

Handsome Ranch: Framed

Part four of the Handsome Ranch adventure path.

Opening note:

The player characters should still be hiding out in the cabin on Handsome Ranch after a run in with Sheriff Daily and several of Maynard's men. If not, they can range out on this adventure from the comfort of the ranch without any problem. Further, it is assumed that Sheriff Daily survived the gunfight with the player characters (if it took place), but if not then simply translate any mention of him to his replacement...which would be someone appointed by Damien Marus himself and so just as ill disposed toward the player characters as Daily was.

It should be noted here that the player characters have likely had it easy up until now. Everyone they've confronted so far has probably underestimated them, assuming they're just a bunch of vagabond orphans. With all the trouble stirring and in light of the fact they've managed to survive so far, Marus' gunmen (and more to the point, Marus himself) won't be underestimating them any further. We're going to start pushing the player characters to evolve and survive, so the obstacles they face from here on will be a bit tougher than those that have gone before.

Background:

After allowing Rance Maynard to probe his enemy's defenses with the horse rustling drive against Handsome Ranch, Damien Marus is prepared to wage war in earnest with Karl Handsome. Having developed a bit more respect for the ranch hands in light of recent events, he first takes steps to draw out Handsome's forces before striking his first blow. In true villainy fashion he targets those closest to Handsome and all those that might support him directly in the days to come. Even the neighboring ranchers and farmers have been warned, in no uncertain terms, to stay

out of the conflict.

First a generous bounty is put out on the player characters (and incidentally on Maia Lin as well), then the local preacher becomes the target of an armed assault in order to draw Mrs. Belford into a trap. Finally, with Handsome's allies all tied up with their individual troubles, Marus uses his influence with the local law to frame Handsome for the mysterious disappearances that have been plaguing the area recently. His control over the magistrate for the area and his friendly relations with the governor making a fair trial for Karl Handsome rather unlikely.

Synopsis:

This episode primarily consists of the player characters dashing around dealing with a rash of crises designed to keep them away from Handsome Ranch long enough for Karl Handsome to be arrested and taken away. Arriving too late to prevent the arrest or oppose the lawmen conducting it, the player characters will be forced to work behind the scenes to clear his name in the next two episodes.

In Act I the player characters have to deal with bounty hunters who've stumbled across their cabin while hunting for Maia Lin. From them they have the opportunity to discover Marus' plan to lay siege to Pastor Millford's homestead. And that there's a bounty out on their heads as well. When the two bounty hunters finally recognize them the player character then have to defend themselves.

In Act II our heroes have inadvertently learned of the planned assault on Pastor Millford's home from the bounty hunters. Arriving there they find Mrs. Belford and Pastor Millford already under siege by Marus' men. After helping fend off their attackers and rescuing the two, the players track

the men back to their camp to hit them before they regroup.

In Act III the players find the abandoned farm where Marus' men were ranging out from is now the scene of some disturbance. Finding out what's going on without bringing the law down on their heads presents itself a problem. But an unexpected ally appears to rescue them, possibly revealing some trouble that's looming in the future for Mr. Handsome in the process.

The players now get to meet Buford "Hoss" Wrangler, one of the governor's more renowned investigators, and may be able to help him ferret out what went on here.

In Act IV the player characters dash back to Handsome Ranch, escorting "Hoss" Wrangler to an interview with Mr. Handsome. On the way the player characters run afoul of a group of Marus' gunmen set to ambush them should they attempt that very thing. If "Hoss" is with them, this may serve as an opportunity to put both they and Mr. Handsome in a more favorable light with the Governor's office. Regardless, they eventually arrive back at Handsome Ranch, too late to intercede on Karl Handsome's behalf.

Opening Scene: Cabin Fever

For our opening scene we'll simply be giving the player characters free rein for a bit to see what they do. Encourage them to get into character and especially to reacquaint themselves with their character's role playing Traits. If they've any unfinished personal business, encourage them to wrap that up now as well. Then step back a minute and see what unfolds. Paint the scene at the cabin as early morning, with the character rising up at the crack of dawn to see to

whatever day to day activities they normally would around the cabin. With plenty of firewood and supplies there really shouldn't be anything in the way of chores for them to do, so they should feel that they have the day free to pursue whatever takes their fancy. Our goal here is two-fold. First to grant them the opportunity to pick up a quick Plot Point for good role playing if they like (without necessarily prodding them to do so) and to establish where each of them are and what they're doing when Act I, Scene I begins. Since this episode will have a bit more action and conflict than those prior they could probably use an extra Plot Point or two among them and getting into character will simply make the episode more enjoyable as well. None of this is at all necessary of course but they'll be steppin' and fetchin' from here on, so this may be the only chance they have to get their feet firmly under them.

Act I, Scene I: Bounties

Once you've given the players their head for a bit, our rim world bounty hunters, Buck and Joe Bitterman, will ride up.

If any of the player characters are outside, they have a chance to detect them coming long before they arrive. Otherwise, hearing the two riders approach from inside the cabin won't be likely until they're practically right outside the door.

Detecting the Bittermans approaching out in the woods while outside the cabin: (*Hard Alertness + Perception/Hearing*)

Detecting the Bittermans riding into the yard from the woods while inside the cabin: (*Hard Alertness + Perception/Hearing*)

Once the two bounty hunters have

spotted the cabin they'll ride right in to dismount in the yard. Unless the player characters meet them outside or have weapons trained on them from inside the house, they'll simply knock on the front door. Buck and Joe are well aware they're on Handsome Ranch lands but haven't a clue yet that the folks in this cabin are bounties themselves.

You should point out to the player characters beforehand that, while wandering onto someone else's land is trespassing and technically illegal, most folks don't dot the boundaries of their land with scores of warning signs. So it's hard to get a conviction against anyone who wanders through accidentally and would be considered a pretty rude thing to even try. As such, it's common behavior for even the most ornery folks to greet others politely who come on to their land without permission before asking them to leave. At that point if the intruders aren't willing to leave promptly, then things can get confrontational. Besides, you won't get many visits if you're that tetchy about your property anyway.

For this reason, though the Bittermans are aware they're on private property without permission, they're comfortable knocking on the door to greet the residents and assume if they aren't welcome that will give them opportunity to say so. Hence any overly defensive behavior on the part of the player characters, such as pointing guns and such, will seem extremely unusual and the Bittermans will almost certainly realize right off the bat that the player characters have a bounty out on them.

Once Buck and Joe have greeted the player characters, assuming there wasn't an uncomfortable confrontation right away, they'll openly identify themselves as bounty hunters and offer a wanted poster to whoever fronts for the group. As they'll assume the player characters are employees of Karl Handsome they'll expect them to recognize Maia Lin's face on the poster without having to identify her. Buck and Joe are riding through here

on the way to Handsome Ranch to interview ranch hands there, hoping someone will be able to offer a clue as to Maia Lin's whereabouts. They're after the 200cr bounty on her head for horse thievery. Since they stumbled across the cabin purely by accident, they naturally stopped here first. Any player character who reads the wanted poster will recognize Maia Lin and will note that the bounty is signed both by Sheriff Daily and the local magistrate. If Sheriff Daily is dead or otherwise out of the picture, they'll learn the name of his replacement now.

All in all, the interaction should be amiable and polite on the Bitterman's end. They're not exactly friendly folk but they know how to interview people without making asses of themselves. They'll simply ask if the player characters know the girl on the poster, although they'll assume they do, and if they have any ideas as to where she can be found. Since they're aware they're talking to people who probably worked closely with Maia Lin in the past, they'll be on the lookout for prevarication or flat out lies and they won't hesitate to call someone on it. They won't mind being pushy about it either, though they'll start off politely enough.

Oops...

During the course of conversation it's important that Buck and Joe mention the upcoming assault on Pastor Millford's house. In the effort to make conversation one or the other will mention it off-handedly, intending simply to get the group talking about something they figure they'll have strong opinions about. A simple technique to break the ice and get folks to open up, one they're familiar enough with.

The mistake here being that they've forgotten the assault isn't supposed to take place until noon. It hasn't happened yet.

The player characters naturally won't know what in the 'verse they're talking about and the Bittermans will immediately realize they're blunder. Having been in town that previous evening at the local saloon, they were on hand to witness Rance Maynard hiring on every ruthless gunman he could dig up in town for the assault. In point of fact, they likely would have signed up themselves if they hadn't already made plans to ride out here looking for Maia Lin.

Once the cat's out of the bag they'll try at first to backpedal. *"Oh, well. Never mind, then. Ain't really none o' our business, no-how."* But if the player characters are aware of Mrs. Belford's relationship with Pastor Paul Milford or for some other reason push the matter, they'll reluctantly relate their account of Maynard hiring on men for the attack in town last night. They'll give as little information as they can get away with but in the end all they know is that Rance Maynard was hiring on a crew to go shoot up Paul Milford's house at noon today.

Act I, Scene II: The Bittermans

During the course of their interview with the player character, the Bittermans will suddenly realize they recognize some of the faces in front of them from other wanted posters they have in their saddle bags. This will probably happen when the interview is winding down or, if the player characters have given them reason to be suspicious, even right off the bat. If the player characters look like they're about to ride out and rescue Millford, this is good time for it to take place as well.

Neither Buck nor Joe are especially good at hiding their reactions so when they realize their looking at a whole smorgasbord of bounties their eyes widen, they stop talking and they

stiffen up for a moment. This should be all that any intuitive player characters need to realize just what's happened.

Realizing the bounty hunters recognize them and that they likely have bounties on their heads as well: (Average Alertness + Perception/Intuition or Deduction)

Anyone with the Intuitive Leaps asset (or similar) should apply that Trait here as well.

This is practically a freebie with the Average difficulty. But if none of the player characters who are interacting with Buck and Joe catch on here the Bittermans are free to smile politely, ride off and set up to lay siege to the cabin. And of course if you don't want to hand them this one on a silver platter, you're free to bump the difficulty up to Hard or higher if you like.

If the player characters do realize they've just been made and figure out what this suggests (that they must have bounties on their own heads) then the Bittermans get an opportunity of their own to realize "that they know that *they* know". (*Whether it's an opposed check or not depends on whether the player characters specifically state they're hiding their own reactions to the realization.*)

This naturally leads to an immediate confrontation between both parties and it's time to roll Initiative.

If the Bittermans don't realize they just gave themselves away, they'll break off the interview politely and ride away, intending to set up and lay siege to the cabin.

Either way, should they manage to so it unopposed then they'll lope their horses out into the woods to safety and hoof it back to the cabin on foot. Buck will circle around to approach the front door from the flank with his shotgun (having snatched it off his horse). Joe will go prone (for the cover

it provides) and set up his heavy rifle to cover Buck from anywhere up to 500' (medium range for his rifle) that grants him full view of the cabin. Once they're both in position Buck will confront anyone in the front yard from the cover of the corner of the cabin. If anyone is inside, he'll call out to them to surrender and warn they'll start shooting if they aren't quick about it.

From that position they'll have decent cover over the cabin (at least the front part of it) but likely won't have a clear shot at anyone inside who isn't sticking their head right out a window. If the player characters don't quickly hustle out with their hands in the air the Bittermans will then resort to burning them out rather than trying to shoot inside, though they're generous enough to issue a warning before doing so. In that case Buck will produce a bottle of flammable alcohol, fashion a quick 'n dirty Molotov cocktail and toss it up on the roof. This will give the player characters plenty of time to figure out what they're going to do about all this, though I'd start pouring smoke down into the cabin interior after too long. If you actually have to set someone's hair on fire to get them moving, don't be shy about doing that either.

Beyond that the GM is free to resolve the situation however he likes. Buck and Joe aren't afraid of a good fight but if either of them are seriously wounded they'll give up on the bounties and break off if they can. Otherwise they'll fight for their lives if they figure it's come to that. So long as they have a reasonable shot at the bounty on the player character's heads (200cr apiece, wanted alive), they'll do their best to collect on it.

Should the players actually be captured, Buck and Joe will slap on the handcuffs and do their best to hustle them back to town where they'll be turned over to Sheriff Daily for the reward.

Act II, Scene I: Pastor Paul

The previous evening Rance Maynard rode into town and whipped up a quick band of money-hungry gunmen, promising a decent score in exchange for helping him shoot up Pastor Paul Millford's house at noon today. Though he gave a thin excuse of wanting to seek revenge for Millford horning in on one of his lady friends, it's all the excuse these men needed to shoot up a house and collect a nice easy paycheck. Most of them don't need any excuse anyway.

Maynard's orders (from Marus) were to draw Handsome's crew off the ranch and keep them busy today. His goal then was to be good and loud about his intentions for hiring these men on, assuming word will have gotten back to Handsome Ranch and some of the ranch hands there will come try to stop him. He expects Mrs. Belford especially to whip up some kind of opposing force to send after him, having become aware of rumors concerning her and the pastor.

What Maynard doesn't know is that Marus' campaign of intimidation in the area has worked to his disadvantage here. No one in town was willing to get involved enough to send word to the ranch about what was going on. Likewise few people even suspect Mrs. Belford has any kind of illicit relationship with the preacher and so no one thought to send word to her anyway. Everyone has always assumed she's shacking up with Mr. Handsome. It's actually pure happenstance that the players have found out about the assault at all. And pure coincidence that Mrs. Belford just happened to have snuck off to spend time with Paul Millford today.

When Maynard arrives at Millford's house just before noon, he hustles the hired guns off their horses and into the

tree line off the property, facing the front of Millford's house. He then rides up to the house with the two or three gunmen of his own that he brought along to call Millford out and state his intentions to shoot up his house until he surrenders himself for a good whuppin'. Once engaged, he and his men drop back to the trees with the others to amuse themselves taking potshots at the house and terrorizing whoever's inside.

Maynard's intentions here aren't necessarily to do any real damage, though if Millford or anyone else is killed in the process he won't mind a bit. His intention is simply to cause a ruckus and wait for some of Handsome's ranch hands to come along to try to stop him, leaving Karl Handsome unprotected. Then, simply shoot whatever ranch hands have come along.

Maynard is surprised and delighted to find Mrs. Belford is already here, having come to do a bit of sparkin' with Paul. Just one more ally of Handsome's out of the way. With Paul being your typical shepherd and a man of peace, he'll have weapons on hand to defend himself but it won't occur to him to open fire on the men out the windows. He'll be hunkered down inside under cover to wait it out, defending himself only if any of the men break in to come after him. Mrs. Belford is a bit more aggressive on the other hand but lacks anything resembling fighting skills, so she'll likewise be armed but hunkered down alongside Pastor Millford. She'll just be a lot more ticked off about it.

Once the player characters arrive on the scene they have all manner of options available to them. The most obvious being to either drive off Maynard and his men, dash into the house to fire on the men from there or get into the house in order to get Pastor Paul and Mrs. Belford to safety. Driving off Maynard's band of hired gunmen isn't really difficult. Just shooting two or three dead or at least

badly wounding as many should do the trick. Though Maynard's paying well enough, they were expecting to simply have some fun shooting up a house and terrorizing a preacher. They didn't at all expect to get themselves killed. They'll toss up their hands and ride off, leaving Maynard to deal with the mess.

Maynard won't really care, though. His goal here is to draw the player characters out of hiding, which he's done. He'll stick around to keep them occupied a bit if he can do so without taking too many casualties but one or two more deaths or serious injuries will convince him his work is done here as well.

I'd recommend a solid dozen gunmen here, using the stats for "Maynard's Thugs" given in the NPC section for all the men here, including those hired in town. This puts enough guns in play to make the whole situation dangerous for the player characters if they don't play smart, but still easy enough for them to drop three or four fairly quickly.

Once Maynard's hired gunmen from town have run off and one or two more of his own men are down, one of Maynard's men can be overheard hollering at Maynard for the lot of them to retreat back to "the Shire". The player characters will immediately recognize this as the local nickname for an old abandoned farm a few miles away (*named for the fact that the thick sod house there is so overgrown that it resembles a certain hobbit's abode from an old children's story*). It's clear that this is where the gunmen have set up their camp for the assault.

Maynard will have already come to the conclusion that he's accomplished his goals well enough and any more casualties would be hard to justify to Marus. He immediately orders his men to retreat back to "the Shire" but makes a point of hollering toward Millford's house first.

"Ya'll just hold on in thar! We're gonna rustle up some more men and some

*kerosene 'n then we'll be right back!
We're gonna have us right proper
bonfire then, too!"*

Maynard intends no such thing, however. It's just a parting shot and a last attempt to terrorize the folks in the house before he rides off. The player characters won't know this of course and both Belford and Millford will take him at his word.

This is also a bit of a gaff on Maynard's part. Though he and his men did initially set up camp at "the Shire" before riding into town and picking up some more men, he really wouldn't have wanted the player characters riding by there just yet. In the heat of the moment it just didn't occur to him to hush up about it.

Act II, Scene II: Counterattack

Once Maynard and his men have been driven off the player characters have a chance to interact freely with Mrs. Belford and Pastor Paul. Mrs. Belford won't suffer questions concerning what she's doing here, though. She'll get good and riled up if they get nosy about it, too.

Both will have taken Maynard's threat to return with kerosene to heart, though. Once everyone's patched themselves up and checked on everyone else, Pastor Paul will encourage the player characters to ride into town to fetch the sheriff. Mrs. Belford will immediately shoot that idea down, reminding him that the sheriff and most everyone else with authority around here is on Marus' side in all this.

After a bit of reflection she'll come to the conclusion that the player characters have to ride out after Maynard instead, hitting him and his men before they have time to regroup at their camp. Pastor Paul will immediately agree and set about getting himself and Mrs. Belford out of the house and somewhere safe. *(They'll*

both eventually wind up at Handsome Ranch, the only safe place left for either of them once Handsome's arrested.) It'll then be up to the player characters to stop Maynard and his men from coming back to burn down the pastor's house.

Should they disagree with the plan being presented, Mrs. Belford won't have forgotten who they work for and who's in charge here. She'll listen to their objections and then order them to do as she damned well said in the first place. She won't hesitate to lower the boom on them if they don't get to steppin' and fetchin' real quick like, too.

Since we're assuming the player characters are all familiar with "the Shire" and know right where it is, it shouldn't be necessary to actually track Maynard and his men back there. They can simply ride straight there to catch up with them along the way or hit them while they're regrouping at their camp.

Unless one of the players decides specifically to track Maynard and his men or actually manage to catch up to them first, they won't know that they've hared off the trail to ride back to town instead. Any attempt to track the men should then become progressively harder until they lose the trail (or the GM simply rules that they lose it). In the end we'll have to be a little heavy handed and just leave them no other reasonable option than riding off to "the Shire".

Act III, Scene I: The Shire

Once the player characters come barreling onto the old abandoned farm, expecting to find Maynard and his men in order to shoot them up a bit, they instead find a small group of townsfolk wandering around the place in a bit of a tizzy.

Last night when Maynard and his men first camped here they weren't just taking their rest before heading on into town. They were setting up Mr. Handsome to be framed and arrested

on some pretty outrageous charges.

The back story here (that the players won't know about and likely won't find out for another couple of episodes) is that one of Damien Marus' hired killers is responsible for the rash of disappearances over the last few months. What he thought was just another cold blooded killer (of which he has several in his employ) turned out to be a full-fledged serial killer, born and bred on a border world. When word got around concerning the disappearances of several young ladies immediately following his setting the man up in the area, Damien Marus put two and two together, realizing the same man was probably behind a similar series of events back on the border world where he found him. A little digging of his own confirmed that his new hired man was dabbling in a some sadistic torture and murder on the sly. More to the point, without his permission.

After confronting the man about the matter and witnessing the carnage himself, relations between Marus and the killer have been strained. He's since decided to make use of the trouble as best he can by implicating Handsome in the murders, then shuffle the killer off somewhere else to keep him on ice until needed. Somewhere he can't get himself into trouble.

Our killer won't be in agreement with that plan though, and relations between he and Marus will be strained all the more. But that won't come to a head for another couple of episodes.

In the meantime the killer has been moved to a new hideout to cool his heels while Marus arranges him a new place to stay on another moon. His old haunt, the Shire, is now abandoned but still contains the grisly remains of his victims and all the carnage that goes along with that. Rance Maynard, when he and his men rode through last night, simply dropped off a few bits of evidence implicating, of all people, Karl Handsome.

The incredulity of the charges is largely inconsequential though. With the local law and the magistrate in Marus' pocket, even the thinnest connection to anything illegal is all that's needed to have Handsome tossed in jail. From there, whether he's convicted or not doesn't matter all that much. Just being accused of such a

thing will cause grave harm to his credibility and popularity with local folks. Not to mention that being tossed in a local jail cell (as we already established with the horse thieves prior) leaves him at Marus' mercy. The last folks that got thrown in there were all killed there.

Additionally, with the real killer out of business temporarily the locals won't fail to notice the disappearances have stopped with Handsome being taken into custody. That will be enough to get many of them wondering just how well they really knew the man after all.

So when the player characters ride up they'll find the local Sheriff, several deputized men, a few locals who live nearby come to be curious and Buford "Hoss" Wrangler all already on the scene picking it over.

The planted evidence implicating Karl Handsome consists of one his horses (one of those stolen weeks prior, in fact) hitched up in the shed, a patch of Handsome's hair with resulting DNA "fingerprint" and a little something extra Rance Maynard took upon himself to add.

When the player characters arrive "Hoss" and the Sheriff will be hard at work supervising the roughly six or so men they've deputized to dig up the shallow graves behind the sod house. Two bodies will have already been uncovered and are currently lying under blankets nearby. Even a cursory examination reveals these poor women suffered pretty terribly before they died.

The main scene of carnage is down in the basement of the sod house. There the killer used a hodgepodge of tools and implements to torture his victims, sometimes for days, before killing them and burying them out back. His latest victim is still there and was simply shot in the head by Damien Marus when he came to confront the man. His way of expressing his displeasure with taking such dangerous chances without orders.

Since the killer was hustled right off the property by Marus' men, the scene remained relatively intact until now. When "Hoss" Wrangler arrived in town this morning he encountered the Sheriff on his way out with a couple of his men, responding to an "anonymous tip" concerning the Shire. Since that's exactly what he'd come to town to investigate, he tagged along. Much to the Sheriff's displeasure.

Once there the scene in the basement and the obviously freshly dug graves out back got the men hustling to investigate. "Hoss" was able to spot the hair clippings thumbed into congealed blood on the table next to the last victim. He then took a hair and DNA scanned it with a newtech handheld scanner (causing the Sheriff quite a bit of envy). The horse is clearly marked with the Handsome brand on its flank, identifying it as Handsome's right off.

This would have been enough to have "Hoss" riding out to ask Handsome some hard questions and taking a DNA sample to compare with the hair found at the scene...were it not for Rance Maynard's little contribution.

Maynard rode through last night to hitch the stolen horse up in the shed and stick the hair recovered from Handsome's last hair cut in town next to the victim. Though the carnage he witnessed there disturbed even him, he just couldn't help himself from contributing a bit to scene. He wrote Handsome's name along one of the baseboards in the victim's blood.

Of course, the victim had been long dead by then, not to mention still tied to the table she'd been tortured and shot upon. And "Hoss" isn't near fool enough to think the woman rose from the dead, untied herself, wrote "Handsome" on the baseboard in her own blood and then tied herself back up again.

After that a second look at the hair on the table revealed it had thumbed into the tacky blood a long time after the women died, too. Not to mention

clearly having been trimmed rather than being pulled or falling out. For that matter "Hoss" takes a capture of the thumbprint up close and personal and if he follows up on it, it won't match Handsome nor the victim (it's Maynard's thumbprint).

The whole scene just screams "set up" to a seasoned vet like "Hoss". Which led to him to taking control of the investigation and putting the men to work digging up the graves for a proper look rather than ride straight out for Handsome Ranch as they had intended.

The Sheriff is naturally pretty sore and surly about that but since "Hoss" Wrangler has clear jurisdiction here, not to mention the ear of the Governor, there isn't a whole lot he can do about it.

Likewise when the player characters ride up and he lurches into action putting them under arrest, he can't stop "Hoss" from shooting that whole idea down as well. He's already heard rumors about that debacle and never did believe a bunch of orphan kids stormed the local jail and shot a bunch of folk in cold blood.

Unless the player characters are twitchy enough to open fire as soon as they spot the Sheriff, he'll holler out, recognizing them, and order his men to arrest them. Buford will then belay that order out of hand and call the player characters forward.

"Well, now. I reckon yer them stone cold killer youngsters what stormed the Sheriff here's jail and murdered all them folk. Leastwise that's what I heard. Can't say ya look all that intimidatin' to me. Why don't ya'll step off yer horses really easy like and come have a chat with old Hoss? I reckon you all got some story-telling' to do."

Act III, Scene II: Buford “Hoss” Wrangler

If “Hoss” is able to talk the player characters off their horses he won’t bother disarming them or arresting them just yet. He’s willing to give them their head for now, though he’ll be keeping a sharp eye out for any foolishness. Objections or insistences that the player characters are a band of dangerous murderers by the Sheriff or anyone else will be ignored, leaving the Sheriff to seethe impotently while “Hoss” interviews the player characters.

This is likely the first opportunity they’ve had to tell their side of the story to anyone in authority. So long as they’re reasonably honest, “Hoss” is more inclined to believe what they have to say over the ridiculous story the Sheriff has relayed to him. This won’t make the Sheriff at all happy but “Hoss” has authority here and the most he’ll be able to do about it is grumble and glare.

If the player characters are particularly successfully in winning “Hoss” over, he’ll likely drag them down to the basement to look over the scene there. He’ll do this not only to take his measure of the crew by confronting them with the horror there and watching their reactions, but also to test them by asking them to relay what they see when they look it over. Feel free to describe the scene however you like. As it has the capacity to be unnerving, we’ll leave it to the individual GM to determine how much horror his players can take in this game without being put off. In the end the players should have the opportunity to note a few things, such as the fact that Handsome’s name couldn’t have been written on the wall by the victim and that the hair sample was obviously planted. Anyone with

decent Perception or especially some Investigation skill has the chance to become “Hoss’s” new buddy.

Determining the unlikely nature of the Handsome’s name scrawled on the baseboard: (*Hard Alertness + Perception/Investigation*)

Realizing the hair was likely pressed into the blood long after it had gone tacky: (*Hard Alertness + Perception/Investigation*)

Once he’s taken his measure of the player characters he’ll be interested in looking more into the conflict between Handsome, the local Sheriff and Marus. He’ll assume the murders he’s here to investigate are related to that whole mess, though they’re actually rather tangential to one another. After taking a moment to face off with the Sheriff and remind him who’s he’s grumbling and glaring at, he’ll order him back to town to sit on his butt and do as little damage as possible for a while. Then he’ll saddle up with the player characters and have them ride with him to Handsome Ranch for a talk with Karl Handsome.

Act IV, Scene I: Bushwhacked

Being the sort to cover his bets, Damien Marus has already determined the player characters represent some real potential for trouble. He won’t want them around when Handsome is implicated in the murders, nor will he want them on hand when lawmen come for Handsome. He’s orchestrated all these events, through his honcho Maynard, mainly to draw out Handsome’s ranch hands, Mrs. Belford and most especially the player characters in particular. He’s also aware that out of the whole bunch, the player characters are the ones most likely to slip through his net and make it back to the ranch before

Handsome is arrested. And since he's sure that won't go well for his plans somehow, he's taken the extra step of setting up an ambush along the road to Handsome Ranch to stop them.

The men he's set up for the ambush are hand picked by him as well, not leaving this particular matter to Rance Maynard as he has so many others. While they might not be professional grade they're a slight bit more effective than the sort of men Maynard's been fielding up to this point. As such, considering the nature of the ambush and the dangerous men they'll be facing, this might be a fairly deadly encounter for the player characters, especially following all the action they've run into up to this point.

Regardless, we're assuming they've managed to earn a few Plot Points during all this and managed to hold on to at least a few of them. If not, this is a good chance for them to learn the wisdom of putting some aside for the climactic ending that typically comes near the end of an episode. Don't cut them any slack here, folks. As previously stated, it's time for our players to catch on to the fact that a proper storm of danger and trouble is building up around them.

The ambush itself is a simple one and makes use of some simple tricks. First, we'll have one man for each player characters (or otherwise make our bushwhackers roughly equivalent in number to the players) and they'll be evenly spaced along the tree line bordering one side of the road. This keeps two group of ambushers on opposite sides of the road from accidentally laying down friendly fire on one another during the ambush. It also grants all of them medium cover from the trees and foliages they'll be making use of to that effect. All are armed with rifles and handguns but will be using the rifles for the attack, allowing them to do some real damage at close range. Additionally,

the setup for the ambush is to startle the horses, which is supposed to leave the players open as Easy targets for the first surprise volley fire.

One of the men, positioned roughly in the middle of the line, will have his hands full with a rope, which he's strung with short, thick bits of bare branch and laid across the road. His plan is to stir the rope violently as the player characters ride up. This will roughly resemble a whole mess of something snakelike stirring in the road and startle the horses. The plan being to slow the player characters down or even bring them to a halt for the bushwhackers to open fire on them.

This one individual then won't be participating in the first round of shots and will have to spend the following turn snatching up and shouldering his rifle as well. Everyone else will be free and ready to open fire.

Should the player characters manage to quickly gain control of their horses, that will indeed render them unawares of the impending attack and thus Easy targets for the first round of shots. Exactly as planned.

The drawback to this plan is that, should the players actually fail to control their mounts and they're left bucking and rearing at the slithering rope at their feet, that will amount to dodging on the horse's part. Whether you extend that dodge roll to their riders (as I would) or simply allow the players the option of utilizing innate defense because of this, is entirely up to you. Either way they won't be the Easy targets the ambushers had planned for.

While riding up on the site of the ambush the player characters naturally have a chance to spot the bushwhackers a turn or two beforehand. But since they've taken care to conceal themselves from just that, it won't be easy.

Spotting the ambush before riding right into it: (*Formidable Alertness + Perception/Vision*)

Once they've stumbled into it the rope-holding bushwhacker violently shakes the rope, sending the horses about to run up on the commotion into a panic.

Controlling one's mount in the face of the snakelike slithering: (*Formidable Willpower + Animals/Riding or similar Animal Handling specialty*)

Those player characters who aren't aware of the ambushers and manage to quickly control their mounts will thus be Easy targets during the first surprise round of fire by the bushwhackers. Those that fail to control their mounts should be given either the horse's dodge roll for that round or at least allowed to utilize Innate Defense if they wish, rather than remain Easy targets.

Any player characters that do spot the ambush are naturally not surprised and get to act during the surprise round. All others have to roll Initiative normally following the first round of free shots.

The GM should be ready for some real carnage here. An ambush is a deadly thing and some of the player characters could very easily be seriously wounded or even at risk of being killed from the first volley alone. Most likely the player characters will burn through whatever Plot Points they have just getting through this last fight of the session alive.

On the other hand they do have something of an ace up their sleeve here. Buford "Hoss" Wrangler is very likely along for the ride and his signature newtech pistol is something to be feared. And should he decide to snatch out his semiautomatic shotgun instead he'll play hell with the bushwhackers, no matter how well

positioned they may be.

Concluding the ambush:

Once the fight is over "Hoss" will snatch up the first still living bushwhacker he can find while the player characters patch up themselves and one other. He hasn't any compunction about playing rough to get a few straight answers either, so don't be shy about having "Hoss" plant a hot gun barrel on a bullet wound or even shooting out a kneecap if the bushwhackers don't sing right off. He should have Damien Marus' name dropped in his lap pretty quick.

Once that's done he'll be bound and determined to have any player characters will at least first aid training seeing to the men's wounds, then having them hogtied and tossed across whatever horse's flank is available.

Nor will he suffer any argument about it either. He's the law around here and he'll make sure the player characters understand they'd best be doing what they're told. He ain't forgot they're wanted murderers in their own right, even if he is fairly convinced that's a load of hogwash.

"Hoss's" intentions here are hauling any surviving bushwhackers back to town. There they'll await transport to the Governor's jail where they can relay accusations against Damien Marus, who "Hoss" already suspected was behind all the mess being stirred up around here.

But that's *after* he talks to Handsome. He doesn't mind letting them bleed a bit in the meantime. They did just shoot at him after all. And if one of them managed to hit him, he might well stop for a bite to eat and a nap along the way.

Only after he's got a witness or two secured will he give the go ahead for the player characters to continue leading him on to Handsome Ranch so he can wrap up that little matter.

Act IV, Scene II: Unwarranted

Once they arrive back at the ranch, they'll find the delays they've suffered have only given Marus time to realize Maynard has messed up somewhere. And that one of the Governor's investigators is intent on stick his nose into his business.

He'll end run that bit of trouble by calling up the Governor directly to complain about the whole mess. Since they're good hunting buddies and Damien Marus has been rather generous with campaign contributions in past years, the Governor will be willing to placate Marus by stepping things up a bit. He'll simply fly another investigator out to the scene with a small band of lawmen of his own to place Handsome under arrest for the murders. Figuring "Hoss" must have gotten tangled up in something troublesome, he'll be concerned about him but is confident he'll see his way through. He always has in the past. It won't cross his mind that Damien Marus himself might be involved in whatever the heck is going on out that way.

The player characters and "Hoss" Wrangler thus arrive in time to witness Handsome being dragged from the dinner table and out to a waiting shuttle in the front yard by the Governor's agents.

Should the player characters so much as approach too closely, the lawmen conducting the whole affair spot them and recognize them right off. They were well briefed while inbound on all the trouble going on around here and know the player characters have warrants for their arrest as well. Assuming the player characters don't react foolishly when they're confronted (and they really shouldn't be in shape to do much about it anyway), "Hoss" will be quick to step up and speak for them. He'll advise the lawmen that

he's already taken this bunch into custody and glare off any questioning looks concerning the fact that they're still armed.

Being rather favored by the Governor, the opposing investigator won't be willing to challenge him on it and will let the matter drop. Regardless, Handsome will be dragged onto the shuttle without delay and the player characters will be forced to watch it take off with their mentor aboard.

"Hoss" won't be willing to intervene in that particular affair just yet.

Wrap Up:

Once Handsome is gone the player characters might want to take stock of the situation around the ranch. They'll find Mrs. Belford hasn't made it back yet (she and Pastor Paul tried to find a safe place for him in town at first but are heading this way now, having failed in that). The only ranch hands about are Group One and possibly Precious and Percy, if the player characters brought them in. Jack Dingo will be around as well, so there will at least be someone old enough to take charge for now. Still and all, the ranch is woefully shorthanded and with Handsome gone things seem dire for the ranch's immediate future.

"Hoss", having witnessed the clumsy set-up at the Shire, riding into an ambush and probably having gotten Damien Marus' name from one of the bushwhackers already has a fairly clear picture shook out in his head about what's going on around here. Unfortunately, that ain't his worry. He was tasked with tracking down who or what's behind the disappearance of all them young lady folk around here recently. The mess between Handsome and Marus is troublesome and he has every intention of filling in the Governor on what he's learned, but he's not at all inclined to get involved directly until the Governor tells him to. For now he's still focused on the

disappearances. All the more now that he's aware there's some sort of mad dog lady killer running about, which he's sure as sunrise convinced ain't Karl Handsome. He'll be off to track down that no good varmint just as soon as Handsome's in the air.

But in the meantime he's not complete heartless and he does take his duty to protect the folks on this moon seriously. Well aware that the player characters have simply got themselves on the wrong side of a very influential (and probably no account himself) Damien Marus, he'll advise them to hunker down low for now.

With a warrant out for them and a bounty as well, just about every homebody with a gun will be looking to collect. For the time being he writes out a quick letter stating his intention to personally rescind both the bounty and the warrants, stamp it with his official seal and hand it over to them before riding off. Hopefully it'll forestall any more level headed folk from trying to take them in. No guarantee against not-so-level headed folk, though. Otherwise, he'll be looking into the matter of the warrants and the bounty as soon as he brings in this crazy killer. Which might take just a little while. Not a whole long while, mind you. "Hoss" generally gets his man fairly quick.

Even if they are arrested or brought in, the letter should serve as warning that their getting hung dead in a jail cell or some such will have him stomping into that jail double quick to see to matters personally. He reckons folks like Sheriff Daily and his ilk oughta think twice on that.

Non-Player Characters

Buck and Joe Bitterman

Rim Planet Bounty Hunters

Agi d6 Str d6 Vit d8
Ale d10 Int d8 Wil d6
Init d6+d10
LP 16

Heavy Revolvers
Mesh Armor
Handcuffs

Buck: Pump action shotgun (d10 W;
Range incr. 40; ROF 2; Mag. 5)

Joe: Heavy Rifle (d8 W; Range incr. 250;
ROF 3; Mag. 50; Laser sight: +1 skill step
to use at close range)

Traits: Addiction (Alcohol) d4, Animals
d6/Riding d8, Contacts d4, Greedy d4,
Lazy d4, Steady Calm d4, Tough d4

Covert d6/Surveillance d10/Streetwise
d12, Guns d6/(Buck: Shotgun
d6)/(Joe: Rifle d8), Influence d4,
Knowledge d6, Perception d6/Tracking
d8/Intuition d10

Twin brothers Buck and Joe have been
in the bounty hunting business for
several years now, though they've only
a couple of dozen captures to their
credit. Though quite skilled neither is
especially ambitious and instances of
tracking down wanted criminals occur
no more frequently than their bar tab
comes up due. Currently it's *overdue*
and they're after the player characters
to set that right.

Sheriff Daily

Corrupt local lawman

Agl d8 Str d8 Vit d8
Ale d8 Int d6 Wil d10
Init d8+d8
LP 18

Medium Pistol
Shotgun (optional)

Traits: Brawler d2, Contacts (Criminal)
d4, Greedy d6, Hooked (Alcohol) d4,
Prejudice (Foreigners/Off-worlders) d4

Athletics d6/Dodge d8/Running d8,
Animals d6/Riding d8, Covert d6,
Discipline d6/Intimidate d8, Guns
d6/Handguns d10/Shotguns d8,
Influence d6/
Persuasion d8, Knowledge d6/Law
d8/Townfolk d10, Medicine d4, Melee
Combat d6/Clubs d10, Perception
d6/Investigation d8, Survival d6/Local
Wilderness d8, Unarmed Combat
d6/Brawling d8

Rance Maynard

Damien Marus' head honcho

Agl d8 Str d8 Vit d8
Ale d6 Int d6 Wil d6
Init d8+d6
LP 16

Knife
Heavy Pistol

Traits: Brawler d2, Contacts d4,
Criminal Past d6, Steady Calm d4,
Rank and Privilege d4, Reputation
(Criminals) d4, Signature Item (Pearl-
handle revolver) d8, Tough d4

Athletics d4, Covert d6/Streetwise
d10, Discipline d6/Leadership d8,
Animals d6/Riding d10, Guns
d6/Pistols d8, Influence d6/Intimidate
d8, Melee Weapons d6, Perception d4,
Unarmed Combat d6

Maynard's thugs

Minions/Mooks

Agl d6 Str d8 Vit d8
Ale d6 Int d6 Wil d6
Init d6+d6
LP 16

Knife

Medium Pistol

Traits: Brawler d4, Convict d6, Hideout d6, Rebellious d4, Smartass d4

Athletics d6/Dodge d8, Covert d6/Sabotage d8/Stealth d8/Streetwise d8, Animals d6, Guns d6/Pistol d8/Rifle d8, Influence d6/Intimidate d8, Melee Weapons d6/Club d8/Knife d8, Perception d6, Survival d4, Unarmed Combat d6/Brawling d8

Paul Millford

Young, Idealistic Preacher

Agl d6 Str d6 Vit d6
Ale d6 Int d6 Wil d12
Init d6+d6
LP 18

Light Revolver
Rifle

Traits: Rank and Privilege d6,
Superstitious d6

Influence d6/Leadership d10,
Knowledge d6/Religion d12, Guns d6,
Performance d6/Bible-thumpin' d12.

Paul is still fairly new to the territory but his youth and energetic delivery have already made him quite popular at the local church. By all accounts he's taken up the mantle left by old Pastor Harold very well. (Harold having passed away over a year ago after falling drunk from the second story of the local cathouse.)

Paul and Addie-May met at a church function soon after he arrived and have been sparkin' ever since. Though Paul feels some measure of guilt over fornicating all over the place, he assuages his guilt with his intention to marry the stern Mrs. Belford...just as soon as he can convince her to say "yes".

Mrs. Addie-May Belford

Adult animal handler/trainer
(these are the stats for Mrs. Belford

converted to the Cortex core rules)

Agl d8 Str d6 Vit d6
Ale d8 Int d6 Wil d8
Init d8+d6
LP 14

Light Revolver

(Addie is absolutely terrible with the weapon and she knows it)

Traits: Amorous d6, Talented d6
(Animal Training, Riding)

Animals d6 (Animal Training d10,
Veterinary d6), Influence d6 (Teaching
d10, Seduction d8).

Addie-May is a rather unassuming individual who keeps mostly to herself and takes her work seriously. While she cares well enough for the kids she trains she probably cares more for the horses. As such, she's generally fair with the ranch hands and treats them well, but when they fail in their duties she can leave a young hand quaking in his boots and messing his trousers. Since her husband passed on some few years ago, she's taken advantage of Mr. Handsome's generosity to secure a place to stay and steady work. She's also taken advantage of rumors about the two to help cover up a secret dalliance with the local preacher.

Buford "Hoss" Wrangler

Governor's Investigator

Agl d8 Str d8 Vit d10
Ale d10 Int d8 Wil d10
Init d8+d10
LP 22

Newtech Heavy Pistol (d8 W; Range incr. 60; ROF 3; Mag. 16; Powered: +1 skill step to use)

Semiautomatic Shotgun (d10 W; Range incr. 40; ROF 3; Mag. 10)

Holdout Gasgun Pistol (Range incr. 10; ROF 1; Mag. 1)

3 gasgun pellets of high quality,
dermal delivery sedative (3d6 S)

Traits: Brawler d2, Crude d8, Duty d10, Formidable Presence d4, Overweight d4, Rank and Privilege d8, Signature Item (Newtech Heavy Pistol), Steady Calm d6, Tough d4

Animals d6/Riding d8, Athletics d6/Dodge d8, Drive d4, Influence d6/Intimidation d8/Interrogation d10/Bureaucracy d8, Guns d6/Handguns d10/Shotgun d8, Melee Weapons d6/Knives d8/Clubs d10, Perception d6/Intuition d10/Investigation d10/Search d8/Tracking d10, Survival d6/Foraging d8/First Aid d10/Trapping d8

"Hoss" comes from a long line of professional trackers and trappers. How he came to be one of the Governor's top investigators and why he's so very loyal to him is unknown, and something "Hoss" isn't willing to talk about. Though rather overweight, "Hoss" is tough enough, ornery enough and stubborn enough to take on anybody he has to. Once he's given an assignment he's not one to let it go until he figures he's got a good enough answer for the Governor.

"Hoss" is well liked by those who know him and has the respect of lawmen all over the moon. Though pretty rough around the edges, and not someone you'd want to invite to a tea party, he's certainly the man you want working your case.

Marus' Bushwhackers

A slightly tougher grade of mooks

Agl d8 Str d8 Vit d8
Ale d6 Int d6 Wil d8
Init d8+d6
LP 20

Rifle
Medium Pistol

Traits: Brawler d4, Convict d6, Greedy d6, Hideout d6, Rebellious d4, Smartass d4, Steady Calm d2, Tough

d4

Athletics d6/Dodge d8, Covert d6/Camouflage d8/Stealth d8/Streetwise d8, Animals d6, Guns d6/Pistol d8/Rifle d8, Influence d6/Intimidate d8, Melee Weapons d6/Knife d8, Perception d6, Survival d6, Unarmed Combat d6/Brawling d8

Only a slight step above the brand of mook the player characters have faced up until now, their skills at ambushing make them a lot deadlier if they have the opportunity catch their quarry by surprise.