction works in the game. How can one player character **turn to violence** against another player character? Aren't they really **turning to violence** against each other simultaneously? And what about **pressuring** each other or **getting the truth**?

I've worked to ensure that all of the moves in **Cartel** function when players use them against each other, but here are some tips for making conflicts between PCs work in your game:

### Share the Spotlight

When two PCs trigger moves against each other, make them share the spotlight. One PC may start a conflict—**pressuring** the other or **turning to violence**—but the action must pass between them so everyone gets time in the spotlight. Remember to **be a fan**—no one character should dominate the conversation.

### Focus on Help or Interfere

**Helping** and **interfering** (page 54) are crucial tools during such conflicts. If one player attacks the other, the target can respond by **interfering**. They can distract their attacker, take cover, fight back: all attempts to reduce the strength of the attack are rolled up in **interfering**. Only once the original move is resolved does the target finally get a chance to act via their own moves!

.....  
*Beto, played by Derrick, got caught in a window screen breaking into Sofia's house, alerting her to his presence instead of sneaking up on her.*

*Brendan—Sofia's player—says, "I hit him with a lamp. I don't really want to kill him, but I need to defend myself!" He smirks and rolls to **turn to violence** with Savagery, getting a total of 11.*

*"Can I **interfere**?" Derrick asks*

*"Sure," I say, "What does that look like?"*

*"I roll out of the way, trying to avoid her blow."*

*"Sounds like one or two stress to me," I say.*

*"I'll wager two stress; I really don't want to get hurt here." Derrick rolls with a +2 for the stress he wagered and gets an 8! He marks the two stress, but he also lowers Brendan's roll to a 7-9 from 10+.*

*"I'll take **suffer little harm** and **avoid collateral damage** for my two options," Brendan says.*

*"Great. Beto, you see Sofia come at you with the lamp; you roll out of the way a bit...but she clubs you hard. Mark one more stress! What do you do?"*

*I'm turning the spotlight back to Beto. Sofia got to make her move, so now it's his turn to respond. Will he attack? Try to protect himself? Run? Cower?*

*Derrick says, "I yell, 'What the fuck, mujer?! I came here to protect you! Santiago is looking for you, and I didn't want to tip off anyone watching.'"*

*"You trying to **justify your behavior**?" I ask.*

*"Yeah, I definitely want her to think I'm on her side." He rolls with Face, but only gets a 7. I can already tell Brendan is going to **interfere**...*  
 .....

## INFO Y INVESTIGATION

**Cartel** is primarily a melodrama of social conflict, but players sometimes have questions about what information they have at hand. Here are some tips for how to handle questions your players may have about what they know:

### Give Them What They Need

There's no need to be stingy when there is little to no uncertainty. Tell players what they see, what they hear, what they know, without holding anything back. If you're not sure what information to include, then make a move: **announcing future danger** is always an option.

### Make them Push Their Luck

If someone is determined to get more info in a risky situation, make them **push their luck**. Sure, they can try to get close enough to a rival *sicario* to see what kind of gear he's carrying, but there's a risk they get spotted snooping around. Maybe it would be best to **size them up** instead?

### Honor Playbook Moves

Some playbooks have moves to investigate situations or people—**Mirar** (*La Sicaria*) or **Conectada** (*La Rata*). Give meaningful details when they are rolled, more than you would give to characters who don't have these moves. Why is *La Sicaria* so scary? Because she knows where you are...when you are still stumbling around in the dark. Get **Mirar**, *pendejo*, if you want such awesome power!

## DRAMATIC IRONY

Players often get info their character doesn't yet have. If *El Narco* is trying to kill *El Cocinero*, the cook's player is in a strange spot: he knows his life is on the line...but only out of character!

Encourage players to lean into dramatic irony—*El Cocinero* can try to **get the truth** out of *El Narco*—but enforce boundaries between player and character knowledge; the cook needs to have evidence he's in danger before he starts acting on the info the player has.

.....  
Gustavo is tracking down a sicaria, Alma, who is blackmailing him. He follows her home using a playbook move—**Seguir** (page 105)—late at night:

"Is she alone? Anyone else in the apartment?"

"Hard to say. There were no lights on when she walked in, but it's late. You got a move you're trying to trigger here, Gustavo? Maybe just **pushing your luck** by snooping around her place?"

Justin, Gustavo's player, nods. "Yeah, let's try it." He rolls with Grit +1 and gets a 7. Barely enough.

"You listen through her window; she's talking to her cat and probably alone. But before you can know for sure, the door to the apartment next door starts to open. Looks like someone might catch you!"  
.....

## KILLING PCs

In Chapter 3 (page 70), I discuss three different kinds of injuries PCs can suffer: **stress as harm**, **narrative harm**, and **getting fucking shot**. Stress cannot kill a character, but the other two forms of harm can finish off anyone, *muchacho*.

### Death from Narrative Harm

It's rare, but narrative harm can lead to a PC's death if it is clear the character **cannot** survive whatever harm is inflicted upon them. Maybe they got caught in an explosion or thrown off a skyscraper, but it must be obvious to everyone that the character's story has come to a close.

PCs almost always get an opportunity to **push their luck** to escape injuries inflicted by NPCs or the environment, and death only occurs on a miss in the most calamitous circumstances:

.....  
*While Luna recovers in the hospital, Santiago pays a nurse to poison her. I tell Katherine, Luna's player:*

*"You're eating lunch when you start to get fuzzy. You throw up, and the strange flavor of the gelatin suddenly makes sense: you've been poisoned!"*

*"I yell for help! **Pushing my luck?**" She rolls a miss. ¡Órale! I've got to **threaten her life!**" You get out of bed but collapse onto the ground. You're dying, cabrona, unless someone intervenes to save you..."*  
 .....

In all my years of running **Cartel**, I've never actually killed a PC through narrative harm. It's always more fun to leave the PC (barely) alive!

### Death by Getting Fucking Shot

The most common way for PCs to die is by **getting fucking shot** (page 71). If anyone—PC or NPC—shoots a PC, the victim has to make the move; if they miss, you tell them when they die. You don't have to kill the PC immediately, but don't leave them hanging for long, *güey!*

You must honor the move whenever a PC rolls it, so don't shoot a player character unless you're ready for the PC's story to come to a close right then and there. When NPCs shoot at a PC, feel free to instead inflict stress as the bullets fly, narrowly missing the scrambling PC...for now.

.....  
*Gustavo, played by Justin, is trying to kill a sicaria, Alma, by sneaking up on her in her apartment while she's sleeping. But...he misses while **pushing his luck**:*

*I announce future danger: "A gunshot shatters the silence. You see a smoking hole in the wall next to you. Alma says, 'You think I can't see you coming?'"*

*Justin decides to double down: "I want to move closer and shoot her! **Turning to violence**, right?"*

*I nod. He rolls another miss. Ouch. The obvious move is to **shoot him**, but I think about it first. If he dies, the ensuing drama between his boss—Santiago—and his wife—Sofia—would be pretty great...*

*Time to **shoot someone!** "You take two steps closer when you realize you have no idea where Alma is in the dark living room. The second gunshot doesn't miss, cabrón. You **get fucking shot!**"*  
 .....



## MANAGING ADVANCEMENT

**Cartel** characters advance when they fill their xp track or clear one of their keys (page 73). Usually players advance about once per session, giving them a few options to describe their characters' growth and development.

### Changes in the Fiction

Advancement is just one kind of change that can happen through play. If *El Halcón* recruits a *barrio* kid to join his *pandilla*, his gang gets one more *mafioso*; if *los narcos* blow up *los federales'* surveillance van, then it's gone...no matter what's on *La Polizeta's* sheet. Changes that happen in the fiction can affect the playbooks directly!

At the same time, changes that happen to the playbook through advancement must have a similar effect on the fiction. If *La Polizeta* takes *choose a new department toy*, then the MC works with the player to explain why the task force gets new gear; if *El Narco* resolves a *plaza problem*, then that problem is gone for good.

.....  
*Sofia, played by Brendan, advances and selects change 2 obligations de la familia. He decides to ramp up the family drama: he removes parish volunteer and starting a new business and adds elderly grandparent and pregnant. He suggests that Sofia takes a step back from her work outside the home when she discovers she's pregnant, just in time to take over caring for her elderly grandmother.*  
 .....

### Retiring to Safety

A player choosing for their PC to *retire to safety* has reached the end of that PC's story. Someone might find a way out in the fiction—perhaps *La Rata* finally gives *los federales* enough evidence to get out of Durango—but characters usually retire when a player chooses to advance out of the story.

Once a PC has retired to safety, they are beyond your reach. Work with the player to determine how (and when) the character escaped the drug war. If the PC is in a bad situation, they find a miraculous escape—even if the odds of survival were extremely low. The character's exit from the fiction is final. Once someone is out for good, there's no way to pull them back in...

### Changing Playbooks

If a player changes playbooks—through the advancement list or the events of play—they leave behind their old conflicts and get a new life. *El Cocinero* might become *El Narco*, leaving behind his lab for *la plaza*; *La Esposa* might become *La Rata*, betraying her *familia en todo!*

Tell the player to keep all the basics from their old playbook: moves, stats, gear, etc. Get rid of everything they lose in the fiction—*El Cocinero* probably gives up his lab to become *El Narco*, but *La Esposa* might keep her *familia* when she turns traitor—then take everything their new playbook gets to start. New moves, new gear, new Heat. Everything a new character gets, they get now.

# USING NPCs IN PLAY

While any story in **Cartel** is fundamentally about the player characters and their messy lives, one of the best ways to enact your agendas is using non-player characters (NPCs) to drive the action forward. Need someone to make a foolish decision that puts the PCs in danger? Or maybe you need a new threat to keep the tension high? NPCs always fit the bill.

## CREATING NPCs

Creating NPCs in **Cartel** is simple: when you introduce a new character, give them a name, and describe them to the players. That's it, *cabrón!*

*After Luna collapses in her living room, Sofia decides to call a doctor she knows who works at her nonprofit. Since we've never seen this character before, I give him a name—Rodrigo—and offer Brendan, Sofia's player, a few details: "He's late 50s, very dedicated to the anti-drug work you do. His daughter died of an overdose a few years ago. He's handsome, but often disheveled and exhausted."*

As you create NPCs, think about how they relate to each other, what they might be hiding (and how you can **fill their lives with secrets**), and what resources they have to deal with problems. But don't share too much all at once! Give the players time to get to know the characters first.

## NPC DRIVES

When you've got a moment to add depth to your NPCs, give them **drives**, core motives that move them to self-interested action. A rival *sicario* probably has a drive like *avenge my murdered brother*; an innocent businesswoman might have a drive like *avoid trouble at all costs*. Most drives are custom fit to the NPC, but there's a list of common drives on the MC worksheet as well.

*As Brendan thinks about what he wants from Rodrigo, I consider Rodrigo's drive. Since he is committed to anti-drug work, I decide Rodrigo's drive is **honor the legacy of my late daughter**. He's trying hard to make up for what he's lost...*

When NPCs are presented with a challenge or opportunity, think about how their drive impacts their view of the situation. If the drive leads them to take immediate action, they will, but if their drive doesn't immediately suggest a concrete strategy, they need to be pressured by another character before jumping in to the fray.

*Sofia explains the situation on the phone: "My sister collapsed at my house. I think she's really hurt!" Rodrigo doesn't need to hear anything else; he can **honor his late daughter** by saving Luna's life!*

## NPC INSTINCTS

**Cartel** is a *rápido* game, one in which scenes and situations can turn ugly faster than you think. As you assign drives to NPCs, also give them **instincts**, gut-level reactions they will take when confronted with danger and uncertainty.

These instincts are one way you can declaim responsibility for your NPCs, committing them to a particular way of handling trouble, even if it makes life difficult (or easy!) for the PCs.

.....  
*I decide Rodrigo's instinct is simple: **contact the authorities**. Since he's not a narco or a cop, Rodrigo is going to default to looking for any authority figure to deal with situations that are out of the ordinary, scary, or dangerous.*

*When Rodrigo arrives at Sofia's and looks at Luna's injuries, he is distraught. Sofia didn't tell Rodrigo that Luna had been shot! His instinct to **contact the authorities** kicks in, and sets me up to **offer Sofia a difficult compromise**:*

*"He says, 'Señora, these are serious injuries. I need to call an ambulance—and the police—to take her to the hospital. She will live, but I can't treat her here.' He looks frightened, but resolute."*

.....  
 As with drives, there is a list of common instincts on the MC worksheet. That said, most civilian NPCs probably default to *contact the authorities*, and most low-level *narcos* or cops instinctually know to *consult the boss* when they encounter strange situations or unexpected trouble.

## PC-NPC-PC TRIANGLES

NPCs in **Cartel** live by their drives and follow their instincts when possible, but don't make them one-dimensional *pendejos*. They are people, *cabron*, often complicated and contradictory. They will seem far more real if you allow them to surprise both you and the player characters.

One way you can develop your NPCs is to show several PCs a different side of the same NPC, creating a PC-NPC-PC triangle in which two (or more) PCs have fundamentally different relationships with the same NPC. Such relationships can develop in play, but you can also introduce them when you add a new NPC.

.....  
*Since Rodrigo is a new NPC, I think about other PCs that might know him. I decide he probably knows Yolanda (La Cocinera) from when she worked at the local hospital, **grounding the story in Durango** by connecting them through local institutions.*

*I declaim responsibility for specifics, though. I say to Sarah, Yolanda's player, "You know Rodrigo from your work as a pharmacist. Why do you hate him?"*

*"Oh...maybe he was the one who got me fired? Yeah, he caught me selling stuff to Beto."*

*¡Perfecto! Sofia trusts Rodrigo completely, but Yolanda hates him! We'll see where this goes...*

.....  
 The tension in a PC-NPC-PC triangle doesn't need to be immediately explosive; the fact that the NPC is complicating the PCs' relationships with each other will almost always yield drama.

## NO HAY FRONTERAS

In 2009, Mexican authorities arrested Santiago Meza Lopez, accusing him of melting down over 300 bodies for the Sinaloa Cartel. Lopez was known as “*El Pozolero*”—The Stewmaker—but he started with *los carteles* doing construction when he was only nineteen. Two decades later, he begged for forgiveness and defended himself by noting his victims “were already dead.” If he didn’t melt them down, surely someone else would have?

*La guerra contra el narco* has a funny way of pushing you past whatever boundaries you may set for yourself. When you start, you think you know your own limits, but the lines get blurry. Would you kill to save your own skin? Steal from people you know will have you killed? Melt some *narco* down in an oil barrel with toxic *químicos*? You don’t know yet. *Tú no sabes, muchacho.*

*Los carteles*, like any organized crime syndicate, are filled with people trying to live with the compromises they have made. Some are *monstruos*, but most are futilely struggling to compartmentalize their realities, dividing their lives from the violence of their work. You might believe yourself to be better, but which *diablos* within you would you let loose on the world to avoid losing everything and everyone?

None of us can look too long at our own failures; we must let them sit separately from our successes and triumphs. *Una cosa es una cosa, y otra cosa es otra cosa.* You can’t mix up the two, *amigo*, or you will find yourself lost in your own selfish regrets, hesitating just when you need to take decisive action to save your own skin.

## NPCS AND STRESS

Like PCs, NPCs can mark stress to turn down a deal that’s been **proposed** by a PC or avoid going along when a PC **pressures** them. But NPCs can only mark one or two stress before they fall apart or make terrible decisions:

- **1-stress:** visibly shaken, angry, paranoid, afraid of/angry at whatever caused the stress.
- **2-stress:** exhausted and forlorn, unwilling to confront opposition, quick to turn to escape.
- **3-stress:** complete breakdown, will violate social norms to get away or get what they want.
- **4-stress:** catatonic, unresponsive, or lost. Will break rules/laws/norms without warning.

Whenever you mark stress for an NPC, make it clear and obvious to the players. They need to know that the NPC is pushing forward with some effort—or about to turn and flee:

.....  
*Yolanda rolled a hit while **pressuring** Diego to give up on kidnapping her (page 130). I’m going to **treat everyone as expendable and suspicious** here: I think Diego is willing to call this bluff, figuring Santiago won’t miss his cook too much. I mark a stress next to Diego’s name on my MC worksheet; he’s going to react poorly...*

*“Yolanda, Diego snarls and strikes you across the face. ‘Shut up! I’m in charge here! I’m not scared of you or Santiago.’ He looks furious...”*  
.....



## WHEN NPCs ATTACK

Sooner or later, your NPCs will decide it's time to hurt (or even kill) one of the PCs. You can **escalate a situation to violence** whenever it's appropriate—keeping in mind your agendas and principles—even if that violence is lethal.

One way to invoke violence is to make a softer move—“Santiago's enforcers have spotted you!”—and let the PCs respond. If they try to get away or take cover, that's **pushing their luck**; if they try to **propose a deal** or **pressure** the NPCs with threats of violence, that's fine too. On a miss, you get to make as hard a move as you like.

.....  
*Since Diego has decided he's still going to kidnap Yolanda, I say, “Diego points at you: ‘You're coming with me, chica. One way or the other. Now.’”*

*Sarah, Yolanda's player, doesn't miss a beat: “I trigger the smoke bomb I made and roll it toward Diego and his goons. **Pushing my luck**, right?” I nod. She rolls, but the total is only a 5. A miss!*

*“The juryrigged device hits the ground and explodes, throwing smoke everywhere.” I'm **turning her move against her—but not speaking its name**. “You stumble backwards, coughing, as Diego emerges from the smoke. He grabs you and slams you up against the wall...”*  
.....

On the other hand, if the PCs **turn to violence**, they *exchange harm as established*; the NPCs get to take their shot too. The PCs have to choose *suffer little harm* to avoid the worst of it.

## NPC Injuries

When you're dealing with harm to NPCs, keep in mind how vulnerable humans are to violence. Any weapon more dangerous than a knife is going to end someone's life...and a knife gets the job done anytime a player chooses *inflict terrible harm* when they **turn to violence** against an unprepared or exposed target.

In short, when an NPC takes enough harm to die, they die. An especially tough *sicario* wearing a vest might be able to take a bullet or two, but a blast from a rocket launcher ought to finish the job *por completo*. **Cartel** is about the consequences of violence, not gun battles.

.....  
*Yolanda isn't giving up. She says, “I'm close to my workbench. Can I grab a heavy tool and hit him?”*

*“Yeah, sure. You've probably got a wrench. **Turn to violence** against him.” I could make her **push her luck** to grab the wrench, but I'm **awarding her an advantage** as a fan of her character. Sarah gets an 8.*

*“I want to **inflict terrible harm and suffer little harm**. I'll mark the stress; I don't care about **collateral damage** right now.”*

*“You swing the wrench into the side of his head, catching him right in the temple. Blood sprays all over you, and he falls backward on to the floor.”*  
.....

If an NPC survives a serious injury, they need acute medical attention *ahora mismo*! If they can't get to a doctor within a scene or two, that's it.

# THE FIRST SESSION

The first session of any game is tough, *güey*. Your *pinches* players only have to pick their playbooks and make characters. You've got to **create a convincing version of the drug war that keeps the characters' lives exciting while playing to find out what happens**. And you haven't even met their characters yet!

Here's the trick: while the players take the time to start to figure out who they are playing, you're going to get everything rolling right out the gate—without any planning at all. ¡Órale!

## MATERIALS Y PREP

Before you start actually playing, print out all the playbooks you're going to offer and review their moves and extras. You don't have to offer every playbook—maybe you want to avoid dealing with *los federales*, so you leave out *La Polizeta*. Regardless, print out enough basic move sheets for the players and a copy of the MC worksheet and basic moves for yourself.

And read this whole book, *cabrón*. You can skim *Los Narcos* (page 77), but the rest of the chapters are vital reading, especially *La Guerra Antidrogas* (page 15), which covers everything you need to fill your game with solid *amigos*, *enemigos*, and *los problemas del narco*. You're going to be hard-pressed to create a believable world if you know nothing about the drug war.

## GETTING STARTED

Once your players show up to play, explain the setting and introduce the playbooks. Here's how I like to start things off with new players:

- I open by giving a general content warning for **Cartel** and explaining the safety tools (page 13) we use while playing the game. I then relay the *tres cuentos* (page 8) from the beginning of this book, focusing on the drug war's lies, money, and violence.
- Next, I introduce the playbooks, starting with *El Narco*—introducing *la plaza*—and ending with the playbooks further outside the cartel, like *La Esposa*. For each playbook, I emphasize the play experience that the playbook best facilitates during a session.
- While the players fill out their playbooks, I try to give them space to read and think. I answer questions as needed, but mostly stay out of the way. Once everyone is ready, I ask players to introduce their characters.
- After all the players finish their introductions, we review the *llaves* they chose and build the relationship map by selecting *enlaces*. Then we're ready to play!

## ASKING PROBING QUESTIONS

As the players introduce their characters, I get started asking probing questions, looking for interesting spots that I can bring into the session. I've listed a few of the probing questions I use for each playbook earlier in this chapter (page 135), but those lists are by no means exhaustive. Make up your own questions, *muchacho*, based on whatever drama your players are giving you!

*Jahmal just finished making his El Narco, Don Santiago (page 78). After Jahmal is finished introducing his character to the other players, I've got a few questions about Don Santiago:*

*"You said you have lots of problems in your plaza: robberies, a mole, a war with Los Zetas. What kind of precautions do you take to keep yourself safe?"*

*Jahmal nods and says, "My enforcers recruit heavily, so I've got a medium gang. I probably have someone with me pretty much all the time."*

*"What do they look like? No training, right?"*

*"No, no training. I buy them suits, so they look like professionals, even if they are untrained."*

*"And what about your house? Do you display your extravagant wealth there as well?"*

*"Absolutely," says Jahmal. "It's huge. A mansion."*

All of this seems banal, but it builds the fiction, creating the bits of the world that make it feel real. Once your players have offered you details, include them—fancy houses, luxury suits, dumb bodyguards—to reinforce a shared narrative.

## REVIEWING LLAVES

Players choose keys based on the conflicts they find appealing; I also review everyone's *llaves* to flag those situations for myself and other players.

*"Which llaves did you pick for Santiago, Jahmal?"*

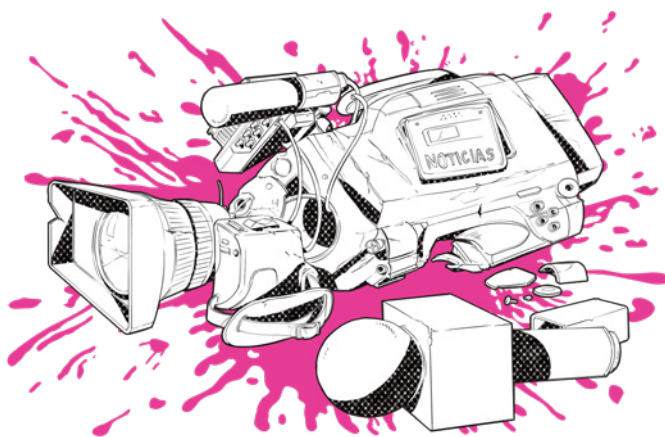
*"Dirty Hands and Family. I get an xp when I personally take care of problems or violate my family's boundaries to protect them," Jahmal says.*

*"Everyone knows you're hands on with business?"*

*"Yes! Folks know I like to sort things out myself."*

*Santiago will have plenty of problems—he can decide when to get involved—but I'll need to plan ahead to include family members with boundaries...*

I try to give each player a chance to hit at least one key in the first session. I'm still **playing to find out**, but I'm thinking through the elements that need to be in play—family? money?—for the player to hit their keys early and often!



## DURING THE FIRST SESSION

After character creation is done, I usually call for a break. It usually takes me about an hour to get through the creation process—longer sometimes if I’ve got a lot of new players—and it’s a nice stopping point before we get going.

During the break, I think about all the ways that the characters are wrapped up in each other, and where I can push on them while following my agendas, principles, and moves. Is there a fragile relationship? Maybe an old grudge? Is someone keeping a secret badly?

I also think about the length of the story we’re telling. If this is a single session game, I’m going to come out of the gate swinging, hoping to put the PCs in danger right away. But if we’re planning on playing multiple sessions together, I’ll look to build the tension more slowly:

.....  
*“Since we’re planning on playing a few sessions of **Cartel** together, I want to start by reminding you all that we’re playing to find out what happens. I don’t have anything explicitly planned, but I know we’ll have fun because you’re all interesting characters with interesting lives. We’ll start by just following you around on a normal day, and we’ll see what sort of drama comes up for you all...”*  
 .....

Once things start, I’m going to rely on the principles and moves, pushing toward my agendas as hard as I can. The PCs—with all their problems and lies—have to keep up!

## Creating Starting Scenes

If you’re stuck trying to think of a starting scene, focus on the *enlaces* your players chose when creating their characters. Many of them are easy entries into a scene that involves two PCs (or more) and some meaningful tension:

.....  
*“Yolanda, I know that you disapprove of Beto’s work with the cartel. How about a scene where you try to get him to leave this work behind?”*  
 .....

This scene framing won’t limit the focus of the first scene. Yolanda may start out going to Beto’s apartment to try to convince him to quit working for the cartel, but new conflicts will arise as I make moves in accordance with my principles.

## Invoking the Moves

Throughout the first session, call out moves when players make them—“That sounds like you’re trying to **pressure** him, Yolanda”—and offer help when players get close to making moves but don’t quite get there—“You could **verbally shame or abuse** Marisol to clear that stress if you want...”

Even experienced players may not fully grasp the mechanics in the first session! It’s up to you to get the economy of the game going, pushing on players to take interesting actions (the moves!) while also building out your version of Durango with opportunities based on the fiction you all created together at the start of the session.



## TEACHING THE GAME

As you go through the session, it's likely you'll end up teaching the game, either because your players have never played this kind of roleplaying game before or because **Cartel** is new to them. Here are some tips for helping folks get up to speed *pronto*:

### Pace Your Explanations

Between the basic moves, stress moves, Heat moves, and more...it can feel like you've got to cover everything at once. Don't overwhelm them, *cabrón*! Give them enough information to make characters, then explain things as you go.

For example, you may feel a need to explain all the basic moves before you start playing. That could take thirty or forty minutes! Instead, just go over how things generally work and discuss the moves in detail as players trigger them. By the end of the session, your players will be pros.

### Model Good Behavior

Your players are all *chido y awesome*, right? The best folks you can find! But that doesn't make them awesome *players*...yet. Be patient and generous. Let them make mistakes, and don't rush them when they need time to think.

Above all else, model great play! Talk as the NPCs in a scene; use the X-Card when things are going down a bad path; act as an engaged audience when two PCs are talking to each other in character; happily incorporate and reincorporate the players' contributions!

## ENDING THE FIRST SESSION

As the first session comes to a close, think hard about what's coming next:

- If it's a one session game, it's time to ramp things up. Push the players to the breaking point by exposing their secrets, wrecking their routines, and placing them in direct danger. Anything that doesn't appear in the story by the end doesn't appear at all!
- If you've got more sessions in store, make sure there's enough tension that players can see where the next session might go. Keep some of your powder dry, *güey*, but give them a taste of the chaos to come...
- Either way, do your best to put the players in conflict with each other instead of just putting them in conflict with NPCs. Look for places where the PCs disagree or have divided loyalties, and highlight that conflict. Everything in **Cartel** takes on a whole new light when PCs face off against each other.
- Finally, don't forget to debrief. Take some time after the session to talk about your favorite moments (stars!) and things you're looking forward to next time you play (wishes). You might even ask what NPCs the players liked the most, just to make sure those same NPCs show up next time...

# THE LONG EXAMPLE

What follows is an extended example that draws upon all the material in this book, calling out MC moves and principles throughout, as well as notes on how I think about the emerging conflicts.

The example starts in the third session of an ongoing game of **Cartel**, featuring four PCs:

- ▶ **El Halcón:** Beto—man, quick eyes, street clothes—a kid who badgered Mina into giving him new responsibilities. Played by Derrick.
- ▶ **El Narco:** Santiago—man, warm eyes, luxury clothes—a ruthless *jefe* whose *plaza* is slowly spiraling out of control. Played by Jahmal.
- ▶ **El Polizeta:** Gustavo—man, clever eyes, plain clothes—a corrupt cop trying to play both sides of the law. Played by Justin.
- ▶ **La Sicaria:** Mina—woman, quiet eyes, casual clothes—a deadly cartel assassin...and the daughter of Santiago. Played by Marissa.

Last session, Gustavo shot and killed one of Don Santiago's trusted *tenientes*, **Rosario**; Santiago responded by sending his enforcers out to grab Gustavo and bring him to Santiago's *casa*. I'm happy to let them tangle here; no need to intervene when they are already **disrupting each other's routines**.

I frame the scene, terse and direct:

*"Your enforcers sit Gustavo down in a chair in front of you, Santiago. He's handcuffed, and you can see they've roughed him up a bit. What do you do?"*

*"I take a second to look at him," says Jahmal. "I want to know what the hell happened to Rosario."*

*I jump in: "That sounds like a serious question. You trying to **get the truth** out of him?"*

*Jahmal's got a shitty Hustle—no one ever tells el jefe the truth—but he gets lucky on his roll and scores a 9 overall. Gustavo can't interfere with the roll (a -2 would still leave Santiago with a 7), so I tell Jahmal to pick an option off the list. "I think I'll take **can't confuse me with falsehoods**."*

*"Great. Okay, Gustavo, you can't outright lie, but you can still **stonewall** or **mislead him** by omitting something crucial from your explanation."*

*Justin smiles. "I'll stonewall: 'You've got a rata in your organization, Santiago. That should be your focus right now. Forget about Rosario.'"*

*"Sounds like you're trying to **pressure him** into dropping the issue?" I say. Justin nods. He rolls—his Hustle is a +2—and gets a 12. Santiago has to mark a stress or go along with Gustavo for now.*

*Jahmal says, "Fuck that. I mark the stress."*

*I notice that Santiago's just filled in his fifth stress. Now I can force a stress move if there's a lull in the action. I'm patient, though. No need to rush.*

Santiago has had enough. Jahmal says, “I get out my gun and shout at Gustavo. ‘Why did you kill Rosario? Was she the mole, pendejo?’”

He’s already made his move to **get the truth** once, so there’s no roll here; Gustavo can’t lie, but he can keep stonewalling or misleading.

“No, not her,” Justin replies, and Jahmal grimaces. That wasn’t what he wanted to hear.

“I was hoping you would tell me the mole was the person in my employ you already shot.”

“I can’t talk now,” says Justin. “Gustavo looks around at the guards and staff. ‘Not here.’”

I jump in again. I want to keep the conversation moving; they might hit a dead end here if Gustavo refuses to give any more information.

“Gustavo, it sounds to me like you are trying to **justify your behavior** here. That sound right?”

“Yes!” Justin rolls...and gets a 6, not enough. No way El Narco is buying the mysterious rata story.

I say, “One of Santiago’s goons punches you. Hard. Mark a stress.” The situation is bad, and I’m **inflicting stress** to keep the pressure on Gustavo.

But I can’t resist taking advantage of Santiago’s stress track. “Santiago, I think it’s time for a stress move.” I’m **speaking to the character here**—not the player—reminding him of the building stress.

Justin frowns. Santiago would usually have to establish some dominance over him before **dishing out a beatdown**, but Gustavo is already handcuffed.

Jahmal picks up the dice. “I think I’ve heard just about enough out of you, cabrón!”

The tension in the scene is so thick I’d need a sledgehammer to break it apart...which means it’s the perfect time to cut away to the other players! I ask Jahmal to hold off on rolling the dice, so we can crosscut to Mina and Beto.

At the end of last session, Santiago told Mina to deal with the thieves who robbed a cartel processing center. Mina called Beto to come along as her driver. The two of them found the gang and placed an improvised explosive device (IED) in the robbers’ van while the thieves slept off the party they had with *El Narco*’s money.

I frame the second scene, slow and careful:

.....  
“You two spot someone approaching. You’re out of sight, but you hear people opening doors. The van’s engine turns over, and you see the lights come on. Looks like they are headed out. What do you do?”

“We follow,” Marissa says. “My father wanted us to send a message, so I want people to see what happens to people who steal from us.”

“Great. If you’re trying to follow them without being seen, I think it sounds like you’re **pushing your luck** a bit, here. That make sense to you, Beto?”

“Yeah. I’m keeping my distance, but...” He rolls and misses—snake eyes! Even Mina can’t help.

I smile. Time to **announce future danger**.

“Things are going smoothly...until you hit a parked car. The car behind you screeches to a halt. The thieves get out of the van, looking around. They look alert but haven’t spotted you.” I’m **making my move, but not speaking its name**.

## NPCs IN GROUPS

There are no special rules in **Cartel** for dealing with groups of combatants. If *La Sicaria* gets in a shootout with three NPCs, she has to find a way to deal with all three of them, perhaps **turning to violence** four or five times.

That said, groups of NPCs should rarely stick around if they are losing a fight to a dangerous antagonist. The default instinct (page 143) for most *narcos* is “consult the boss” not “fight these PCs until I die.”

Marissa grimaces. “Not perfect, but it will have to do. I hit the trigger on the remote for the IED.”

Whoa. I hold up my hand. “You sure about that? This is a crowded area. You’re certain there will be civilians caught in the blast.”

“Yup. Cost of doing business for my father. I’m **turning to violence**.” She rolls with Savagery +2 and gets a 12. “I’ll take **inflict terrible harm, suffer little harm, and resist marking stress**.”

Big moment to **be a fan of her character**; Mina set up the bomb, and now she’s pulling the trigger. No reason to pull punches here when she’s seizing the spotlight. “The thieves don’t see it coming. At least one of them is consumed by the blast...leaving his buddy stumbling around in the wreckage of their van. The street is filled with debris and screaming.”

I turn to Derrick. He says, “Wow?” I nod.

“Yeah, mark a stress, Beto.” I want to show the difference between these two characters; **inflicting stress on Beto helps draw the distinction clearly!**

“I get my assault rifle out of the trunk,” Marissa says. “I gotta finish them off. I’ll take my body armor too. I start with the guy stumbling around. I still roll to **turn to violence**, right?” I nod. She gets a 5. Ay.

I think about just having the thief get away before Mina can shoot him. Maybe that’s a way to **threaten Mina’s interests**. But it feels like Mina’s just gonna follow him and kill him. He isn’t scary! I’ve got to ramp things up to really **threaten her**.

“You cut him down. With all the smoke, you’re not even sure he saw you. But then you hear someone shouting. In English. Behind you.”

“¡No chingues!” Marissa says. “The thieves are dead, right?” I nod. “I turn around then. Who is it?”

“It’s an American. She’s holding a cup of coffee and a 9mm...with a badge slung around her neck. She looks stunned. DEA, maybe? You speak English?” Marissa shakes her head. “Cool. You can see the blown-out coffeeshop behind her. She must have been getting her coffee when you set off the bomb.”

I’m **turning Mina’s move back on her**, giving her what she wants...and the attention that goes with it. I’m **grounding the story in Durango** too, pointing out that this agent is an outsider, unable to even communicate with Mina directly in Spanish.

Marissa says, “Drop it, puta.” I motion at her gun with my assault rifle, still ready to shoot.”

“Sounds like you’re **pressuring her**. Make the roll.”



*The dice are cruel: another miss. I wanted Mina to succeed—to humiliate the agent and walk away—but I stay true to the fiction. If Mina's not convincing her, then it's time to **embrace the language of la guerra antidrogas and shoot Mina**. "The gringa doesn't hesitate. She pulls the trigger; you feel the impact of a bullet. Looks like you **got fucking shot!**"*

*Marissa laughs. "Okay! It's a handgun, and I have armor on, so that's +2 to **getting fucking shot?**" She rolls a total of 7. She'll live! "Whew! I want it to be **messy and bloody**, I think. I need medical attention and it's going to leave a scar."*

*"Sounds good." I turn back to Derrick. "You just saw that gringa shoot your sicaria. Mina drops to the ground. You're not sure if she's dead or alive."*

*"Fuck! Is the shooter paying attention to me?"*

*I'm gonna **award Beto an advantage** here. "Not yet. She's approaching Mina's body. You gonna bolt?"*

*"No! I'm gonna hit her with my fucking car. **Turn to violence?**" I laugh and nod. Derrick gets an 8 on the roll. "I think I'll take **inflict terrible harm and avoid collateral damage**. I suffer whatever harm she throws at me and take the stress from the move."*

*"You gun the engine and race towards her. She turns and opens fire—mark a stress as the bullets shatter your windshield—but your bumper cuts her down before she can get off a clean shot. You see her crumple under the vehicle with a crunch—mark another stress. A la verga. What do you do?"*

*"We gotta get out of here before more cops show up. I get out of the car and grab Mina..."*

Whew. That was intense. I call for a break, both to give everyone a chance to process what just happened...and to give me some time to think about how to bring the PCs together. These two competing threads are great, but I'm always looking for opportunities to refocus the story.

It hits me that Santiago would probably care about his daughter getting shot. Since he and Mina have unresolved conflicts around the death of Santiago's mother—Mina's *abuela*—a scene between the two of them might be awesome.

I turn to Derrick before framing the scene:

.....  
*"Do you think you might call Santiago for help?"*

*Derrick nods. "Yeah, that's perfect. I'm way in over my head here. I'll call him while I drive."*

*"No!" Marissa says. "We can't trust him. I want to **pressure Beto** to keep him from calling my dad."*

*"Okay, what does that look like?" I say.*

*"I say, "Take me to the vet. Don't call anyone."*

*I nod; Marissa rolls. It's a 7. Just barely enough.*

*Before I say anything, Derrick jumps in. "Can I interfere here? I can wager my last stress."*

*"Sure. What do you say back to her?"*

*"Fuck that! I'm not keeping el jefe in the dark."*

*Derrick rolls a 4, not enough to reduce her roll. He marks the stress; I decide to **award Mina an advantage** as a result of the miss: Beto's gun.*

*"Mina's resolve is steady. And worse, you can see she got her hands on your gun when you got in the car. Looks like she's calling the shots..."*

I think a scene between Mina and Santiago would be great, but I'm **playing to find out what happens**. No need to shove a conflict down anyone's throat! We might get there later anyway...

In the meantime, I turn to Jahmal and Justin:

.....  
"When we left off, you were about to...**dish out a beatdown** to Gustavo? Is that right, Santiago?"

"Oh, yes! I'm gonna rough him up while I've got him cuffed." Jahmal rolls, but gets a 6. A miss!

I remind Justin he can't **help** or **interfere** with a stress move and start to think about my own move.

**Dish out a beatdown** says "the violence gets out of hand" on a miss, so I've got a lot of options. If Gustavo was an NPC, I'd probably just have Santiago kill him, leaving El Narco with one fewer informant and one more dead body. But Gustavo is a PC; I've got to **keep his life exciting** too, and I'm acting against that agenda if he dies right here.

I decide to **lean on Santiago's secrets**: "You start hitting El Polizeta, and the next thing you know, one of your sicarias—Alma—is pulling you off of him. You're still livid with rage; you don't feel any better at all. All you hear is the slow trickle of blood into the carpet and Gustavo's ragged breathing.

"We fade to black here," I continue. "But before the shot goes dark, we can see Santiago's wife, Andrea, in the shadows around the corner. She's clutching a rosary, and we know she heard everything." I'm **filling the characters' lives with secrets**, including burdening NPCs with terrible knowledge!

I pivot back to Derrick and Marissa:

.....  
"You're driving, Beto? **Fleeing a messy crime scene?**"

Derrick groans. There's no question it's messy: a car bomb, multiple gunshots, and...a hit and run. El Halcón has Heat +0, but he's gonna have to roll with Heat +1 because he's fleeing with La Sicaria.

He gets lucky: a miss. ¡Órale! I say, "You hear some sirens, but you're on the road before they know where you are. Should we cut to the vet?"

They both nod. Fine by me! I have **made the authorities a persistent presence**, and the miss means we can move on quickly to the next scene.

"Beto, you pull into a strip mall with the vet Mina told you about: the rundown sign out front says 'Fido's' and signs in the window and on the door advertise vaccine shots. What do you do?"

"How does Mina look? Can she take it from here?"

I decide to **demand Beto play his part**: "She looks bad, cabrón. There's blood all over her shirt, and her eyes are fluttery. She needs help getting in."

"Shit. Okay...I park the car and get her inside."

"Cool. The waiting room is empty, just a receptionist holding a cat; her eyes widen as you enter."

"I sit Mina down and say, 'My friend needs help. Now. We can pay.' I think I'm **proposing a deal**."

I nod, and Derrick rolls. Only a 6. Marissa says, "I want to **help**. I draw my gun and wave it at her."

I think about letting Mina **help**, but we've already established that she was badly injured. Gotta **say what honesty demands**: "Sorry, chica. Beto's on his own. You're too fucked up to threaten anyone."

*I think about my move and decide to **declaim decision making**: “You ever been to this vet before, Mina?” If so, they probably take her in; I’ll **offer Beto a difficult compromise**. If not, then maybe I **turn his move back on him** and call the police.*

*“Yeah. They’ve patched me up once before.”*

*“Okay, cool. She nods, and heads to the back to get Dr. Ruiz.” I’m **naming the doctor**, thinking about **her drive**—“keep the clinic open”—and **her instinct**—“always give an honest assessment.”*

*“Dr. Ruiz comes out with a technician. She takes one look at Mina and starts barking orders to her staff. She turns to you, Beto: ‘This woman is dying,’ she says. ‘I can stabilize her, but she needs to go to a hospital later or she will die. Got it?’” Derrick nods.*

*“I’m calling Santiago,” Derrick says.*

*“The fuck?” says Marissa. “I thought we agreed not to call him when I **pressured you** in the car.*

*“Sure, but you’re fucking dying. What if this goes bad? I’m not getting blamed for your death!”*

*“Sounds like the situation has changed, Mina,” I say. “Santiago, as you’re washing Gustavo’s blood off your hands, your phone rings. It’s Beto.”*

*“Hola, Beto. Did you find the thieves?”*

*“We did,” says Derrick, “but things got out of hand. Mina got shot. It’s pretty bad. Real bad.”*

*I interject: “Sounds like you’re **justifying your behavior**.” Derrick nods, and rolls. 12!*

*“I’ll take the xp,” says Jahmal. “Where are you?”*

*I look to Derrick. Up to him to say or not.*

*“Yeah, I tell him. Lying isn’t going to help me!”*

*I don’t waste any time. Right to the action:*

*“When you arrive at the vet, Santiago, Mina’s in a back room. She’s pale, a bandage over her chest.”*

*“What happened, hija?” Jahmal asks.*

*“Can I **size him up** before I answer?” I nod; she’s been worked on by the vet, so she’s awake. She rolls and gets an 8! “I’ll take **how could I get you to tell me what happened to Mamá Victoria?**”*

*Jahmal is quick: “If you told me you can’t trust me until you know what happened, I’d tell you.”*

*Marissa smiles. “Got it! I say, ‘I’m not telling you anything. I’ll do your dirty work, but I can’t trust you until you tell me what happened to Mamá Victoria.’”*

*“You want to know?” Jahmal says. “Okay, fine! She wanted me dead, so I got her first. And I was hoping that you and I wouldn’t have these kind—”*

*Marissa cuts him off: “I shoot him. I’ve still got Beto’s gun.” Both Jahmal and I are totally stunned! But I can’t stop Mina; I’m **playing to find out!***

*Marissa rolls...and gets a 7. But Santiago’s stress track is full; he can’t **interfere**. She says, “I **inflict terrible harm and avoid collateral damage**.”*

*Jahmal rolls with a +1—it’s a handgun—to **get fucking shot**...but gets snake eyes. End of the line.*

*“The gunshot is deafening. Santiago, you stumble backward, blood spilling out of the bullet holes. What do you do with these final moments?”*

*Jahmal shakes his head. “I look at Mina and say, ‘...these kind of problems, hija. These kind...’ and then I fall to the floor in a heap...”*

# CHAPTER SIX

## EL ÁGUILA Y LA SERPIENTE





## TAN LEJOS DE DIOS

The Mexican flag features imagery from Aztec legend: an eagle consuming a snake while resting upon a cactus. The gods told the Aztec to establish their capital, Tenochtitlan—now Mexico City—where they found such a majestic bird locked in battle with a deadly serpent. The Mexican flag depicts this moment with a sense of national pride, the eagle a symbol of just victory over slithering, poisonous evils.

North of the border, however, *México* is cast as the fallen snake, the infectious corruption spreading from the south—via immigration, smuggling, and economic disruption—to weaken the American ideal. In the minds of some, America is the noble eagle, battling the violent, serpentine narcostate to the south. But Mexicans know what *los gringos* have forgotten: the cartels may be slippery foes, but *Los Estados Unidos* has never hesitated to break the rules to take what it wants from *México*.

This special edition chapter expands on the **Cartel** corebook to add American interests and law enforcement to the game, including:

- ▶ **Más Historia:** This chapter opens with a deep dive into Mexico's relationship with the US, focusing on the conflicts that shaped Mexico (page 160) and the American agencies of the drug war (page 164).
- ▶ **Los Gringos:** Including *los americanos* requires avoiding the trap of clichés. I explain new principles (page 167), moves (page 168), and other tools (page 170) to help you integrate American forces.
- ▶ **El Güero:** This chapter contains a new playbook—*El Güero*—a CIA agent serving America's interests in Mexico (page 174). I detail the playbook's features and showcase *El Güero* in a long example (page 182).

If you want to review the broad history of *México* and *la guerra contra el narco*, check out Chapter 2 (page 15). You might also want a refresher on **Cartel's** mechanics (page 31) or advice for the MC (page 117)!

# SIEMPRE JUNTOS

The image of the snake and the eagle—locked together forever in mortal combat—is a powerful metaphor for the relationship, proximity, and history between America and Mexico.

But for America, the struggle with Mexico has long been sublimated into the drug war, a "righteous" cause that allows *los gringos* to pursue terrible policies in the hopes of stemming the flow of illegal drugs (and "illegal" people) across America's porous borders.

## AMERICA FIRST...AND ONLY

No matter how you judge America's pursuit of its national interests, it's impossible to deny the effect *El Norte* has on the drug war. The American prohibition on heroin, cocaine, meth, and cannabis is the central driver of the price of drug exports from Mexico, and America's lax gun laws make *Los Estados Unidos* a primary source for the weapons *los narcos* use every day.

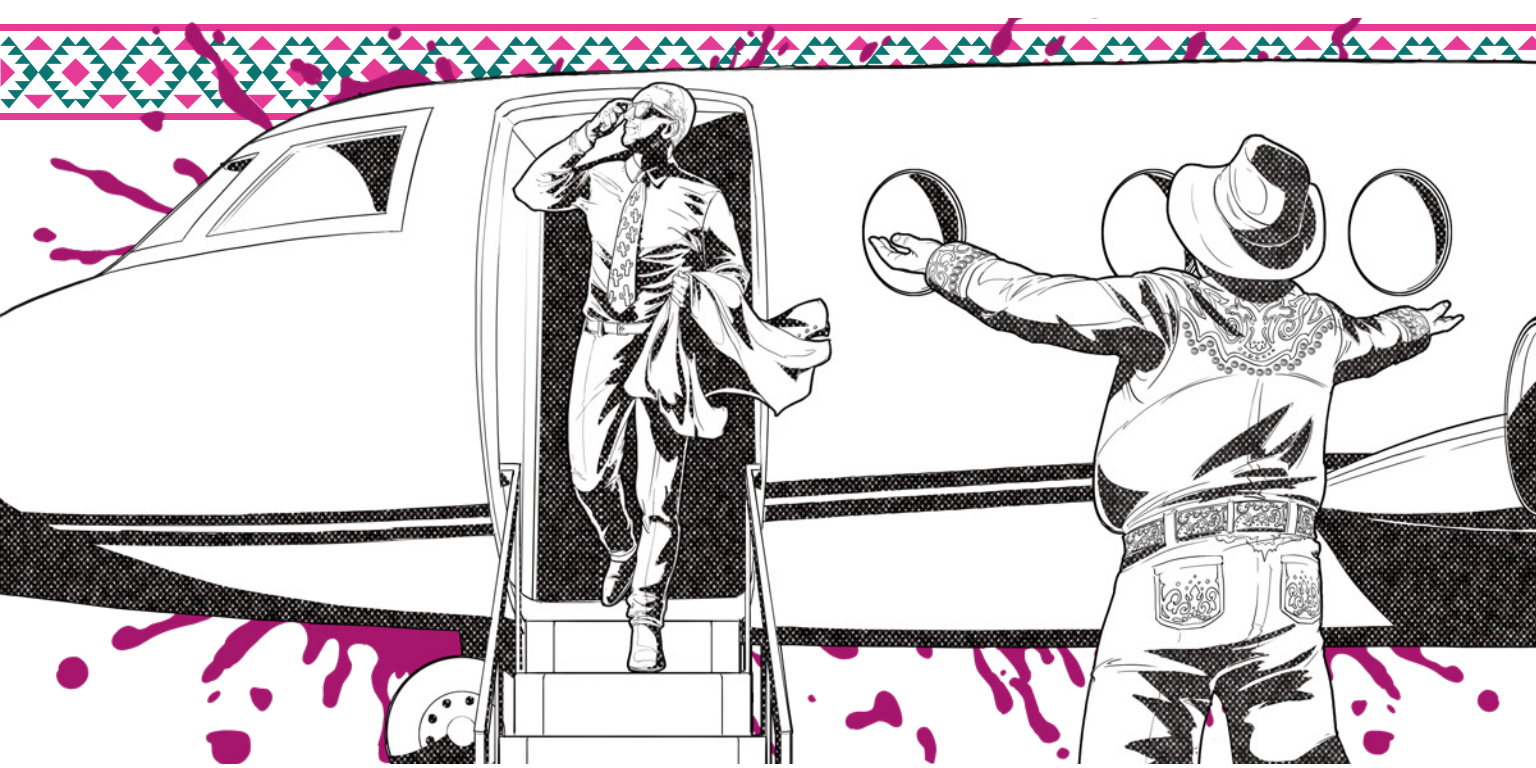
Thus, *la guerra contra el narco* is fought on Mexican soil (and in the surrounding Latin American states), but the fuel for this thirty-year conflagration is almost entirely American made. Without the demand for narcotics and other drugs—and without the easy access to high-caliber, lethal weapons—Mexico would face a far different foe in *los carteles*.

## COPS, NARCS, AND SPIES

America's influence is not limited to the overall socioeconomic conditions created by prohibition. *Los Estados Unidos* also sends its agents into Mexico—cops, narcs, and spies who execute America's policies firsthand, attempting to accomplish a nearly incoherent set of goals ranging from interfering with the drug trade to building alliances with *los carteles* against international terrorist organizations.

The men and women sent to Mexico work for a variety of agencies (page 164), many of which aren't working toward the same ends, and their incoherent objectives often create strife between apparent allies. The cartels may not always understand their enemies, but they have long recognized that some Americans may be willing allies in the pursuit of greater power and influence.

But America's official policies aren't designed to win *la guerra antidrogas*; they instead enable the United States to maximize the influence its agents have over Mexico's institutions and infrastructure—chaos which begets control. In essence, America's interventions in *México* are intentionally disastrous policies executed by trained—and sometimes reckless—professionals...all no more or less human than the *narcos* themselves.



## ¿IMMUNITY O IMPUNITY?

American operatives in *México* operate under broad immunities; the Mexican government simply refuses to push hard on their American allies. The CIA gets the broadest leeway—they offer Mexico the most funding and support—but it's not unusual for agents from *El Norte* to find their Mexican counterparts ignoring, or even encouraging, abuse and corruption.

Yet much of law enforcement in Mexico already serves two masters: the federal government and the cartels. American agents who hope to find support within *los federales* for anti-drug ops often encounter unexpected and unspoken resistance to meaningful progress.

The introduction of Americans thus complicates an already messy situation: no one is capable of holding anyone else accountable, and there were never that many rules anyway. Who is to say, *güey*, what help *México* should expect from *los americanos* when everyone knows the US has been supporting the cartels for decades?

That said, everyone—*gringos*, *federales*, *narcos*—agrees the Americans themselves are off-limits. Since the death of Kiki Camarena in 1985 (page XX), there has been only one rule that counts: murder an American agent and God himself cannot stop the pain and retribution *Los Estados Unidos* will visit upon you and yours.

# MÁS HISTORIA

Mexico lives in the shadow of *Gringolandia* today, but for many years the relationship between the two nations was less consistent and clear. America was a fledgling experiment; *México* had a contested identity. Neither nation had a clear future, but their growth has always been interlinked.

## 1629: NOT YET A BORDER

The borderlands between Mexico and the United States are not a natural border. For thousands of years, the land on both sides were mostly home to small nomadic communities; the arid desert proving less hospitable than territories either mostly north or south.

After the destruction of the Aztec Empire in 1521 (page 16), Spanish explorers swept north into what eventually became Northern Mexico and Texas. Myths of cities of gold enticed such exploration, but few settlements were constructed before the discovery of silver in the early 1600s. The Catholic Church spread alongside the colonizers who claimed the land; the Indigenous people were often targeted with violence by settlers and regularly wiped out by disease.

By the 1700s, most educated people agreed it was impossible to rule the whole of New Spain. Stretching to modern-day Canada, the area was larger than Europe, considerably less populated, harshly inhospitable, and unevenly developed.

## 1821: AFTER INDEPENDENCE

Trade flourished between the two nations once they were both independent, and many Mexicans began to sell their goods in America as often as they sold them at home. Eager to see the North be put to use, the Mexican government began to grant huge chunks of land to Americans willing to move into Mexico.

But put enough *pinches gringos* in one spot, and they start to think they own it. Texas—now controlled by white immigrants—declared independence in 1836; Mexico failed to quell the rebellion and lost the area to the United States. The emboldened US threatened to annex California...and Mexico began to prepare for war.

## 1855: HALF OF MEXICO LOST

And war did indeed follow. Mexico and the United States were closely matched militarily, but American forces successfully invaded and occupied Mexico City. Besieged Mexican leaders sued for peace, agreeing to give up nearly one-third of all of Mexico's land to end the conflict.

Fearing a second US invasion, Mexican leaders signed the Gadsden Purchase in 1855, establishing the current border by selling parts of New Mexico and Arizona. By that point the United States had seized nearly 50% of Mexico's territory in just over a decade.





## 1876: EL PORFIRIATO

Despite the military conflicts, the border region thrived throughout the 1800s, fueled by land speculation, mining, and free trade zones established by mutual consent of both Mexico and the United States. Mexico even devoted money and resources to resettling Mexicans who found themselves on the wrong side of the border after the treaties were signed, creating dozens of new communities such as Nuevo Laredo and Nogales.

The rise of Porfirio Díaz—the strongman president who went on to serve seven consecutive terms—and the expansion of the railroad throughout Mexico both contributed to a sense of prosperity and stability. Suddenly, Mexico was connected and at peace; trade flourished, and most looked the other way as Díaz consolidated his power and allowed Americans to capture industries south of the border.

## 1910: AMERICAN MEDDLING

Yet even when Díaz was overthrown, American interests continued to dominate Mexico. The American ambassador, Henry Lane Wilson (HLW), continually undermined newly elected President Francisco Madero, working on behalf of conservatives to damage the fledgling leftist democracy. HLW's role in Madero's ouster and execution by Victoriano Huerta in 1913 was so egregious that Woodrow Wilson—who had appointed HLW!—was forced to remove the ambassador and even refused to recognize Huerta's new government.

## LA DECENA TRÁGICA


In all the tragic stories of *México*, there are few more heartbreaking than the Ten Tragic Days. Can you guess who shares the blame, *amigo*?

The Mexican Revolution of 1910 dethroned President Porfirio Díaz, returning power to the people after thirty years of dictatorship. The new *presidente*, Francisco Madero, dreamed of a democracy capable of serving the poor and the rich, but in 1913 he was betrayed from within. His own general—Victoriano Huerta—backstabbed him during a ten-day conservative coup, revealing key information to the rebels, then turning on Madero and seizing the presidency for himself.

Throughout the coup, American ambassador Henry Lane Wilson made no secret of America's preference for conservative forces, openly pressuring Madero to resign while the fighting was ongoing. As Huerta seized power, Wilson even negotiated the terms of surrender...then offered Huerta support for a back alley execution of Madero once Madero had ceded the presidency.

*Trágica*, but unsurprising. America wallows in visions of their Founding Fathers, ignoring the murder of *los padres* of democracy everywhere else. There is no fairness, no equality. *Los Estados Unidos* keeps one thumb on the scale to ensure a balance that favors *gringos*, first and foremost.

Why would the CIA treat *México* any differently today, *cabrón*? Americans have always seen Mexico as a playground for their interests. *El hombre propone, Dios dispone, y el diablo descompone*. There are too many devils in *El Gabacho* for things to have ever gone differently for anyone.



## DEMASIADA HISTORIA

The history between the United States and Mexico is fascinating, but don't rush to include it in every session of **Cartel**. Instead, find ways to speak to the broader themes, the ways that *los gringos* run roughshod over the rules and demand everyone play their game. Check out page 170 for more on including such American PCs and NPCs!

## 1924: A NEW BORDER

Conflicts between United States forces and Mexican revolutionaries ceased as the elites in Mexico began to rebuild in the 1920s. While the Americans imposed strict immigration controls on other ethnic groups—especially Asians—the need for cheap labor in states like Arizona, California, and Texas largely kept the border open to Mexicans looking for work.

That said, the National Origins Act of 1924 created the United States Border Patrol, a law enforcement agency specifically dedicated to preventing "illegal" crossings at the Mexican and Canadian borders. Focused primarily on preventing the smuggling of alcohol during Prohibition, the Border Patrol effectively militarized the line between the two countries, taking the first step toward a truly "hard" border.

## 1954: OPERATION WETBACK

In the early half of the twentieth century, joint immigration policies between the United States and Mexico ensured a growing Mexican-American population inside *El Gabacho*. Combined with the Mexicans who stayed after the Gadsden Purchase, large communities of immigrants helped to almost triple the population of the United States' border region by the mid-1940s.

One of the most successful policies was the Bracero program, a joint agreement in 1942 between the two countries that guaranteed wages and conditions for Mexican migrant workers. The need for such a workforce exploded as men were drafted for World War II, and many Mexicans took advantage of the terms to work in the United States and send money home to family south of the border.

When the men returned from the war, however, suspicion soon fell on the influx of migrant workers, and the United States implemented a plan to "protect" American workers from the effects of Mexican labor: Operation Wetback.

*La migra* rounded up over a million "immigrants," many of them born in the US, and "returned" them to Mexico. The PRI-controlled Mexican government was happy to "welcome" them home, often taking the opportunity to repatriate the deportees to areas of Mexico in need of cheap labor, effectively stranding workers stolen from their homes in the United States to unfamiliar parts of Mexico.

## 1968: LA GUERRA SUCIA

By the late 1960s, concerns about the rise of communism had infected every part of American life—including the relationship between the US and Mexico. Eager to rid itself of left wing dissidents within the country, PRI worked closely with the United States to identify, imprison, torture, and murder thousands of leftist Mexicans who organized against the government.

This unholy union between America's "interests"—limiting the spread of communism—and the self-serving goals of Mexico's elites became a blueprint for the next fifty years of cross-border politics. The level of corruption and American influence was unprecedented: the CIA's station chief in Mexico City, Winston Scott, allegedly convinced even Mexican presidents and cabinet members to act as CIA assets.

## 1985: OPERACIÓN LEYENDA

Yet cooperation between the two countries had limits, especially around the drug trade and *El Padrino's* influence (page 18). The torture and murder of DEA agent Kiki Camarena in 1985 pushed the relationship to the breaking point; the DEA demanded the heads of the Guadalajara Cartel, knowing full well the organization's influence in México. Over the next four years, the DEA pursued Operation Leyenda, a concerted—and successful!—effort to dismantle *El Padrino's* cartel and influence...an effort that ironically paved the way for the rise of the Sinaloa and Gulf Cartels.

## 1994: NAFTA BECOMES LAW

The neoliberal consensus of the 70s and 80s blossomed into the North American Free Trade Agreement in 1992, a tri-national effort to eliminate obstacles to trade throughout the Mexico-United States-Canada corridor by reducing tariffs and securing intellectual property and investor rights throughout the region.

Of course, expanded trade made it even easier for *los carteles*—now fully operational criminal organizations capable of producing industrial quantities of narcotics—to move drugs into the United States. In fact, rumor holds that Mexican President Carlos Salinas pushed to ratify NAFTA *because* PRI benefited from the cartels' ability to move *drogas* into *El Gabacho*...

## 2000: THE MODERN ERA

The end of PRI rule in 2000 led to a hopeful Mexico; the old guard had finally ceded power, and most were sure prosperity was just around the corner. Yet six years later, most Mexicans realized little would change under PAN just as the drug war started to take off. *A la verga*.

The upbeat worldview on the American side shifted as well when the Twin Towers fell on 9/11, refocusing American law enforcement away from narcotrafficking and violent crime toward border security and counterterrorism. Suddenly, Mexico seemed more a liability than a partner, two thousands of miles of unguarded, unsecured border which anyone could cross at any time...

# AGENCIAS GRINGAS

As influential as American policy can be on Mexican affairs, America's efforts in *la guerra antidrogas* are managed by a multitude of organizations and systems, few of which actually work together to prosecute the drug war.

Coincidence? ¡Chingao, cabrón! Don't be stupid. *Los Estados Unidos* wants to snort, smoke, and shoot drugs *and also* undermine the governments of the people who produce those drugs. ¡Por qué no los dos, amigo? Such agencies represent American interests perfectly...

## THE FBI: AMERICA'S COPS

Founded in 1908, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) grew in size and stature throughout the mid-twentieth century to become America's federal police force, pursuing interstate crime, terrorism, and public corruption. *Los carteles* give them plenty of trouble, laundering money, murdering witnesses, and more...all within the US.

The FBI must restrict itself to domestic actions within the borders of the United States, but their cartel targets cross back and forth frequently. FBI agents lament the lack of power they have in Mexico to pursue *sicarios y traficantes*, but they must often rely on uncertain allies like the DEA to help them travel to Mexico to collect evidence, interview witnesses, or extradite captured *narcos* and other criminals.

## THE DEA: AMERICA'S NARCS

The Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) is a more recently organized institution (1973), created in concert with President Nixon's escalating drug war throughout the 1970s. They employ thousands of special agents whose primary focus is waging the war on drugs.

Tasked with working both domestically and internationally to disrupt the flow of narcotics, the DEA focuses largely on "decapitation," targeting the narcos at the top of the food chain instead of ordinary criminals. They often work closely with local law enforcement when working abroad.

## THE CIA: AMERICA'S SPIES

After World War II, President Truman turned wartime intelligence services into what became the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), a clearinghouse for overseas intelligence gathering. But by the 1950s, The Agency was overthrowing democratically elected governments to "contain" the spread of communism; information gathering had turned into direct intervention.

Since 9/11, the CIA has put a special focus on working to undercut terrorism, often siding with *los carteles* or other criminal partners to pursue a set of objectives the FBI and DEA don't even know exist. Drugs? Laws? The CIA only cares about power and who holds it.



## COMPETING OBJECTIVES

On paper, each of these agencies deals with a different part of the problem, focusing on their jurisdiction in order to combat *los carteles*. In reality, *la guerra contra el narco* throws all of these *americanos* into conflict with each other over resources, access, and prestige. They cannot get along because they serve different masters.

The FBI's primary focus is on making cases, prosecuting *narcos* inside the United States for murders, drug trafficking, and money laundering. Cartel money often moves through cash-only businesses like horse racing and gambling; FBI agents rarely find enough evidence to earn the administrative support necessary to authorize them to cross the border in pursuit of a suspect.

Meanwhile, the DEA's pursuit of top *narcos* focuses on undercover operations and paramilitary raids, all designed to track and arrest *los meros meros*. The DEA has little cause to help the FBI track down a low-level murderer even if DEA agents are authorized to work in Mexico.

Finally, the CIA's objectives run counter to everything the FBI and DEA do to fight crime. The Agency only cares about securing America's geopolitical interests; they care little about murders, trafficking, *narcos*, or corruption, provided those committing such crimes are useful allies to The Agency's long-term plans. CIA agents gladly protect the *narcos* the DEA and FBI seek if it means access to the power those *narcos* and their friends control!

## ADDITIONAL AGENCIES

The FBI, DEA, and CIA aren't the only American institutions interested in the Mexican drug war. A few other factions sometimes get their hands dirty fighting *los carteles*:

### National Security Agency (NSA)

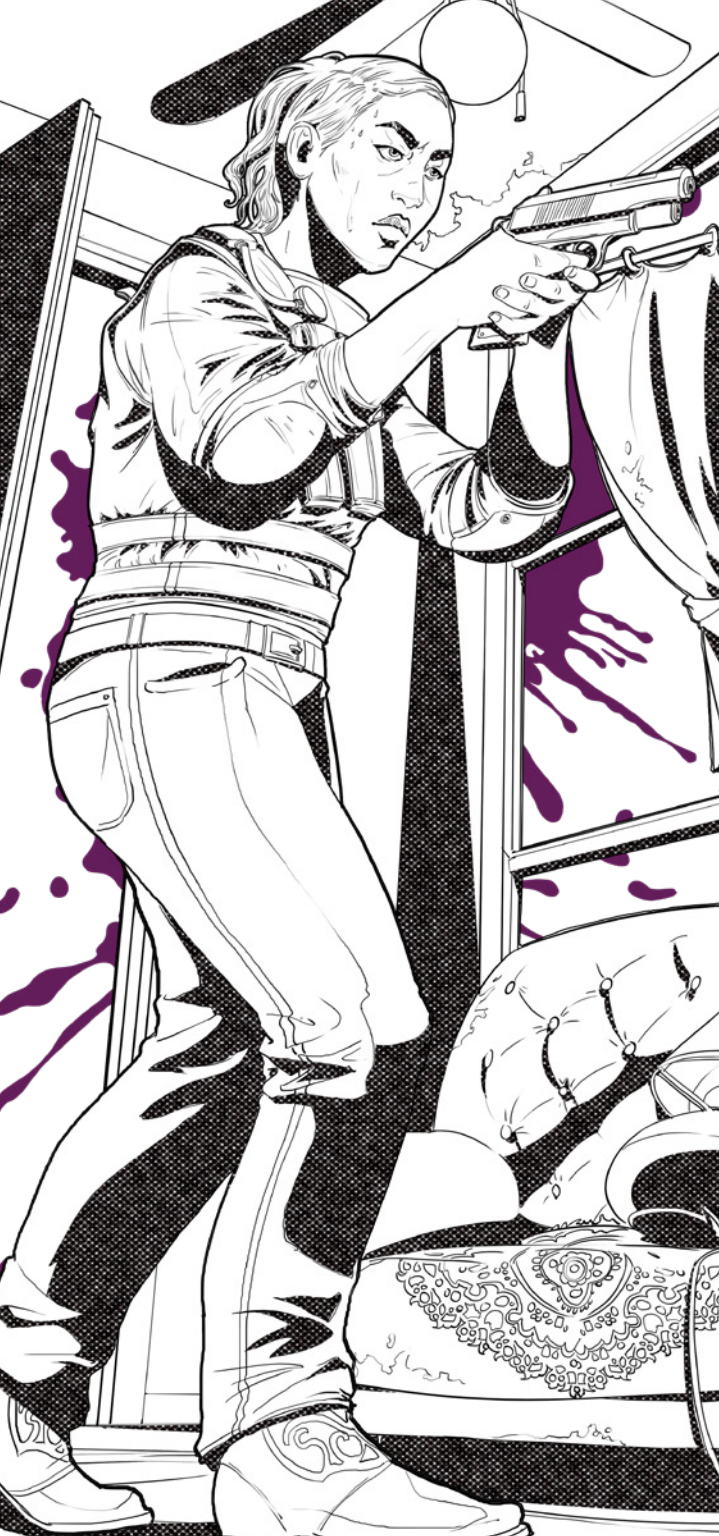
The CIA specializes in human intelligence (HUMINT); the NSA handles telecommunications and messaging (SIGINT). The NSA monitors everything, and often provides support for DEA and CIA operations in Mexico, tracking cell phones, conducting wiretaps, and sometimes even directly bugging cartel holdings.

### Internal Revenue Service (IRS)

While far less feared than the shadowy NSA, the Internal Revenue Service is often put in charge of dealing with seized narcoassets, including stuff like tigers or horses. They have a few criminal investigators, but they almost never travel to Mexico without a request from another agency to deal with a particular seizure.

### Office of National Drug Control Policy

A segment of the executive branch, the ONDCP coordinates anti-drug efforts within the United States: managing television ads, multi-agency collective efforts, and international cooperative agreements. Largely a group of political operatives, employees of the ONDCP sometimes travel to the front line of the drug war to get a look at "the reality" of the war they allegedly oversee.



## AGENDAS

Alongside every other element of **Cartel**, introducing American law enforcement and intelligence needs to be in the service of your agendas:

### MAKING LA GUERRA SEEM REAL

It's unavoidable: the drug war is what it is because Americans make it so. *Gringos* are a wonderful tool for driving home the madness of *la guerra antidrogas*; their inclusion makes portraying the insanity much easier. Beware overusing them as opposition; they are most interesting when they are rare and notable.

### MAKING THE PCs' LIVES EXCITING

NPC American agents are dynamic actors in **Cartel**, characters who can force the PCs to respond and upset fragile truces among violent forces. Such agents are also often naive and shortsighted, perfect foils for more cautious characters or worthy allies for the reckless.

### PLAYING TO FIND OUT

The stories of *los gringos* who come to Mexico to save it—or break it—are powerful tales. The characters and conflicts you introduce require more discipline from you than nearly anything else you can add to a game of **Cartel**. Look closely at the new principles and moves introduced in this chapter to keep the focus on the player characters and their choices.

# NEW PRINCIPLES

**Cartel's** agendas are served well by American characters and conflicts, but new principles are useful for maintaining focus. *Los gringos* aren't like *los federales* or Los Zetas; American desires are difficult and confusing, often a mix of smug naiveté and calculating cynicism:

- ▶ Make their motives murky and strategies clear
- ▶ Highlight the injustice of America's interests
- ▶ Grant *gringos* humanity in measured moments

Include these new principles whenever you make Americans a major part of your story; adding *gringos* demands you honor these principles as well to pursue your agendas in full.

## MAKE THEIR MOTIVES MURKY AND THEIR STRATEGIES CLEAR

American interests are messy, switching often between policies without warning at the request of officials in Washington. Most *narcos* never understand what Americans truly want because the *gringos* themselves don't even know!

But the way *gringos* get things done couldn't be more obvious. DEA agents regularly explain what they need in the hopes of winning *narco* sources; CIA agents are duplicitous, but everyone expects them to be liars! It may not be clear why the Americans do what they do, but always make it obvious how they do it.

## HIGHLIGHT THE INJUSTICE OF AMERICA'S INTERESTS

There are surely American agents who work to pursue justice for those wronged by the drug war...but justice is not a national policy. *Los gringos* work to serve America's interests, and nations don't often care about morality; they care about control and power, security and risk.

Portray this injustice whenever the truth of America's interests comes to light: "It's clear Agent McEwen isn't interested in the evidence you've put forward about Ruiz's murder, unless it implicates *el narco's* political allies as well..."

## GRANT GRINGOS HUMANITY IN MEASURED MOMENTS

Be wary of any impulse to make *los gringos* simple heroes or irredeemable villains; they are the agents of a superpower that cares little for ordinary Mexicans or their problems. You diminish the unique stories **Cartel** can generate if you fall prey to such familiar narratives.

But remind the PCs that the Americans are often as lost as any *narco*: exhausted, defeated, and desperate, hoping beyond hope for a way forward in the face of systems as inevitable as they are cruel. *Gringos* may represent the system, but they fall down, make mistakes, and show mercy like anyone else, *güey*.

# NEW MC MOVES

The list of basic moves for the MC (page 126) is a solid starting position for scenes involving *los americanos*—*gringos* can **shoot someone**, **threaten someone's interests**, **lean on a secret**, etc., just like everyone else. But there are a few additional MC moves that can come into play when you introduce American agents to **Cartel**:

- ▶ Offer immunity at a terrible cost
- ▶ Demand someone take a foolish risk
- ▶ Expand the scope of a conflict
- ▶ Reveal a deal done in their absence
- ▶ Lock down an area or location
- ▶ React with overwhelming force

You don't need to use these moves every time you seize a golden opportunity or react to a miss when an American is involved. In fact, you should use these sparingly, employing them to mark the difference in tone that arises when *los gringos* take control of a situation.

Think carefully about how you use these moves within the context of the various kinds of Americans the player characters might meet. The FBI tends to be the most cautious—relying on other agencies and agents to get stuff done—but the DEA and CIA can be brutally straightforward with violence, bribes, and intimidation. Of course, the CIA works through anyone willing to work for them, even *los carteles*.

## Offer immunity at a terrible cost

Americans can offer security Mexican *federales* can't match—a trip to the United States puts most *narcos* out of reach of the cartels. But such a precious prize cannot be won by someone unwilling to offer serious aid in return for such safety.

*"The American who joined your interrogation late interrupts the federal in perfect Spanish: 'We know your brother is Osito. We know you work for him. We know you had cocaine on you when we picked you up. If you want to avoid a very long prison sentence, you need to start talking...'"*

## Demand someone take a foolish risk

*Los gringos* never understand—or don't care about—the consequences of what they want their sources, allies, and agents to do. They insist upon immediate action; even if the risks are high, they know someone else will pay the price.

*"Your DEA handler seems unimpressed with your excuses: 'Why the fuck should I care that your wife is getting suspicious about our meetings? You told me you could get us to el jefe. Either plant this recording device in his house today or...I'm afraid our mutually beneficial relationship is coming to a close.'"*



### Expand the scope of a conflict

Most *narcos* are caught up in the day-to-day of *la guerra*; they don't think about the things that "matter"—political corruption and international security. Remind them that the Americans care much more about the bigger picture than they do about justice or greed or revenge.

.....  
*"You think your friend's death is a tragedy? The real tragedy is that the guy who murdered him—your boss—is helping terrorists move weapons across the border. Now are you going to help us or are you going to pretend this all isn't happening?"*  
 .....

### Reveal a deal done in their absence

The fog of war of **Cartel** makes everything uncertain. Who are your *enemigos*? Who are your *aliados*? You can never really know, *güey*. It changes too often for you to count on anything. Show the players that alliances change and shift by announcing a deal that's already done, an arrangement already bearing fruit for both sides.

.....  
*"The Zetas that captured you dump you out of the truck on to the asphalt. You hear one of them say, 'Aquí. Just like you wanted,' and pull the bag off your head. An American is standing next to them—wearing cargo shorts and a Hawaiian shirt—'Exactly what I wanted, amigos,' he says, 'Thanks for your time and expertise. Here's the money.'"*  
 .....

### Lock down an area or location

Together with their Mexican allies, *los gringos* can swarm an area, keeping someone from coming in...or getting away. Everyone knows the Americans can't win the war with such tactics, but that's never stopped them from trying.

.....  
*"The squeal of tires outside tells you the federales are already here. You look outside the window of the lab to see at least a dozen federal police cars, alongside a few SUVs filled with gringos. DEA, maybe? They are already moving toward the door with full body armor and a battering ram and you don't see any other way to get out of here..."*  
 .....

### React with overwhelming force

Americans think problems always have solutions; they escalate—regardless of the cost to others—until obstacles simply fall to the side. Be ready to drop the hammer whenever the players push back against *los gringos*, meeting their actions with serious (and unnecessary) escalations.

.....  
*"Vibora looks confident when he gets in the SUV: 'She's dead, jefe. Whatever she told los pendejos is a rumor, right?' He starts to laugh, but he's cut short by an explosion that rocks the side of the vehicle, flipping the SUV over and almost knocking you out. As you struggle to hold on to consciousness, you see a group of gringos approaching with assault rifles..."*  
 .....

# USING GRINGOS IN PLAY

Whatever America's interests are in Mexico, the PCs don't interact with them directly. You need characters, *cabrón*, people who can **demand the PCs take foolish risks** and **lock down an area** of importance when things get out of hand!

## INTRODUCING LOS GRINGOS

The key to adding *los americanos* to a game of **Cartel** is to focus on individual characters. It can be tempting to put forward a wall of American faces, but your players won't remember anything about them. Present just a few Americans—maybe even one or two who speak limited Spanish and don't have the full picture—and your players will fixate and focus on them with delight.

It's also useful to introduce two *americanos* working against each other, each offering a different set of opportunities and dangers for the PCs. A DEA agent out to finally arrest *el jefe de jefes* might want the PCs to turn against the cartel, while a CIA agent would rather have an introduction to *el jefe*, even if the spook has to kill to get it.

Remember you can also include *El Güero* as a playbook in your game, allowing a player to take on the role of an American agent working in *México*. The *El Güero* playbook is described in full on page 174, including information on how to help the player select a mission for their character.

## CHOOSING AN AGENCY

When introducing an NPC American agent, think carefully about which agency the character represents. You don't have to be direct with such information to the PCs, but it's important that you have a selection in your head—a hard-working FBI agent out of her element is different from a CIA spook working both sides.

- ▶ **FBI agents** tend to be the most traditional law enforcement agents—suits, close-cropped hair, formal demeanors. They ask tough questions about crimes they think they can prosecute, and only rarely create chaos to try to sway a *narco* to their side.
- ▶ **DEA agents** are more casual, often working undercover or with military-style support. They are usually looking for *los jefes*—or evidence to convict *los jefes*—and they are far more willing to shoot first and ask questions later than their friends at the FBI.
- ▶ **CIA agents** are the slipperiest foes, often masquerading as something they are not and making promises they don't intend to keep. They have goals and objectives larger than *la guerra* itself, and they are always willing to break the rules to achieve the greater good. They are not limited by a traditional morality.



## MEXICAN SUPPORT

Allegedly, Mexico's military and federal police work closely with American law enforcement to battle the cartels. American aid depends on such cooperation, so virtually every political leader to hold federal office in *México* knows how to say the right things about *los federales'* commitment to winning *la guerra antidrogas*.

But we all know how this really works, don't we, *cabrón*? *Políticos* keep the *narcos* safe and the *narcos* pay them for that safety. The corruption of the narcostate cannot simply give way to American ambition; the roots of this terrible tree grow too deeply to be casually tossed aside.

As you introduce American agents, portray their Mexican handlers, counterparts, and staff as people who surround and isolate *los gringos* from the terrible truth—the war cannot be won. Let the players see the Americans' power, but remind them that such power cannot reach far without interference from the mass of compromised institutions that run Mexico.

On occasion an American—usually a CIA agent—travels outside such bubbles. These are rare and dangerous operatives. They have the confidence to handle the streets of Durango and a burning desire to see things as they truly are.

## ¿SOMOS O NO SOMOS AMIGOS?

The two main American agencies working in Mexico—the CIA and the DEA—appear at first glance to be natural allies: both tasked with pursuing America's interests and reporting to Washington, D.C. There's only one problem, *güey*: they hate each other. Most CIA agents regard their DEA counterparts as dumb jocks, incapable of executing a strategy beyond smash and grab; in turn, DEA agents mostly think of CIA operatives as sleazy weasels who couldn't close a case with a conviction if their lives depended on the trial.

This mutual animosity is not without cause. Conflicts between the two agencies are constant, and sometimes it can feel as if America wants to have two agencies who fight with each other more than they fight with anyone else. Their missions take them in different directions.

Many experts argue the CIA was even involved in Kiki Camarena's murder (page 163), going so far as to claim the CIA helped torture him. After all, Kiki knew their intimate secrets, ways in which the CIA and *los carteles* worked together to smuggle drugs into the United States to raise money for weapons for the *contras* in Nicaragua. Kiki's death kept those secrets from coming to light.

It's no wonder *los carteles* and the CIA end up on the same side so often. The DEA only knows how to disrupt everything; the CIA knows that you have to give a little bit—torture an American agent, for example—to get anything at all. *A donde te quieren mucho no vayas a menudo, cabrón*. You can't be a constant thorn in someone's side and expect them to work with you.

## WHAT DO GRINGOS WANT?

No two *agencias americanas* want the same outcomes, but there are a few resources nearly everyone finds useful. Here's a list of targets if you need to give a *gringo* a motive or strategy:

### Financial Records

*Narcos* launder cash through businesses—swapping "dirty" money for "clean" funds—to use it for legitimate purposes: buying houses, sending money overseas, or funding new enterprises. But everyone keeps records, *cabrón*, documents that can be used in a prosecution...or in blackmail.

Getting *real* financial records is tough; money laundering often generates fake records, masking the true source of the money. But everyone always has a set of books documenting real income, locked away somewhere secret...

### Criminal Informants

Bank records and money ledgers are useful, but they can't tell the whole story. *Americanos* need criminal informants like *La Rata* (page 136) to learn how the cartel moves money and drugs into the United States. Informants also know information everyone but law enforcement already knows, like where *el narco* buries the bodies.

Sometimes *gringos* try to win *narcos* over by building relationships and promising safety, but they are just as likely to put low-level *mafiosos* in a tough spot—maybe even with enough evidence to send them to jail—than trying to flip them in exchange for immunity and protection.



## Drug Shipments

*Los carteles* are smart about shipping drugs to *El Norte*: never too much at one time, never more than they can afford to lose. But *gringos* love putting drugs on the table during a press conference, even if it's a drop in the torrent of illicit substances headed to the States.

Sometimes, the DEA gets lucky and makes a real bust: a consolidated shipment, a secret processing facility, maybe even a whole lab. These raids can make an agent's career, no matter how little they matter to the broader war.

## Physical Locations

America ostensibly has an agreement with Mexico to extradite criminals for prosecution, and *los federales* often promise support for raids and captures. In reality, *narcos* have such a hold on the Mexican legal system that finding an important *jefe* is fairly unlikely; someone always warns him before *los gringos* arrive.

The DEA has teams capable of extracting *narcos*, but they need to know where to go and who to get. *Narcos* move around, conceal their identities, and sometimes even get plastic surgery to disappear again after they have become famous!

The location of a high-level *jefe*—or an important cartel facility—is often one of the most important missing pieces in a criminal prosecution. *Los gringos* can collect reams of evidence, but who can they send to jail if *el narco* keeps slipping through their fingers?

## Physical Assets

The *narcos* don't come from old money. They are blatant with their wealth, overeager to purchase gold-plated cars and exotic animals... luxuries that *los gringos* and their Mexican allies enjoy seizing whenever they can. *Los jefes* have learned to put wealth in the names of other people—their wives, their kids, their elderly parents—but Americans often take first and finish the investigation later.

The Americans sometimes snatch up such assets in order to put pressure on the *narcos*, hoping *el jefe* makes a mistake. After all, he bought all this to display his wealth and power! What errors might he make when it's suddenly taken away?

## Bodies, Always Bodies

*Los carteles* know to keep the violence to the Mexican side of the border, but sometimes they kill people Americans actually care about. The deaths of most Mexicans may not demand much attention, but many American citizens—some born in *México* or just across the border—travel back and forth regularly. When they are killed, *los gringos* sometimes go looking for their murderers.

It is extremely difficult to prosecute someone for murder without a body. The discovery of a mass grave can kick off dozens of prosecutions, since the defense can't argue the victims are still alive. Any information that leads to bodies—the most essential of evidence—is vital to American law enforcement working in Mexico.

# EL GÜERO



## YOUR STATS

+1

FACE

-1

GRIT

+0

HUSTLE

+1

SAVAGERY

-1

HEAT

*Driven, pitiless, lost. El Güero is an independent operative working for The Agency. He's not a rookie, and his misión is clear: serve America's interests, no matter the cost. But his sins are legion; he knows the bill will eventually come due. Can he finish his work in Durango before his enemigos—or his conscience—get the best of him?*

## YOUR NAME

- Allison, Cynthia, Gina, Liz, Madeline, Natalie, Susan, or Valerie
- Austin, Bertrand, Erick, Gregory, Michael, Ryan, Todd, or Zachary

## YOUR LOOK

- Man, woman, ambiguous, transgressing
- Bored eyes, laughing eyes, sharp eyes, tired eyes
- Modern clothes, outrageous clothes, practical clothes, street clothes

## YOUR GEAR

- a luxury lifestyle
- a downtown loft, a disposable car, a 9mm (close loud), burner phones

Add +1 to one of these stats:  
Face, Grit, Hustle, Savagery

## TUS LLAVES

You get this one and one more:

- **Clean:** Mark xp when you try to convince someone else to do your dirty work. Clear this key and advance when you cross a line that exposes you to retribution.
- **Daring:** Mark xp when you willingly enter a perilous situation without precautions or deception. Clear this key and advance when you retreat from a messy situation instead of risking further failure.
- **Arrogance:** Mark xp when you use your superior knowledge or experience to *verbally shame or abuse* someone you care about. Clear this key and advance when you admit to a loved one that you're in over your head and urgently need help.

## LOS ENLACES

You've convinced \_\_\_\_\_ to help you with one of your objectives, but you know their loyalty is limited and fleeting. *Así las cosas...*

\_\_\_\_\_ and you enjoyed a professional *and* personal relationship in the past. Ask them why they cut you off when you thought things were *muy bien*.

\_\_\_\_\_ thinks you're a trusted ally. The truth is...you're setting them up to take the fall when things inevitably get messy. *¡Listo!*

## YOUR MOVES

Choose three:

- **Calculador:** When you've *sized someone up* and you act on the MC's answers, take +2 instead of +1.
- **Están de Luto:** You know a few NPCs with grudges against your enemies, old *sicarios* you've worked with previously. Mark a stress to have one of them join you as a bodyguard for a scene or mark two stress to have one of them suddenly appear in a scene in a superior, hidden, or surprising position.
- **Adiós, Felipe:** When you tell a low-rank NPC to fuck off or get out of your way, roll with Face. On a hit, they do it, *no hay problema*. On a 10+, they offer an *apología también*: clear a stress. On a miss, they dramatically escalate, much to your *disgusto*.
- **No Hay Reglas:** When you offer to trade dirty favors instead of cash to get what you want from someone, you can mark stress instead of rolling to *propose a deal* as if you rolled a 12+.
- **Escurridizo:** Mark stress instead of rolling to *interfere* as if you had rolled a 10+. When you *get fucking shot*, you get to pick both options on a 7-9.
- **Estratega:** When you enter a chaotic battle, roll with Savagery. On a hit, ask the MC a question about the fight; they will answer honestly. On a 10+, hold 2. On a 7-9, hold 1. Spend hold 1 for 1 to:
  - *kill an NPC within easy reach or close range*
  - *protect an NPC from imminent harm or danger*
 On a miss, you're in over your head; mark three stress or get captured by your *pinche* enemies, your choice. No one said *México* was safe...

## TU MISIÓN PARA LA AGENCIA

You're an officer in the CIA Special Activities Division, trained to accomplish American objectives in Mexico. You're bilingual, funded, and immune to prosecution.

You've broken a few rules in your time. Choose two:

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> <i>killed a fellow agent</i>    | <input type="checkbox"/> <i>assassinated a político</i> |
| <input type="checkbox"/> <i>trafficked cartel drugs</i>  | <input type="checkbox"/> <i>covered up a murder</i>     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> <i>tortured narcos for info</i> | <input type="checkbox"/> <i>abandoned a civilian</i>    |

You're working; Mexico is your beat. Choose a *misión*:

- ☐ **Control:** *Replace el narco with someone friendlier to Agency interests in the region.*
- ☐ **Power:** *Bring down an honest politician who has proven inconvenient and unpredictable.*
- ☐ **Security:** *Build an alliance with the local cartel against foreign terrorists and rogue states.*

Mark three of the objectives below. When you fulfill a marked objective, strike it out and mark xp. When you strike out all three, mark three more objectives. When you strike out the second set, you've completed your mission; return to the States for a debrief and some R&R. You've earned it.

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> <i>recruit a new informant</i>   | <input type="checkbox"/> <i>steal a valuable asset</i>   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> <i>kill a dangerous enforcer</i> | <input type="checkbox"/> <i>arrest a cartel ally</i>     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> <i>uncover a cartel secret</i>   | <input type="checkbox"/> <i>seize a narco account</i>    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> <i>disrupt a political event</i> | <input type="checkbox"/> <i>eliminate a deadly rival</i> |

## SIETE VIDAS

When something would otherwise kill you, you can permanently fill in a stress box—even if you've already marked the box with normal stress—to survive instead. Tell the MC how you manage to miraculously dodge death's clutches; they will tell you what costs you pay to secure your escape. If you fill your fifth stress box in this manner, your time in Mexico is done, *cabrón*. You're too old for this shit.

## ADVANCEMENT

When you fill your xp track, select an advance:

- ☐ *get +1 Face (max+3)*
- ☐ *get +1 Hustle (max+3)*
- ☐ *get +1 Savagery (max+3)*
- ☐ *get 4 weapons y 4 gear (La Sicaria)*
- ☐ *get a new güero move*
- ☐ *get a new güero move*
- ☐ *get a move from another playbook*
- ☐ *get a move from another playbook*

After 5 advances, you can choose from this list:

- ☐ *get +1 to any stat (max+3)*
- ☐ *erase a filled stress box*
- ☐ *erase a filled stress box*
- ☐ *choose a new misión from The Agency, erase all your objectives, and choose three new objectives*
- ☐ *change your character to a new type*
- ☐ *raise your lifestyle one level*



## PLAYING EL GÜERO

You have been sent to *México* for reasons no *narco* can truly understand. You alone see things clearly: all of this is a joke. The drugs always move *norte*; you serve a higher calling that can perhaps make use of the situation.

Your unique position affords you a certain degree of respect, even from *pinches cabrones* who usually don't give a shit about "the rules." You're *intocable*, immune to the consequences most *federales* or *narcos* can bring to bear against you. They know it. You know it. No secrets. No lies.

But you're playing a dangerous game, one in which you have the freedom to enact any plan, recruit any ally, torch any source...and your enemies can't touch you, no matter how much you disrupt their lives. Yet...they will find some other way to get to you, *amigo*, before you wreck their plans and accomplish your goals.

You don't think you can truly fool anyone. You might speak Spanish and have cartel contacts who owe you favors, but you know you still stick out like a sore thumb. No use pretending you are anything other than what you truly are, *güero*. Everyone knows you; that's part of the fun!

And when things aren't fun anymore, when someone decides to kill you—or your allies—no matter what it costs them? Show them just how serious you can be. After all, The Agency, in its wisdom and benevolence, has bestowed upon you a mission. Are you going to let a few foolish *pendejos* stop you from completing it?

## Notes on Your Moves

- ▶ You don't have to pay any additional costs to use *Están de Luto*, so long as you provide an opportunity for the NPC to hurt their enemies. If you want further support, however, you need to **pressure them** to stick it out or **propose a deal** to buy their continued loyalty.
- ▶ Any dirty favors you **propose** have to be real temptations for characters you target with *No Hay Reglas*. You have to offer things people want, *cabrón*, if you want them to say yes!
- ▶ You have to enter a chaotic battle to trigger *Estratega*, but you're welcome to introduce an element of chaos yourself—an IED, perhaps—to ensure you can use the move. Each hold you spend *kills one close NPC* or *protects one NPC from a single threat or attack*; you need to spend additional hold to kill more NPCs this way or protect an NPC a second time.
- ▶ Choosing a *misión* and objectives defines your character; see page 178 for advice and clarification on the options presented.

## Inspirations for El Güero

- ▶ Matt Graver, *Sicario*
- ▶ Mr. Green, *Narcos*
- ▶ Maya, *Zero Dark Thirty*
- ▶ Agent Sands, *Once Upon a Time in Mexico*
- ▶ Monty Schafer, *American Made*

## DEFINING YOUR MISSION

Most characters in **Cartel** were born in *México*. You were sent here, assigned to Durango because your handlers believe there is important work to be done. They have given you a **mission** to fulfill, and you intend to see it through.

The Agency, however, is not interested in the day-to-day crimes of ordinary *narcos* or impeding the flow of drugs into the United States. No, *cabrón*, they have bigger fish to fry.

### Your Mission: Control

The Agency might have assigned you to replace *el narco* with someone more likely to support Agency operations. You aren't bringing *el narco* to justice or ending the influence *los carteles* have in Durango, but you might end up working with local law enforcement to remove the target.

### Your Mission: Power

Despite operating in the shadows, The Agency as a whole is often constrained by politics. Your handlers might have assigned you to eliminate a political actor and obstacle, either by ending the target's political career or assassinating them.

### Your Mission: Security

The Agency has broad geopolitical interests, and *los carteles* could be valuable allies. You might have been assigned to build relationships with *los narcos* to ensure The Agency's long-term goals. Who better to help guard America's borders than those who regularly cross them with impunity?

## The Rules You Broke

Your work for The Agency, lawless as it might seem, is defined by rules. The politicians in D.C. set boundaries, and your handlers relay those limits to you with your mission. Limits make all this legal. But if the politicians wanted limits followed, they wouldn't come to you. They want results, *güey*, and sometimes you've had to get messy:

- If you *killed a fellow agent*, you eliminated another American operative in Mexico, probably either a DEA or CIA agent.
- If you *trafficked cartel drugs*, you helped the *carteles* bring drugs into the States to fund another secret operation or curry favor.
- If you *tortured narcos for info*, you employed "enhanced interrogations" similar to those used by the CIA in Iraq and Afghanistan.
- If you *assassinated a político*, you murdered an elected official in Mexico's government without explicit permission to do so.
- If you *covered up a murder*, you helped to obstruct an investigation into a murder in Mexico, perhaps even one you committed.
- If you *abandoned a civilian*, you discarded a human asset you were assigned to protect when they outlived their usefulness.

Expect the MC to remind you of these transgressions while you do your work in Mexico. Your sins are never far behind you, not even here.

## COMPLETING YOUR MISSION

In order to complete your *misión*, you need to accomplish a number of **objectives**, specific tasks that advance your goals. Your work is complex; you can't just assassinate someone and expect to change the system, *pendejo*. You have to set up the dominoes before you knock them down!

When you choose objectives, work with the MC to identify how they move you closer to completing your mission. They might directly put pressure on your enemies, create opportunities to seize power, disrupt your rivals, or even cover your tracks! You don't have to define everything about the objectives, but you need to have a clear picture of how your actions lead you to accomplish the goals The Agency set for you.

The best objectives are **specific, meaningful challenges** that drive play during a session:

- ▶ **Specific:** You aren't getting just any random informant; you're looking for someone in a particular organization, perhaps even a unique person with uncommon knowledge.
- ▶ **Meaningful:** Accomplishing an objective must move you toward completing your mission. Why do you need this informant? What can they tell you that helps your cause?
- ▶ **Challenges:** Your objectives can't be easy, *cabrón*. You're calling out the pieces of your work that require planning and dedication. If the work was easy, they'd send someone else.

.....  
*Jahmal's new PC is El Güero. His misión is **Power**: he's got to get rid of an honest politician making Agency operations in Durango difficult by demanding more Mexican oversight. Jahmal selects **recruit a new informant, arrest a cartel ally, and eliminate a deadly rival** for his objectives.*

*"First, who is this politician?" I ask.*

*"The governor of Durango? I think she should be more powerful than just a mayor," Jahmal says.*

*"Sounds good. Maybe you need to **recruit someone on her staff** to infiltrate her inner circle?"*

*"Yeah!" Jahmal says, "she's honest, but maybe I need to **arrest her brother as the cartel ally**? He might do business with the cartel without her knowledge. That would put some pressure on her."*

*"Totally! She might be clean, but her familia is dirty. Is the brother employing someone deadly? Is that why you picked **eliminate a deadly rival**?"*

*"Nah, I want to involve the cartels directly," says Jahmal. "There's a new jefa, right? Maybe the new boss has assigned a sicario to protect the brother?"*

*"Awesome. Let's say the sicario's name is Tiburón. What's your relationship with him? What makes your conflict more than just business?"*

*"Oh, we used to work together! I've **trafficked cartel drugs** before with him, so we know each other well. He would definitely remember me."*

*"Got it. We'll see how these objectives go, then talk more about the next three objectives when these are done! ¡Buena suerte, cabrón!"*  
 .....

# ENGAGING EL GÜERO

Integrating *El Güero* into a game of **Cartel** is simple: the playbook is designed to work with all the other playbooks and mechanics, and the tools found earlier in this chapter (page 170) are as useful for dealing with American PCs as they are for including *los gringos* as NPCs.

That said, here are some tips for engaging *El Güero* as the MC, including how the playbook interacts with other systems in the game.

## BEHIND THE PLAYBOOK

*El Güero* is driven by his mission; he outlines what he hopes to accomplish, and it's your job to complicate—but not thwart—that goal.

If *El Güero* attempts to reach out to his handlers for information or support, remind him he's an independent operative. His people are unlikely to offer any direct aid; it weakens their plausible deniability about his illicit activities.

And don't forget that *El Güero* is still caught up in all the ordinary drama of Durango! He might very well be related to a *narco*—**Cartel** is melodrama, after all—and he's got at least one personal relationship through his *enlaces*.

## QUESTIONS FOR EL GÜERO:

- ▶ Why did you break the rules you broke?
- ▶ Where did you learn to speak Spanish?
- ▶ What do you actually like about Durango?

## USING THE MISSION

Most of the time, *El Güero's* mission offers a set of concrete scenes to frame throughout the game. If *El Güero* needs to secure a new informant, for example, then a meeting at a cantina with the potential mole is a solid place to start. Don't fret about how *El Güero's* mission will come together in the end; most CIA "planning" is just improvisational chaos with an end point in mind.

*El Güero* should be a self-starter, pursuing his *misión* with abandon; reach out to him with opportunities if he slows down. The conversation with *El Güero* at the start of the game is vital: if you both understand what is needed to accomplish his objectives and why those objectives might be difficult, you can better introduce those challenges into the story.

## Finishing the Mission

Once *El Güero* completes the first set of objectives, defining the second set should explicitly set him up to succeed at his *misión*. Work with the player to ensure the remaining objectives form a narrative arc resulting in completion.

Don't get *tacaño*, *cabron*! Once all the objectives are complete, *El Güero* is done in Mexico. You cheapen the whole story when you insist that *El Güero* jump through one more set of hoops to complete his mission and retire.



## OTHER MOVES Y SYSTEMS

Once you get started, *El Güero* makes use of all the basic moves as normal. Here are a few issues that might crop up with other systems in **Cartel**:

### Heat Moves

Like every other character, *El Güero* still has to make Heat moves when he tries to **avoid suspicion**, **leaves a messy crime scene**, or **flees los federales**. His low Heat might keep him out of trouble, but it's by no means a perfect defense.

When he's caught, however, his American immunity kicks in when dealing with cops and *federales*; they might detain him, but there's nothing they can do to lock him up for long. Even deporting him isn't much of a threat: he probably crossed the border without going through the usual checkpoints in the first place!

### Stress Moves

All of the stress moves are available to *El Güero*, including **confess your sins**. Of course, most priests will instantly recognize *El Güero* as a dangerous American. They might require some convincing to take his confession properly. After all, the CIA doesn't offer the church a fraction of the support *los carteles* offer.

On a miss, the weight of the priest's condemnation weighs just as heavily on *El Güero* as it does on any other character. He might not be Catholic, but there are few things in *México* as cutting as the judgement of a devout priest. And true absolution isn't easy to come by these days!

### Lifestyle

*El Güero* begins the game with a luxury lifestyle; he probably has access to multiple CIA bank accounts and more cash on hand than *El Halcón* will see in a lifetime. The Agency will never ask where this money went, even if *El Güero* spends it foolishly or stupidly. What's \$50,000 to the United States government?

### Advancement y Death

Unlike many other characters, *El Güero* cannot *retire to safety* as an advance. If he wants to get out of *México*, he's got to complete his mission.

But the stress of the job can eventually end his career: if he fills in his fifth stress box through **Siete Vidas**, he's done. And eventually, *El Güero* will only have one or two stress to mark before you can call for a stress move. Hit him hard, *cabrón*, when he gets to that point of his story.



## OTRO EXAMPLE

What follows is another extended example that uses the material in this chapter, calling out general MC moves and principles, as well as notes on integrating American law enforcement.

This example extends the long example from page 150 and features four PCs:

- ▶ **El Güero:** Erick—man, laughing eyes, modern clothes—a CIA operative with connections in the Mexican cartels. Played by Jahmal.
- ▶ **El Halcón:** Beto—man, quick eyes, street clothes—a kid drowning in cartel politics beyond his understanding. Played by Derrick.
- ▶ **El Polizeta:** Gustavo—man, clever eyes, plain clothes—a corrupt cop trying to play both sides of the law. Played by Justin.
- ▶ **La Sicaria:** Mina—woman, quiet eyes, casual clothes—a cartel assassin...now on the run after murdering her father. Played by Marissa.

Last session, Mina shot and killed her father, *El Narco*—played by Jahmal—when he admitted to the murder of his own mother, Mina's beloved *abuelita*! Unwilling to claim his role in the cartel, Mina went into hiding. She knows the new *jefa* will certainly send someone to kill her!

At the end of the last session, I introduced the new *jefa*, Santiago's sister, Doña Raquel. She's hunting for her niece, and she expects both Beto and Gustavo to help her avenge her brother.

Since Jahmal needed a new character, we agreed to jump the timeline forward a month or so. He has chosen to play *El Güero*, so I began by clarifying his *misión* (page 179) to eliminate a difficult *político*, the governor of Durango. Now it's time to connect Jahmal's new character to the existing PCs:

*"Before I pick my enlaces," Jahmal says, "I was thinking it might make sense for me to play my Güero as Erick, the CIA agent Mina tangled with a few sessions ago. Is that cool?"*

*I think for a moment: Erick hasn't done a lot on screen yet, and Jahmal will certainly make the CIA agent more interesting as a PC than I can make him as an NPC. Sounds interesting!*

*"Sure," I say. "We haven't said much about Erick yet, so that gives you lots of room to play."*

*"And is it cool if I'm Black," Jahmal asks, "even though güero means 'white dude'?"*

*I laugh. "Yeah, totally. You just need to look like an outsider. As long as everything about Erick screams American, you're set."*

*"All right, then. I'm set." Jahmal smiles and looks over his enlaces. I'm glad he's taking the loss of Don Santiago so well! "For my first enlace, I'm going to say I've convinced Mina to help me with one of my objectives. I need her help killing Tiburón. He's a bad hombre, and Mina is tough."*

*I love it. Mina's caught in a bad spot, so it makes perfect sense Erick had approached her with a deal when he heard Mina killed her father.*

*"What do you think, Mina?" I ask.*

*"That sounds great. Will you get me out of Mexico if I help you with this?" Marissa asks Jahmal.*

*"Definitely." Jahmal nods and gives Marissa a wicked grin; we all laugh. Mina might be in trouble!*

*"For my second enlace," Jahmal says, "I'm going to say Gustavo thinks I'm a trusted ally, but I'm really setting him up to take the fall. I think maybe I'm supposed to be helping your task force?"*

*"Yeah, makes sense" says Justin. "We probably have a bunch of Americans around 'helping.'"*

*"Do I know you're corrupt?" Jahmal asks.*

*"Up to you," says Justin. "I could see it both ways."*

*"Maybe you know," I say, "and Gustavo trusts you because you've protected his secret so far?"*

*Both of them nod. Erick knowing the truth gives the two more ways to have scenes together.*

*"How about that last enlace, Erick?" I ask.*

*"Hmmm. Beto doesn't fit my last enlace very well." Jahmal thinks for a second. "Oh! What about Raquel? Can I use an enlace for an NPC?" I nod.*

*"Awesome. We used to have a personal relationship."*

*"Oh, that's perfect. Ties it all together. She knows you because you two used to be a couple!"*

*"Yup. I'm supposed to ask why you cut me off?"*

*"Hmm. I think Raquel's feelings for you were too intense; she knew you would ask her to betray her family. She didn't trust herself around you..."*

Now that I've got Jahmal's new character integrated in with the rest of the PCs, it's time to frame some opening scenes. I want to show Erick pursuing his mission right away, so I look to his objectives for some starting ideas:

*"Erick, you need to recruit a new informant, right?"*

*Jahmal grins: "Yeah, I need to get someone on the governor's staff to start giving me intel. I want to know where the governor's going to be, who she's meeting with today, all that good stuff."*

*"Got it. Let's say you've already got someone in mind. Maybe one of her legislative aides, someone with a gambling problem you can use against him?"*

*"Perfect. Can I already have a meet set up?"*

*"Yeah, makes sense. His name is Ramón García Rivera. Your source inside los federales says he's a suspect in the recent disappearance of state funds, but they haven't contacted the governor yet."*

*"Cool. Mina and I will meet him right away..."*

Since we have set Erick and Mina in motion, I want to see if I can get Gustavo and Beto moving as well. We've skipped forward in time a month, so all of this setup is basically like starting a new game, albeit one with more history and existing rivalries. I want to keep everyone involved!

I also want to introduce our new opposition replacing Jahmal's *El Narco*: Raquel, *La Jefa*. I think it's going to introduce some nice tension to remind Mina (and Erick) that their enemies aren't standing by idly while they work...

I turn to Justin and Derrick:

.....  
*"Since it's been a month or so since Don Santiago's death, I think the new jefa would like to have a conversation with the two of you. Sound good?"*

*"Uh...is she suspicious of me?" Justin asks. "Things weren't going well for me before Mina shot Santiago."*

*"Raquel is probably suspicious of everyone...but you're still alive. You heard some of Santiago's people have disappeared, but Raquel has pretty much left you alone. You going to try to avoid her?"*

*Justin shakes his head. "Nah, I'm hoping Santiago didn't get a chance to share anything with her before Mina killed him. Clean slate!" I laugh, and Derrick rolls his eyes—once again, Gustavo escapes the noose.*

*"Doña Raquel calls you both into Santiago's old office; she has new security, several mafiosos you don't recognize with serious firepower. She also shares Santiago's style: impeccably dressed and accessorized. She gestures for you to sit in chairs across from her desk."*

*"Can I size her up?" Justin asks. I nod; he rolls, and gets a 12. "I'll take how can I show you submission?, what do you intend to do next? and what do you wish I'd do right now?"*

*I think Raquel is a straightforward NPC: her drive—"avenge her brother"—and her instinct—"send trusted agents"—both put pressure on the PCs and create division between them.*

*"You can tell if you treat her like la jefa, she'll treat you accordingly. She clearly wants you to find Mina. Pictures of her niece cover her desk. In fact, Raquel seems completely focused on getting her revenge..."*

*Justin nods. "Doña Raquel, everyone was sorry to hear about Don Santiago. He was..."*

*"She nods in respect but cuts you off: 'Gracias. But I did not call you here to discuss how much my brother's murder has cost us. I asked you here because I intend to do something about it.'"*

*Santiago's death mixed things up, but now I'm **disrupting their routine**, pushing them into a new conflict while also **announcing future danger**. I want to get back to El Güero's mission, but I don't want to forget about the drama already in motion.*

*"So...what do you want us to do?" Justin asks.*

*"I want you to find my niece. My men aren't familiar with the area, and they haven't been able to track her down. You two know her best.' She looks at you both for a reaction, clearly wondering if either of you is already hiding Mina."*

*Derrick doesn't hesitate. "We haven't seen her Doña Raquel. She took off from the clinic when she shot Don Santiago.' I'm definitely **justifying myself** here." I nod, and Derrick rolls. Six. Mierda.*

*"I'm **helping**," Justin says. "I'll mark two stress, and say 'She doesn't even like us or respect us, Doña Raquel. She wouldn't ever come to us for help!'" I laugh, but his desperation pays off. He hits his helping roll with an 8 and gets Derrick to a 7 total.*

*"She **accepts your reasoning**, but has questions: 'Would you tell me if she had called you, Beto?'"*

*"Of course, Doña. She doesn't matter to me."*

*"Is that true? Or are you **marking a stress**?"*

*"I'm marking stress. I don't want to betray Mina!"*  
 .....



I cut back to Erick and Mina. We know Beto and Gustavo are looking for Mina now, but *La Sicaria* is still mixed up in *El Güero's misión*:

.....  
*"You arranged to meet with Rivera at a cantina downtown, La Tertulia. But when you walk in, you can see you're not the only gringo interested in the governor's beleaguered legislative aide: a DEA agent is sitting at a table with him."*

*"¡Chingao! Do I know them?" Jahmal asks.*

*"Yeah, it's Susan López, a DEA agent who loves to draw attention to your less scrupulous dealings."*

*I'm expanding the scope of the conflict by involving López; Erick's mission doesn't involve the DEA, but I want some American opposition to balance out El Güero...and another CIA agent seems like too much. The DEA has a whole different set of priorities with which I can complicate things!*

*"I'll size her up and see if I can figure out what she's doing here," Jahmal says. He hits his roll with an 8, enough for a single question. "I'll take how could I get you to stop bothering Rivera and fuck off?"*

*"As you and Mina approach the table, you can see López is already watching you. She's not here for Rivera—she wants to talk to you, Erick. The legislative aide is just the bait on her hook..."*

*"I say, 'Hola, chica,' and take up a seat next to her and Rivera. 'I didn't know you were in town. You pissed someone got Santiago before you could?'"*

*"López smiles sarcastically: 'I wanted justice, Erick. Santiago's death wasn't even close—it does nothing for the families of the people he murdered.'"*

*I'm granting López humanity, framing her desire for justice against Erick's cynicism. She isn't a hero or saint, but she's more invested than El Güero.*

*"Rivera—a balding bureaucrat with a pencil mustache and an ill-fitting suit—coughs. 'I'm sorry, but I've really got to be going. I'll be missed if...'"*

*Jahmal says, "What? No. Señor, we came all the way here to meet with you. Why leave now?"*

*"Rivera coughs again, steeling himself to say what comes next: 'Agent López has already offered to resolve the issue I have with the state.'"*

*"Oh, did she?" says Marissa, laughing a bit.*

*I'm revealing a deal done in Erick's absence, making this specific, meaningful challenge an interesting conflict, keeping his life interesting.*

*"I grab López and drag her away," Jahmal says, "Why are you doing this, López? This is my guy."*

*"And now he's my guy. That's how this works."*

*"What do you want?" Jahmal asks.*

*"Someone on the task force is dirty. Give me a name, and Mr. Rivera is yours to handle."*

*López's motive here is still murky—it's not clear who she's really after, maybe Raquel?—but her strategy is clear: pressure Erick to learn the truth. And I'm leaning on Gustavo's secrets too!*

*"I'm proposing a deal," Jahmal says. "I say, 'I'm not giving you a name, López. I don't do that. But I'll set you up to figure it out yourself. How about that?' Am I triggering No Hay Reglas?" I nod. Sounds like a dirty favor to me. "I'll mark the stress for the 12+ then instead of rolling the dice..."*

Now that I have all the pieces in motion, it's time to turn things over to the players and see where they take the narrative:

.....  
*"Beto and Gustavo, what are you all planning? Do you have some way to reach Mina?"*

*"Yeah, I think I still have her cell phone number, assuming she's still carrying one," Derrick says. I look to Mina, she nods. "I'll start by giving her a call and seeing where that goes, what she says."*

*"Sounds fine. You gonna pick up when you see that it's Beto calling, Mina? Or blow him off?"*

*"I'll definitely step away from the table and pick up. 'Hola, cabrón. What the fuck do you want?'"*

*"Raquel knows you killed him; we need to meet."*

*"Are you **pressuring her**, Beto?"*

*"Yeah!" Derrick rolls, and gets a total of 8.*

*"You going to agree to meet or mark a stress, Mina? Either way he's going to let something slip."*

*"Can I hear what it is first?" Marissa asks. "That might make up my mind for me here." I nod and look back at Derrick for Beto's slip of the tongue.*

*"Uh... I think I say, 'Gustavo and I are worried that you're all alone. Just want to make sure you're doing okay.' That way Mina knows he's involved."*

*"Oh, fuck that. I'm not going anywhere near that weasel. I mark the stress," Marissa says. "You pick a time and place, Beto. Just text me and I'll try to meet you there.' You can tell she's lying."*

*"I'm serious, Mina!' I want to **propose a deal** and get her to change her mind. Is that cool even though I already **pressured her** about this?"*

*"Yeah, totally different tactics. What do you say?"*

*"Raquel is out for blood. You meet with me and talk, and I'll help you stay ahead of her. Deal?"* Derrick rolls and gets a 7, enough to make the offer stick.

*"I'm gonna **interfere**," Marissa says. "I wager two stress and say 'Listen to me, you pinche halcón, we wouldn't be in this mess if you hadn't called my dad!'"*

Marissa rolls, adding +2 from the stress wagered, but the dice are unkind. Snake eyes. She marks the stress—filling her track—and I get to make a move.

I need to **be a fan of Marissa's character**, and she hasn't been a big part of these scenes yet. Erick's taken the lead on most of his mission, and Mina is just kind of along for the ride so far.

I decide to make things a bit more physical: "Your yelling seems to have attracted attention, Mina. You see someone across the street look directly at you. It's Tiburón. He's been following you? Or maybe López? Hard to say. What do you say to Beto's offer?"

*"I'll **point Beto at an interested party**. You want someone to make a deal with you to take on Raquel? I have a DEA agent right here who would love to talk. Want me to give her your number?"*

Derrick laughs. "Nope. I'm going to use **Vendedor** to mark a stress and make Mina pick a different option. I'll say, 'I saved your life, Mina. Please.'"

*¡Órale! I love it. Mina can't get away. She's got to either impose a condition or adjust the price...*

*"Fuck. I'll take **impose a condition**. 'Fine! Only you, though. I don't want to see that pinche polizeta anywhere near us when we meet. Okay?'"*

I've got two great threads cooking—Mina's meeting with Beto and Erick's betrayal of Gustavo—but I've got to honor Mina's miss:

.....  
 "Mina, as soon as you hang up, you see Tiburón answer a call on his own phone." I'm **threatening her interests**, showing Tiburón getting orders from Raquel. "What do you do?"

"Goddamit. Erick, I think we need to leave." I look at Jahmal. Is he ready to take off?

"We're not done yet, Mina. Señor Rivera and I are still discussing his unique predicament."

"I come back to the table. Tiburón is outside. He's going to spot us together. You want him dead, let's fucking go." I'm **pressuring him** to go after Tiburón." Marissa rolls...and gets another miss.

Time to **escalate a situation to violence**: "Erick doesn't have a chance to respond before the sound of gunfire fills the cantina. You look out the front window to see Tiburón opening fire with an AK-47, spraying bullets everywhere. What do you do?"

Marissa says. "Can I use **Mirar** to **read a charged situation**?" I nod; she rolls. A total of 8. She gets just one question. "**Where's my escape route?**"

"Tiburón is out front, but you don't see anyone coming through the back. You'll have to cross his line of fire, but if you make it you can probably get away. Erick, how about you? What do you do?"

"I'm shooting this dude. He's one of my objectives, right? Has he seen me yet or is he focused on Mina?"

"It looks like he's focused on Mina. He was taking pictures of her, but he probably didn't see you yet."

Jahmal grins. "Perfect. I **turn to violence** against him. I've got a clean shot, right?" I nod; Tiburón has totally exposed himself to get at Mina. Jahmal rolls... but only gets a six. He looks to Marissa for help.

"I...my...my stress track is full. I can't help you."

I jump in. I want to **be a fan of everyone's character** here. Things are bad, but I want this to be a tense, dramatic scene, not a comedy of errors:

"You draw your gun, Erick...and realize Mina looks freaked out, like she can remember too clearly when she last got shot. You level your gmm just as Tiburón realizes you're there, turning to shoot you."

Jahmal groans. "Am I **getting shot** again!?"

I laugh. "You're the one who decided to go in guns blazing! Looks like a +0 roll too. He's a pro with an AK-47 and he knows he needs to kill you."

Jahmal's rolls are tragic: another miss. I say, "You gonna use **Siete Vidas**?" Jahmal nods. "Cool. Let's see what Mina does, and we'll come back to Erick."

"I'm gonna kill Tiburón," Marissa says. "Fuck running away." She **turns to violence**, hitting a 10+! "I'll take everything but **resist marking stress**. I can't mark it anyway; my track is already full."

"You don't miss—the sicario's head snaps back as he slumps against the wall. What do you do now?"

Marissa is quick: "I look to Erick. He isn't dead?"

"Nah," Jahmal says, "I **marked in a stress box to survive**. What does this cost me to stay alive?"

"It's a messy wound," I say. "One bullet caught you in the face. **Take a -1 to Grit**. You'll recover, but you'll never be the same. What do you two do?"

## AFTERWORD

At long last, *cabrones*, we have reached the end. This *libro* is a true labor of love, a genuine obsession that would not let me go until we arrived at this precise moment. ¡Órale, amigos!

I started working on **Cartel** when I wrapped up writing **Urban Shadows** in late 2014. I was proud of the nuance Andrew Medeiros and I brought to that game, but I wanted to try and connect my work in roleplaying games with my experiences as a Mexican-American gamer.

But when I started working on “my Latino game,” I struggled to connect my perspective to an experience players could love. I couldn’t just set a game in Mexico; I had to find a time and a place that evoked the pain and the promise of Mexican culture while giving the players an experience worth having again and again.

When I watched **Breaking Bad**, it clicked for me. **Breaking Bad** is set in my hometown—Albuquerque, NM—but it’s a story about white people. It explores themes and ideas that are central to my heritage...but with Latinos at the fringes of the narrative. I realized that the game I wanted to write was right in front of me: the drug war, from the perspective of the Mexican people who live in the middle of it.

Yet, I had no idea that creating a game about *México* would be quite this kind of journey.

Nearly six years have passed since I started working on **Cartel**. In that time, I’ve wrestled with the ambiguities of the game I’ve created, and I’ve heard feedback from some who believe that no “game” can capture these kinds of experiences, and that **Cartel** achieves little but the glorification and perpetuation of *narcocultura*. I’ve thought long and hard about these critiques.

But—for me—**Cartel** hasn’t ever been about glorifying *los carteles*; it’s about finding human moments amidst the sprawling catastrophe of *la guerra contra el narco*. It’s about exploring what it means to live in the supply chain. It’s about connecting across borders, and seeing the people (and their conflicts) on the other side as real.

Nicolás Medina Mora wrote—in a recent, scathing review of a terrible novel about drugs and immigration set in Mexico—that “Mexico is an infinite subject to which one must dedicate a lifetime to understand that it is impossible to understand it.” **Cartel** has taught me I know nothing about the drug war. Nothing except what is here in these pages, truth wrestled from the lies we tell ourselves to avoid seeing *la guerra antidrogas* clearly. It isn’t nearly enough. It will have to do.

—Mark Diaz Truman, May 12, 2020



# GLOSSARY

It is impossible to convey translations for all of the Spanish used by *los narcos* in Durango, but here are a few words and phrases that regularly appear in **Cartel**:

- ▶ **abuelo/abuela**: a grandfather or grandmother
- ▶ **amigo/amiga**: friend
- ▶ **bienvenidos**: welcome, greetings
- ▶ **cabrón/cabrona**: motherfucker, asshole, a badass; all-purpose vulgar epithet
- ▶ **carteles**: the organizations that control drug trafficking throughout Mexico
- ▶ **ciencia**: science!
- ▶ **cocinero/cocinera**: a *narco* who often makes cocaine, meth, or heroin for *los carteles*
- ▶ **con todos**: all together, completely
- ▶ **corrido**: a ballad focused on a story, usually with a moral or message at the end
- ▶ **enlaces**: ties or relationships between people
- ▶ **entrarle**: to go, to make it happen
- ▶ **esposo/esposa**: a spouse, husband, or wife
- ▶ **fiesta**: a party or celebration
- ▶ **güey**: dude, guy, buddy, friendly interjection
- ▶ **halcón**: low-level narco, named after a hawk
- ▶ **hermano/hermana**: brother or sister
- ▶ **jefe/jefa**: the boss, a leader
- ▶ **juntos**: together, with one another
- ▶ **la guerra antidrogas**: the war on drugs.
- ▶ **la guerra contra el narco**: literally, the war against those who traffick in drugs
- ▶ **llaves**: keys, a mechanism of advancement
- ▶ **matones**: violent thugs
- ▶ **mijo/mija**: slang for “my boy” or “my girl”
- ▶ **mordidas**: bribes, favors, payments
- ▶ **muchacho/muchacha**: slang for boy or girl
- ▶ **narco/narca**: anyone involved in the drug trade, even a low-level *halcón*
- ▶ **narcocorrido**: a *corrido* about *narcos*
- ▶ **niño/niña**: a child, a son or daughter
- ▶ **novio/novia**: boyfriend or girlfriend
- ▶ **órale**: a slang term of excitement
- ▶ **pandilla**: a gang, usually amateur thugs
- ▶ **pendejo/pendeja**: idiot, moron, fool
- ▶ **pinche**: goddamn or fucking, as an adjective
- ▶ **plata o plomo?**: silver or lead?; “do you want to get paid or do you want to get shot?”
- ▶ **plaza**: an area of importance to the cartels, a route for smuggling and production
- ▶ **polizeta**: a dirty cop, a pun on the name of Los Zetas, a feared and deadly cartel
- ▶ **primo/prima**: a cousin
- ▶ **químicos**: chemicals, often industrial
- ▶ **rata**: a mole within a crime organization
- ▶ **sicario/sicaria**: a feared cartel enforcer
- ▶ **teniente**: a lesser boss among the *narcos*, working for bigger *jefes* up the chain
- ▶ **tío/tía**: an uncle or aunt

# TAGS

Assets and items in **Cartel** come with tags, descriptive words that alter mechanics, assign constraints, or offer the players cues for how they work in the fiction. Here are a few examples:

- ▶ **AP (mechanical)**: armor piercing ammo ignores a target's armor, including the +1 usually granted when a PC *gets fucking shot*.
- ▶ **Area (mechanical, cue)**: consider each target within the area to be equally affected.
- ▶ **Armored (mechanical)**: armored NPCs suffer little harm when injured, and armored PCs always get +1 (cover) when they *get fucking shot*.
- ▶ **Autofire (mechanical, cue, constraint)**: this weapon can be used as an +area weapon but doing so requires the shooter to reload.
- ▶ **Bulky (constraint)**: this item is impossible to keep concealed or hidden without effort.
- ▶ **Close (constraint)**: this weapon can only be used against someone within close range of you, roughly between 2 and 10 meters away.
- ▶ **Concealable (cue)**: this item is easy to keep out of sight, small enough to fit in a pocket.
- ▶ **Costly (constraint, cue)**: this item requires regular financial upkeep to function properly.
- ▶ **Expensive (cue)**: this item is incredibly valuable and likely to be stolen if left unattended.
- ▶ **Far (constraint)**: this weapon can only be used to target someone more than 10 meters away.
- ▶ **Grapple (mechanical, constraint)**: the target of a successful attack with this weapon must break free to avoid further harm and injury.
- ▶ **Hand (constraint)**: this weapon can only be used against someone within a meter or so of your reach, i.e. the length of the weapon.
- ▶ **Hi-tech (constraint, cue)**: this item or weapon is a valuable piece of technology that requires special care if it breaks down.
- ▶ **Informed (cue)**: this asset has regular knowledge of recent events and gossip and can connect PCs to other friendly sources.
- ▶ **Loud (cue)**: everyone nearby hears, and can identify the noise. It wakes up sleeping people, startles people who aren't expecting it, etc.
- ▶ **Messy (cue)**: this weapon inflicts severe and bloody wounds and destroys the area around the target. Not suited to precision work.
- ▶ **Persistent (cue)**: this item has constant features that allow the item's use without previously stating a plan of attack or use.
- ▶ **Reload (cue)**: this weapon has limited ammo and needs to be reloaded often when used.

# INDEX

Agendas (MC) – 118  
Catholic Church – 27, 28, 62  
Durango – 7, 28–29  
Enlaces – 84  
Los Estados Unidos – 18, 25, 61  
Guadalajara Cartel – 18, 19  
Gulf Cartel – 17, 19, 26,  
Lifestyle – 68, 72, 80, 131  
Llaves – 68, 73–75, 80, 141, 146, 147  
Moves – 34–67, 123–131, 138  
    Basic Moves – 38–57  
    Heat Moves – 64–67, 131  
    MC Moves – 123–129  
    Stress Moves – 58–63  
Playbooks  
    El Concinero – 23, 87–91, 135  
    La Esposa – 87, 92–95, 135  
    El Halcón – 23, 87, 96–99, 135  
    El Narco – 21, 22–24, 87, 100–103, 136  
    La Polizeta – 26, 87, 104–107, 136  
    La Rata – 87, 108–111, 136  
    La Sicaria – 23, 87, 112–115, 136  
Las Plazas – 20, 21, 22  
Principles – 120–122  
Safety Tools – 13, 58, 146, 149  
Sinaloa Cartel – 6, 7, 17, 19, 21, 25, 26,  
Stress – 37, 38, 50, 58–63, 68, 69, 132, 133, 144  
Los Zetas – 7, 17, 19, 26

## Basic Moves

Get Fucking Shot – 36, 50–53, 71, 140  
Get the Truth – 36, 44, 45  
Help or Interfere – 36, 54, 55, 58, 138  
Justify Your Behavior – 36, 38, 39  
Pressure Someone – 36, 40, 46, 47  
Propose a Deal – 36, 40, 41  
Push Your Luck – 36, 38, 42, 43, 139  
Size Someone Up – 36, 48, 49  
Strain Your Finances – 36, 56, 57, 72  
Turn to Violence – 36, 50, 51

## Heat Moves

Avoid Suspicion – 64, 65  
Flee from Los Federales – 64, 67  
Leave a Messy Crime Scene – 64, 66

## Stress Moves

Confess Your Sins to a Priest – 58, 62  
Dish Out a Beatdown – 58, 63  
Lose Yourself in a Substance – 58, 60, 61  
Verbally Abuse or Shame Someone – 58, 59

