

Handsome Ranch: Hoedown at Huckabee's

Part five of the Handsome Ranch adventure path.

Background:

With Handsome in custody Mrs. Belford insists the player characters move back to the ranch, clear out the upstairs study and shack up in the main house. It seems everybody and their grandma knows they're hiding out in the cabin anyway so they might as well pitch in with keeping up the ranch. They'll have abandoned the cabin and moved back to the ranch therefore by the time this episode begins.

Mrs. Belford has since taken over the day to day operations of the ranch and Pastor Paul, now hiding out at the ranch as well, pitches in to do his part. Apparently he's learned his not so loyal flock has been scared off by Damien Marus' campaign of intimidation and doesn't expect anyone would show up even if he did try to hold a Sunday service.

With only Group One (and Precious and Percy if they're there), Jack Dingo, Addie-may, Pastor Paul and the player characters, it's a rough go keeping the ranch running. The three sales on trained horses Handsome had set up prior have all fallen through, again due to customers distancing themselves from all the trouble. They've even been politely uninvited to the next horse show this coming season. As it's been nearly a week since Handsome was arrested, the ranch is beginning to hurt for money and clearly out of favor all around.

Nevertheless, with grain stock running low and the mule needing a new trailer hitch, Mrs. Belford eventually is forced to dig into the jar of platinum coins uncovered in episode II. Since they don't expect a polite welcome in town anytime soon she opts to send the player characters out the long way to Huckabee's Trading Post. Huckabee's lies about twenty miles in the opposite direction from town, serving the ranches and farms from a crossroads out that way. Handsome has done little business with Huckabee in the past but what

trade he has done with him has always been fair.

Synopsis:

This episode features a simple supply run out to a crossroads trading post, a possible chase scene along the way, getting drugged up and tossed in a closet and, finally, fending off yet attack by folks intent on planting them in the dirt. The GM should be aware up front that we've slated quite a lot of conflict in this episode and it could easily wear down the player characters. We're continuing to drive home the point that they're in real and constant danger these days. All the better to motivate them to get clear of that danger, as well as provide a real sense of relief once they've gotten out from under the worst of it.

In Act I we'll test the player characters ability to recognize when it's time to fight and when it's time to run. We'll toss a big enough gang of mooks at them that making a stand is perhaps possible, but not especially prudent. If they're smart and make a break for it, we'll get a nice chase scene, with prerequisite bullets flying about their heads. Mainly just because we haven't had a nice chase scene in a while and that'll be fun.

In Act II the player characters arrive at Huckabee's Trading Post (possibly a bit banged up already) and get an opportunity to meet the Huckabees. With a nice array of gear to pick over they can shop a bit and maybe even pick up a few more interesting things, if they can convince the trader to open up his "preferred customer's selection". Once they've done their shopping and made their purchases, they'll end up in a bit of trouble from Huckabee himself, who hasn't heard about their bounty being rescinded and makes his own bid at collecting on it.

In Act III the players have their chance to get free of the misunderstanding with

Huckabee and possibly even get a discount for their troubles. Regardless, before they can make off with the goods they've purchased they have a little run in with another gang of ranch hands who are under the impression their employer is a no account murderin' mad dog. And ready to express their opinion of that with their fists.

If they've already managed to gather certain clues on the murders that Handsome was framed for, they might have an opportunity to pick up another one here as well.

In Act IV the player characters find out the hard way that Marus has finally started taking them seriously. The small band of mercenaries he's employed arrives, escorting the serial killer Harold Betts out to the lake house where Marus intends to stash him until he can be snuck off this rock. Their leader Shade's rotten luck blows her attempt at putting them in a compromising situation and the final bit of violent trouble we'll be throwing at their heads winds up the episode. In the end the player characters may have pegged Betts as the serial killer and know where Shade is taking him. Otherwise that information comes in handy when "Hoss" Wrangler clues them in on it in the next episode.

Opening scene:

Our episode begins with the player characters upstairs in their new room in the main house (the northeastern study), washing up before having dinner downstairs. From there they detect a bit of a ruckus going on outside. If they choose to they can sidle on over to Handsome's room and peer out the window onto the front yard. Otherwise, they'll have to hike it downstairs to see what's going on.

Either way they find Mrs. Belford on the front porch of the house wielding a shotgun, with Pastor Paul right next to her with his own rifle. In the front yard facing them are Sheriff Daily (or his replacement) and a small band of deputized thugs. If they're close enough

to hear or otherwise pick up on the conversation, it's clear the Sheriff is making a last ditch effort at intimidating Mrs. Belford into turning them over.

Following the tense conversation from upstairs: (*Hard Alertness + Perception/Hearing*)

(If the players simply open a window they'll be able to hear properly but will likely be drawn into the confrontation a bit by drawing attention to themselves.)

Despite the fact that it's already gotten around the area that the Governor's investigator, Buford "Hoss" Wrangler, intends to rescind both the warrants and bounty on them (pending further investigation), the Sheriff is angling for one last shot at getting them in his jail. Where he most likely intends for them to meet with some dreadful end.

Mrs. Belford's not having any of it and, unless the player characters get drawn into the confrontation and muck things up, she'll have the Sheriff and his men run off the property in short order. The Sheriff is well aware he really hasn't much of a leg to stand on and a full scale assault on the ranch will be rather difficult to justify if the Governor's agents get wind of it.

After butting heads a bit with Mrs. Belford and Pastor Paul, and failing to knuckle either of them under, the Sheriff is forced to spit, curse a bit and ride off with his men. The incident makes clear however that heading into town for the supplies the ranch is needing simply isn't an acceptable option. If the Sheriff or any of Marus' other men manage to catch them out in the open, it's safe bet they'll either be shot out of hand or at the very least tossed into the town jail where they'll meet much the same fate.

Act I, Scene I: Saddle up

Once the player characters have their orders they'll be given a full 100

platinum coins from Grampy Handsome's recovered stash and a simple shopping list. (A 2" trailer hitch, 20 sacks of fine grain, 10 cases of assorted canned foods and a smattering of small goods for the house.) Mrs. Belford expects the 100 platinum should cover it and likewise expects them to haggle successfully or otherwise figure a way around if not.

The bulky goods they're expected to fetch will require the ranch's range truck to haul effectively. But since Mrs. Belford doesn't want to take a chance at putting Jack Dingo in any possible dangerous unnecessarily, she'll have the player characters chose one of their number to drive the truck. Since it's a two way trip up a fairly level trail, she expects they can manage it.

Though it may seem a tad overprotective of Jack, the player characters have already proven themselves capable of handling troublesome situations and violent confrontations. Jack Dingo, on the other hand, is the ranch's truck driver and was never intended to run honcho for the ranch. Addie-may won't consider sending him off the ranch with all the trouble brewing out there. She won't allow any members of Group One and most especially not Pastor Paul to go along and get themselves in trouble either.

Handsome Ranch's Range Truck:

Agi d4, Str d6, Vit d4

Ale 0, Int 0, Wil d6

LP 10

Init d4 + d0

Speed: 2

Scale: Large

Passengers: 3

Armor: 1W (driver and passengers inside the cab should also enjoy medium cover)

Since the truck cab can hold three and there should be room in the back for four more (two, once loaded down with the supplies) the player characters may well forgo the use of horses and just use the truck for the journey, depending on how many of them there are. Either is fine so give them free rein to determine that matter to their liking.

Once they figured out who's riding where and driving what, the player characters are expected to ride on out to Huckabee's Trading Post without wasting any more time.

Act I, Scene II: The Not-So- Lonesome Trail

After they've hit the trail and made a few miles on the ranch, the band of gunmen Sheriff Daily (or Rance Maynard, if he's still alive) have had on hand nearby make their move. Since they've been spying on the ranch since Handsome was taken away, waiting for the player characters or any of the more notable employees to wander out where they can be nabbed, they'll be aware the player characters have ranged off ranch lands. After assembling a large enough group and saddling up themselves, they'll ride hard after the player characters to waylay them on the trail.

After about a half hour of riding or driving, they'll have a chance to spot the dust being kicked up by the small horde chasing them down.

Spotting the large group of gunmen riding hard after them: (*Hard Alertness + Perception/Vision*)

If the players actually state that their characters are on the lookout for trouble or if anyone is riding in back of the truck, drop the difficulty down to Average. The horde of gunmen are riding in the open, right up behind them and easy to spot if they actually have occasion to check their rear.

How many men are in the group is up to the GM and should depend on how many player characters there are and how formidable they've proven themselves to be so far. They may be unusually well armed, for example, or have one or two of their number with high combat-oriented skills. But I'd

recommend at least two or even three opposing gunmen for every one player character. It should be immediately clear they're grossly outnumbered, regardless of whatever edges the player characters may have over simple mooks.

In the end, if the player characters choose to make a stand and they play it smart, it's entirely conceivable they can defend themselves against such a large group of men. Most likely they'll end up in pretty rough shape afterwards but if that's their choice, I'd recommend allowing it. At worst, they have an opportunity to learn why taking on superior numbers is generally a bad idea.

Circling the wagons:

If the player do choose to fight, we'll skip over most of what we have planned for this act (essentially intended as a chase scene). In this case they have the range truck they can use for cover and possibly some horses to provide them mobility. Depending upon the environment you provide for the fight, there may be cover available in the surrounding area as well. For my part, I'd have the area largely open, with no tree groves or forests within a few miles. Waist high grass all around and the open trail itself would largely constitute the environment I'd paint for the confrontation.

As a large, horse-bound force against a small number of armed characters, the most likely tactic for the horde of gunmen to employ would be the old standard circle-and-shoot. By staying in motion it makes their own shots a bit harder to aim but they remain moving targets for the player characters, too. Mostly, this allows the attackers to edge around any one-sided cover the player characters enjoy. Unless they've somehow managed to "circle the wagons" for a full range of cover around them, this means at least half the horde will have a clear shot at them at any one time. It also allows the attackers to break off easily should the fight go badly for them by simply wheeling

about and riding away.

Since we'll be using the old Maynard's thugs/Daily's posse stats (see the NPC section) for these guys, they aren't exactly professional mercenaries. Basically just a gang of hell raisers hired out of town, they won't fight to the death. Should the player characters manage to drop anywhere close to a third of them, or wound roughly as many badly enough, they'll be ready to break off and cut their losses.

Chase scene:

Should the players play smart and make a run for it, we have the chase scene we were angling for here. This episode assumes you're using the Cortex Core rules for chase scenes but if you have your own you may have to alter this act to fit them.

The chase begins at Far range if the player characters have successfully spotted the gunmen barreling down on them. If not, they automatically become aware of them at Close range. With the terrain open and relatively flat (assuming you've followed my lead on that score) this makes the difficulty of the chase Easy.

Since the player characters will have the range truck to contend with and likely aren't very skilled drivers, this gives the gunmen chasing them an advantage in keeping up. Most likely we'll have a running gunfight here.

Futhermore, since we're dealing with so many combatants and it's still early in the session, feel free to treat these mooks like true "mooks", ruling that any hit knocks them out of the fight automatically. That can save quite a lot of dice rolling and paperwork tracking damage and multiple actions all around.

Since the Chase rules presented in the Cortex Core rules indicate Caught range allows combat and such, we'll be a little cinematic and rule that no combat is conducted on the chaser's part until that range is achieved. We'll describe them as firing off a few potshots, whooping and hollering and such, but won't bother with making any attack rolls.

The player characters are free to take potshots of their own, of course. You can allow anyone with their hands free to try to drop a pursuer or two in while still beyond Caught range if you like. I'd rule out of hand that pursuers at Far chase range are at Long range for rifles and such, and make handguns and other such arms out of the question. Pursuers at Distant chase range are simply out of range of all small arms unless you really feel compelled to rule otherwise.

If you need to juggle the numbers then, Far chase range would be roughly 600-900 feet and I'll leave the rest of that for you to determine.

With the Easy difficulty of the chase and both sides likely having roughly equivalent skills on that score, the chase may go on a while before the player characters can get away (assuming they even can). Just to even things up all the more, we'll rule here that a mounted horse has a Speed score of 2 as well (equal to that of the ranch's old range truck).

Eventually the player characters will manage to either reach Escaped range or more likely will have shot enough pursuers that they break off. Either way the pursuit eventually ends and the horde of gunmen limp off to lick their wounds. They won't attempt to catch up and pursue them again.

As it's only twenty miles to Huckabee's and they've been on the trail for nearly a half hour by the time the chase began, they should be riding up on the trading post only a minute or two after the Chase scene wraps up. You can easily have the Chase scene carry on right to Huckabee's if you like but the gunmen won't be as prone to breaking off if they've got their quarry pinned down.

Act II, Scene I: Huckabee's Trading Post

Huckabee's Trading Post sits at a

crossroads between three towns, one of which is Hannity's Cove (or whatever you've named the town nearest Handsome Ranch). As such Slim Huckabee, owner and operator, is able to make a decent living trading with passersby and providing supplies to the farms and ranches in the area. He also serves as a waypoint for the two coaches (and sometimes even the occasional motorized vehicle) that ferry passengers from one town to the other. He hasn't any fuel or other such supplies for vehicles, though. They are few and far between in these parts, Handsome's range truck being a very rare exception. In addition to his regular stores he also sports a couple of cheap tables and a small kitchen to serve guests passing through.

The Trading Post layout consists of a large store front, one locked store room behind the counter, a small kitchen off to one side and living quarters upstairs. The living quarters consist of a simple lavatory and two bedrooms. Outside the trading post is an adjacent garage where he stores a few meager mechanics tools, a half-empty fuel tank and a mid-sized mule (broken down long years ago and now just gathering dust).

For all intents and purposes Huckabee has available all the standard goods one would expect in a fairly well stocked rim world mercantile. He has a few weapons for sale as well, though nothing more fancy than some revolvers, a couple of pistols, a single barrel shotgun and two standard rifles. He sells ammo for a wide variety of guns, though.

Newtech gear, electronics and such just aren't available. At least not to your average guest. Huckabee squirrels away a few more interesting items but doesn't exactly keep them on display (they're locked up in a box under the counter). If the player characters manage to ingratiate themselves to him, he might try to sell them on these items as well:

- A plate vest (*the plates have been stripped out, though, so it's just a*

standard mesh armor until and unless armor plates can be found to insert into it.)

- 1 Silencer for a light pistol*
- Portable Cortex Terminal (*with no battery*)*
- 1 Layer blade**
- A stun baton with a full battery
- 2 Fragmentation grenades
- 1 Smoke grenade
- A Unification war-era Squadkiller mine (*that doesn't work*).
- A single round for a personal anti-tank rifle (*without the rifle, naturally*)**
- 2 Flashbang shotgun rounds**

* - see the Newtech Goodies supplement, Badger's Bulletins for details.

** - see the Alternate Weapons List supplement, Badger's Bulletins for details.

Huckabee's Moonshine Special:

Slim Huckabee, positioned so far out from the protection of regular law enforcement, has had to deal with some of the more ornery types one might expect on a rim moon. With not only his stock but his wife and son to protect, he's picked up a little trick for dealing with especially difficult customers. Slim keeps a bottle of homemade whiskey, spiked with Narconal, under his counter. Unruly customers are typically treated to a tremblingly offered shot, ostensibly to knuckle under and fawn over whomever's trying to intimidate him. Once the hooligans are knocked out, Slim and his son strip them, bind them and toss them into the storage room while Slim's son fetches the sheriff from town. He'll then have them charged with attempted robbery, even if they never quite got that far in their troublemaking. He typically pockets a healthy portion of whatever cash they were carrying as well, figuring he's earned it for his trouble.

Though he's had to utilize this approach several times over the last ten years, none of the troublemakers who've suffered such treatment have yet returned seeking revenge. Apparently they don't admit to falling for the trick

either, since it hasn't gotten around. But just in case Slim keeps a loaded double barrel shotgun under the counter anyway.

Shopping at Huckabee's:

Once the player characters have arrived and been greeted by Slim, he'll make conversation while touring them around his stock, helping them find whatever they need. During the course of that he'll ask all the polite questions one would expect during such discourse.

"So where ya'll from?"

"I heard there's some trouble brewing out that way, is that right?"

"So how's old Handsome doing these days?"

If the player characters speak honestly and clue him in on their identities in the process, Slim will realize they're the folks he's heard tell have a bounty on their heads for horse rustling or murder or some such. He won't quite know the details but the fact that they're all walking bags of reward money won't have escaped him.

He'll follow through with any purchases and transactions they're intent on doing and have his son load up the grain and any other goods they purchase onto their truck. He'll even haggle over prices, take their money and make change.

Then he'll invite them to sit down for a spell and share a free drink, so that they can fill him on current events from out their way. He'll make a point of toasting Mr. Handsome to be sure everyone at least takes a sip and he'll have poured himself a shot from another bottle on the sly.

Resisting the effects of the Narconal shot, even only a sip or so, is a

Formidable Resistance check. Failure renders the player character unconscious quick enough for little more than a muttered, "*Son of a....*" Not to mention taking the difference in Stun damage.

Whether successfully resisting the

knockout effect or not, the potent shot still drops 2d6 Stun damage on everyone imbibing it, though. And Huckabee will be ready to wrestle or even beat down anyone staggering about trying to fight. If necessary his wife will wield her broom and beat about their heads as well.

Once unconscious, one way or the other, Slim and son will strip them down to their unmentionables, bind their wrists and ankles with some old hemp rope and drag them into the locked storage room behind the counter. Slim will then send his son off to town to fetch the Sheriff and await his reward.

The Narconal is potent but has been sitting around in the whiskey bottle for a good long time. As such it's effect is fairly short lived. Characters are able to make additional Resistance checks every 15 minutes, recovering Stun damage equal to the difference when successful.

The player characters will probably wake within hour or so, giving Slim time to have his wife run off and lock herself in her bedroom (just to be safe). He'll still be leisurely going through their belongings when they begin to stir. For sake of simplicity they should be allowed to recover all Stun damage from the drug shortly after waking, without requiring additional Resistance checks to shake it off.

Those that required a sound beating to render them unconscious should still be toting those bruises, though.

Act II, Scene II: "Is it Chris'mas? Wha'happen' about me?"

Waking to find themselves bound in such a fashion, even standing up to hobble about the small storeroom will be difficult. They have a chance to get

free if they're strong enough to break the rope, manage to find something to cut the rope with or willing to drop enough Plot Points on any such attempt. The hemp rope is older than Slim realizes but still pretty tough.

Breaking free of the hemp rope binding one's wrists: (*Formidable Strength + Strength*)

The GM might want to consider allowing such skill checks as Strength + Athletics/Weight Lifting and Agility + Athletics/Contortion as well.

Finding a sharp or rough edge: (*Average Alertness + Perception/Vision or other appropriate skill specialty*)

Worrying through the ropes with such: (*Hard Strength + Athletics/any appropriate specialty*)

Once free there are a few items they can use as improvised weapons, if they think to look around for something to wield. I'd insist on an **Average Alertness + Perception/Search** check for each person searching to find a weapon, though. These junk items have been necessarily kicked under, around and generally out of the way.

- An old chair leg: *d4 B, -1 step penalty*
- Fractured axe handle: *d6 B, -1 step penalty*
- A length of thin chain: *d2 B, no penalty*
- A short length of lead pipe: *d2 B, -1 step penalty*
- Three hefty, fist-sized rocks: *d2 B (wielded or thrown), -2 step penalty*

Once free, possibly armed and ready to tan Huckabee's hide, there's still the matter of getting out of the storeroom. The lock on the door is accessible from both sides, so anyone with lock picking skills and something to pick it with can make the attempt.

Picking the lock on the storeroom door: (*Average Agility +*

Covert/Lockpicking)

Otherwise there's always the option of simply breaking down the door:

Breaking through the door with physical force: (*Formidable Strength + Strength or any appropriate Strength + skill specialty the GM approves*)

Beyond that the door will take 40 points of basic damage before caving way.

All of this is simply designed to delay the player characters long enough for Slim Huckabee to come across the letter from Buford "Hoss" Wrangler, advising whomever's concerned of his intent to rescind the bounty. Assuming of course that the players have been smart enough to keep it with them. If they haven't or if they manage to get free to confront Slim quickly enough, there'll be a bit of a confrontation.

Once he's aware that the player characters are free, he'll snatch up the double barrel shotgun from behind the counter, if he can get to it (he'll be seated at one of the tables going through their gear at the time). Even if he manages to lay hand to it, he's still in a bit of predicament. He only has two shots and his store of shotgun shells probably aren't immediately at hand. Not to mention reloading a double barrel takes time.

Slim isn't foolish enough to waste his two ready shots and leave himself at the mercy of the rest of the player characters. Faced with this situation he'll use the shotgun to keep them at bay and probably come to the realization that tossing their gear outside and running them off is his only option.

If the player characters have spent enough time getting loose (or if they haven't managed it at all) he'll eventually pick up the letter he first put aside (he's not a big fan of reading and saved it for last). Confronted with the

fact that the bounty on these folks heads isn't really any good anymore, he'll be faced with the prospect of turning them loose and hoping to make amends somehow.

Naturally he won't be exactly looking forward to that and will, if able, try to make peace as best he can while they're still unable to get at him.

In the end Huckabee isn't really the bad sort and will honestly try to make up for their treatment, even though he feels he was somewhat justified considering the outdated information he was working under. All in all, this is simply a chance for us to gauge our player character's...well, character. Be sure to aware Plot Points if they do the noble thing here.

Should the player characters chose to let the matter slide without getting especially ugly about it, he'll even be generous enough to extend a 10% discount on their purchases. That should suit Mrs. Belford right to the ground, assuming they tell her about it and aren't greedy enough to just pocket the difference.

He'll also open up his "preferred customer selection" for review, if he hasn't already.

Act III, Scene I: The Fillmore Gang

While all the trouble's winding down, Huckabee receives a few more customers who will likely dither a bit at the door when confronted by all the commotion inside. Once matters seem to have resolved a bit the Fillmore gang will amble on in, Jack Surly likely cracking a smart-alecky remark about the confrontation they just witnessed. They're naturally curious about the goings-on and probably looking to make sure the player characters aren't trying to make trouble with old Slim. Huckabee knows the gentlemen well, doing business with them supplying their ranch for some years now. Though

he'll be a bit embarrassed over the fiasco he won't mind admitting what went on. Luckily for the player characters, the Fillmore gang have already heard rumors about the trouble going on out west and know the bounties on them don't amount to much anymore.

Unfortunately, Jack Surly's niece was one of the victims uncovered at the Shire. The murders for which Karl Handsome is to be charged.

Jack Surly won't hesitate for long before expressing his opinion of Karl Handsome being a no account, scum of the earth, bloodthirsty mad dog what oughta be skinned alive and boiled in his own filth. He won't have a very high opinion of those that work for such a low life either. He'll likely be ready to express that opinion in a more physical manner before the player characters have even processed that someone here's suddenly displeased with them.

Jack's had plenty of time over the last week or so, since hearing about the foul end his poor niece met with, to get good and upset toward Karl Handsome and all associated with him. Being far removed from the incident he hasn't yet had a chance to express his anger on anyone involved. Of course, he now has his chance and he'll demand some measure of satisfaction. The rest of the Fillmore gang, being a proper band of pals, won't have any problem backing him up either.

This situation naturally has a low flash point. It won't take much at all for fists to start flying but the Fillmore gang, despite being the "troubleshooting" brand of ranch hand just like our player characters are, won't be inclined to gunplay here. They're angling more toward simply beating up the no account Handsome Ranch folks and running them off. That's quite enough to satisfy them for now.

None of them will draw weapons right off (but that's not to suggest they won't grab a chair or any other handy blunt object). Should the player characters

respond to threats by drawing firearms they'll be surprised a bit at how bloodthirsty they are but then again they'll reckon that figures. Working for that murderin' Karl Handsome and all. They'll respond in kind and figure they're doing the 'verse a service. Nonetheless it should be obvious to the player characters that a straight up brawl is brewing here. If they choose to escalate it to the level of deadly violence that's fine, but they should at least be aware that's what they're doing.

Though there are five members of the Fillmore gang given in the NPC section, feel free to drop one or two if you've a smaller party of player characters. But since they aren't presented as a necessary combat encounter here, you shouldn't feel compelled to tack any more onto the gang.

Avoiding violence isn't really all that hard to do, assuming there aren't any real loudmouths among the player characters. Just a little diplomacy will go a long way and simply allowing Jack Surly to express his anger without responding in kind will allow the situation to wind down after a bit. Again, it won't take much to set things off but it should be within their ability to avoid, should the players choose to do so.

Additionally, if it doesn't boil over into violence right off then Slim Huckabee will stand up for the player characters a bit as well (assuming they settled matters with him somewhat amicably.) But mostly he just won't want a fight inside his store. If it looks like it's heading that way he'll try his best to run everyone out before it blows up. But by then likely no one's listening to him anymore.

In the end the Fillmore gang simply won't have much for the player characters when all is said and done. They won't be making any friends here, no matter how things play out.

If there was a brawl of any sort though, Huckabee will be pretty riled up himself by the time the whole thing winds down. His double barrel shotgun will

ensure no one leaves the premises until they've paid for any damages done to his store.

Act III, Scene II: Harold Betts

If the player characters aren't feeling like the whole 'verse has just been coming down on their heads in waves over the last few hours...well, they haven't been paying attention. And they've one more bit of trouble to deal with before they're done. By the time we're finished here they'll either be highly motivated to clear Handsome's name (and their own) or will have resolved never to leave the ranch again.

Following the events surrounding the arrest of Karl Handsome and Marus' failure to keep the player characters away from the ranch that evening, the player characters will have been officially elevated to "pain in the ass" status in Marus' estimations. While he recognizes that he underestimated Handsome's ranch hands and overestimated Rance Maynard's usefulness, he's ready to have them properly dealt with. Now that Handsome is in custody he wants to focus on putting him through the ringer and eventually having him hung for murder. He doesn't want little distractions like the player characters keeping him from his fun.

To that end he's called in the best troubleshooter he has in the area to deal with the problem, leaving it to her to handle and allowing him to turn his attention fully on Handsome.

First, though, he's tasked her with transporting that troublesome serial killer he has on his payroll out to the lakefront warehouse where he's to be kept for now. She's in the process of doing that very thing she and her two goons ride by Huckabee's Trading Post and stumble across the gang of ranch hands they're being paid so well to kill.

Again, once things seem to be settling down one way or another, the front door of the trading post opens up to allow yet another group in out of the prairie. By now the player characters will most likely be ready to high-tail it back to the ranch before anything else can confront them. The open door being an invitation to do just that.

Considering the entire session up to this point has largely bounced them from one confrontation to another, they're very likely sporting at least some Stun damage, maybe even a stinging Wound or two. Getting into yet another fight probably won't be looked upon very favorably by them.

Nevertheless two of the three men who enter the trading post immediately take up position at the door to block the third one from leaving without them. And being a bit grumpy about the babysitting duty they've been saddled with, they're ornery enough to make everyone else wait, too.

The third man, whom the other two are being so watchful over, is Harold Betts, our murderin' no account mad dog serial killer from the Shire. Betts has been using Huckabee's as a pick up point for his expensive imported pesticides and chemicals, preferring to avoid going into town to the docks. Since it represents a sizable expense and it's out of the way anyhow, he's managed to convince the gang transporting him to swing by and pick it up on the way. Since it detours them even more widely out of the way of town, Yoko Shade didn't object.

Harold is also hoping he'll be able to use one of the chemical compounds to incapacitate the gang and get free, but they won't be foolish enough to allow him to keep the canisters once he's gotten them from Huckabee.

The two men at the door are Bill Osprey and Dudley Ladner. Being, as previously mentioned, extremely irritated at the babysitting job they're saddled with, they're a might tetchy about the whole thing. Consequently they won't be

paying much attention to all the folks in the trading post (not recognizing the player characters right away) and will be impatient for Harold Betts to get his canisters from Huckabee so they can move on. They also won't let anyone out of the door until Harold's done, out of nothing more than simple cussedness. They'll bark at anyone attempting to leave before they can lay hands to Harold again to damned well wait 'till their done. They'll welcome an altercation with anyone who objects to waiting, too.

Anyone on hand to witness Harold Betts pick up his canisters from Huckabee will be able to spot the contents stenciled plainly on the side. Those with some knowledge of chemistry may be able to identify them by name and know something of the properties of each.

In both cases; recognizing the chemical compound identified on either canister: (*Hard Intelligence + Science/appropriate specialty*)

A generous GM might allow any player characters with Medicine skill to take a shot at it: (***Formidable Intelligence + Medicine/Forensics, Pharmaceuticals or Toxicology***)

Roll for recognition of the chemical compounds in *each* canister. One canister contains a common pesticide. It is the same pesticide that stained the front step of the abandoned farmhouse in ***Sidestep I: The Whiny Dog***, if that was noticed and identified. The second canister contains a compound normally used to flush out burrowing animals. Though non-lethal it causes temporary blindness and confusion, typically used to capture such animals alive for whatever purpose. It's not very commonly used of course and is rather prohibitively expensive as well.

If the player characters *didn't* spot the green stain at the abandoned farmhouse and didn't identify it, they've no reason for them to take note of the contents of

these two canisters. In that case, I wouldn't call for the check unless they specifically ask or at least express curiosity.

If they *did* identify the green stain as a pesticide they should have a shot at automatically recognizing the same chemical compound on one of the canisters here as well as making note of the other.

Regardless, once Harold has picked up his canisters from Huckabee, who's stored them high on the shelf behind the counter, he'll head for the door. The two men at the door will grab the canisters from him right away, over his objections, and hustle him on out to the horses waiting outside. If there hasn't been any especially heated argument between the two men and any of the player characters, they won't realize who they are until they're saddling up to ride off. At that time it will suddenly occur to Bill Osprey that the ranch hands they've been tasked with putting down are right there inside the trading post.

Act IV, Scene I: Three Shades of Deadly

This realization puts the hired assassins in a bit of a pickle. With Harold Betts on hand, they can't very easily engage in violence with the player characters without putting him at risk (rather contrary to their orders to get him to Carver's Lake). Since Yoko Shade doesn't view Harold Betts as any kind of use in a straight up gunfight, that won't be an agreeable option to her. On the other hand, they don't want to pass up the opportunity of catching the player characters off the ranch and in the open like this either.

If the player characters followed right behind Bill and Dudley, they'll be on hand when Bill realizes who they are

and whispers to Yoko, nodding in their direction. Otherwise, he's free to point out the folks in the trading post are the ranch hands they're after without being overheard.

Yoko will require a minute to mull over their predicament before coming to a hasty plan of action. Whether the player characters are still inside the trading post or currently saddling up to ride out, she'll quickly *tete-a-tete* with her two men and have her rough plan in play before they can leave.

Since it involves putting them at ease she'll welcome them initiating a dialogue, even if they're hustling after Harold Betts to look into the matter of the pesticide canister. Otherwise she'll ride up and engage them in a friendly fashion before they ride off.

Setting the trap:

It should be noted that Yoko Shade would prefer *not* to get into a fight with the player characters just yet. At least, not if she can arrange for a confrontation somewhere more agreeable instead. Her goal here is to put the player characters at ease and come across as a potential ally. Hopefully then she can convince them to meet up with her and her gang later, once they've dropped off the troublesome Harold Betts at his new digs.

To accomplish this, she'll play the part of a hired gunhand currently employed by Harold Bett's rich uncle to escort him safely to Carver's Lake. After that she'll be free to seek further employment and, since she's aware that Handsome Ranch is probably short a few much needed gunhands themselves, she's interested in hiring herself and her boys out to them. She'll also profess a bit of bitterness toward Damien Marus, claiming he stiffed them out of their pay on an escort job a year ago, just to score a point or two with the player characters.

If the players take the bait, she'll try to make arrangements to meet up with them somewhere other than Handsome Ranch, claiming to have a nephew she's

looking after and prefers to have him secured somewhere safe before word gets out she's hired on (being concerned for his safety and all). She'll try to set up a meeting at any secluded location the player characters agree to within two days. Tomorrow evening, if she can swing it. If she absolutely can't convince them to meet her and her boys anywhere else, she'll begrudgingly agree to ride on to the ranch when she's done with this escort job, figuring she'll just take what opportunity she can there.

If the player characters have butted heads with Bill and Dudley already, and they're on hand to glare a bit at the upstarts that mouthed off to them, she'll shrug off their behavior. Bill and Dudley, she says, are a little rough around the edges but otherwise good men to have on your side when the going gets tough. She'll illustrate the point by giving them both a good glare and straightening them out right quick.

The pesticide and Harold Betts:

Yoko Shade is well aware of the nature of the monster she's ferrying out to the lake. She likewise knows the details of how he prefers to deal with his victims and how he incapacitates them with the blinding agent beforehand. As such, she'll catch on quickly that questions about the pesticide might lead to the player characters identifying him as the killer responsible for the murders in the area. Though she utterly despises the man and wouldn't mind putting him down herself, free of charge, she takes her job seriously. Since she's being paid to get him to Carver's Lake, that's exactly what she intends to do. She's unaware that Harold Betts intends to run off and continue with his killing spree, assuming he's still doing as Damien Marus says.

In response to such any line of questioning involving the pesticide, she'll offer that Harold Betts is a pest control man and has naturally visited most of the farms and ranches in the area at one time or other. In point of fact, that's exactly the guise he operates

under and how he's able to choose his victims, gain their trust and, more to the point, gain access to their homes. In order to steer suspicion away from him, she'll promptly ask him if he's noticed anything suspicious recently, considering he gets around as much as he does. Harold Betts is smart enough to catch on and play along, possibly even dropping a clever red herring or two to further derail suspicion from himself.

Things get shook up:

In the end the whole attempt at subterfuge won't matter. Because Yoko's Rotten Luck complication kicks in and Damien Marus chooses that moment to radio in, wondering what the hell's taking them so long. And since she's got the newtech long-range commpack on her hip set on speaker, Damien Marus' voice blares right out in the open for everyone to hear.

"Shade, it's Marus! Where the hell are you? Why isn't Betts here yet? I'm not paying you to go sight seeing. Get his ass down here so you can take out those pain in the ass kids of Handsome's!"

Since our whole goal here was putting Yoko and her men face to face with the player characters at this moment, we've accomplished our goal. If the player characters actually agreed to hire her and her men on at the ranch, and are suddenly confronted with the fact that they darned near stuck their necks in a noose, all the better.

And since Shade is a cool customer and well accustomed to violence, she aiming to gun down the player characters before they realize the situation they're in. Even if the player characters don't catch on to what's going on, it's time to roll Initiative.

Act IV, Scene II: Hoedown at

Huckabee's

Tactics:

Shade is a tough character and she knows it. Her abilities already make her a match for any of the player characters and her vast array of cybernetic enhancements only magnify that. She's also a cool customer though, and well aware that getting Harold Betts out of the line of fire and down to Carver's Lake takes slight precedence over gunning down the player characters. She'll take a shot at it if the opportunity is presented to her but her first concern is getting Betts down the road and completing her assignment. Not to mention, we intend to have her pop up again later in the campaign so we don't want the player characters planting her in the dirt just yet either.

Dudley and Bill on the other hand are quite expendable. Not only for our purposes but for Shade's as well. As she's only been working with them for the last month or so she won't weep if they meet an untimely end here. In point of fact, she prefers to work alone anyway and these two have long since gotten on her nerves. The only sticking point for her at the moment is having to escort the despicable Harold Betts all by her lonesome. She's already catching on that he's a bit of crafty guy in his own right.

Nonetheless, she figures her best approach to this sudden and complete muck up is tossing Bill and Dudley to the proverbial wolves and riding off with Betts. To that end she opens up on the player characters with the intention of pinning them down a bit so she can do so. She's leaving it to Bill and Dudley to do the killing in her absence.

The first turn:

Whether or not she gets Initiative, Shade's first action is to snatch and toss her one and only Blackvine sticky bomb at the player character's feet. Despite her quick thinking this really isn't all that effective a first shot, since the loose dirt underneath makes rooting

anyone to the ground unlikely. Nevertheless it's bound to root *somebody* on one side or the other and thus probably keep the fight here long enough for her to ride off with Betts. After tossing the bomb she draws her sidearm and issues orders on the same turn, yelling at Bill and Dudley to "put 'em down" and Betts to flee, giving his horse a solid kick to the flank. She and Betts begin riding off the following turn. She takes no other actions this turn. Bill and Dudley will be awaiting instructions, not being quite as quick thinking as Shade, and will be reduced to dodging this turn, drawing weapons as soon as they spot the player characters doing so, if they do.

How the battle shakes out after that largely depends on the player character's actions. If they're smart they'll likely duck back into the trading post for cover. Otherwise they'll be forced to deal with Bill and Dudley directly.

They may decide that Shade and Betts riding off requires them to give chase and that's something left to you to deal with. Most likely they'll bite off a bit more than they can chew if they force Shade to stand her ground and fight them. In such a case, don't be shy about handing them the butt-whuppin' they have coming to them.

Bear in mind also that Betts is determined to get free of his "escort" given the opportunity, so if their goal is pursuing him they could easily end up with Bill and Dudley shooting at them from the rear, Shade standing her ground in their path and Betts taking advantage of the situation to ride off on the other side of all that.

In such a case, should Shade beat them up too terribly, you have an excuse to pull her off they're mangled bodies to run try to catch up with Betts again.

Should they actually manage to put Shade down or otherwise prevent Betts from escaping they'll largely skunk the next episode completely. If they are that successful I'd go ahead and skip the next episode, allow them to uncover Harold Betts as the serial killer, find evidence establishing

that and go ahead to grant the extra Advancement Point reward for ending this chapter right here. It's a bit of a shake up but that's pretty impressive and should be rewarded appropriately.

However the conflict concludes, if Shade and Betts did indeed get away you can allow the player characters an attempt to track them if they try to. They may even track them all the way to Carver's Lake if you like (jump starting the next episode a bit next session), but I wouldn't allow them a chance at catching up and beginning an actual Chase Scene.

Wrap Up:

The player characters should have had a chance to spot the pesticide being handed over to Harold Betts (*if they picked up that clue in Sidestep I: The Whiny Dog; otherwise it doesn't matter here*). This puts Betts in their minds in connection with the murders Handsome has been framed for.

Yoko Shade will have been presented as one of the bad guys here as well and her use of the sticky bomb should probably indicate to the players that she's not just another mook.

The reactions of Slim Huckabee and the Fillmore gang should have established how unpopular (and downright despised in some cases) Handsome and all associated with him have suddenly become. Even once their own warrants and bounties are cleared, they should now know their fate is tied to Handsome's probably more than they had realized.

Once all matters have been concluded here the players still have to get their supplies back to Handsome Ranch but we'll cut them some slack and allow them to do so without any further trouble, wrapping up the session.

Non-Player Characters

Maynard's thugs / Daily's posse

Minions/Mooks

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

Knife
Medium Pistol
Rifle

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

The Huckabees

Slim Huckabee

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

Double Barrel Shotgun

Traits: Good Natured d4, Overweight d4

Animals d4, Athletics d4, Craft d6, Drive d2, Guns d6, Influence d6/Bartar d10/Conversation d8, Knowledge d6, Mechanic d4, Melee Weapons d4, Performance d6/Acting d8, Perception d6, Survival d2, Unarmed Combat d2

Helen Huckabee

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

LP 14

Broom (d4 B; -1 step penalty improvised weapon)

Traits: Faith d6

Animals d4, Athletics d4, Craft d6, Guns d2, Influence d6, Knowledge d6, Medicine d4, Melee Weapons d4, Perception d6, Survival d4

"Lil' Jim" Huckabee

Agl d6 Str d4 Vit d4
Ale d6 Int d4 Wil d4
Init d6+d4
LP 8

Knife
Child's Slingshot (d2 B)

Traits: Combat Paralysis d4

Athletics d6, Covert d4, Craft d4, Guns d2, Influence d4, Knowledge d2, Melee Weapons d2, Perception d4, Ranged Weapons d6/Slingshot d8, Survival d2, Unarmed Combat d2

The Fillmore Gang

Jack Surly

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

Traits: Brawler d2, Smartass d4, Tough d4

Animal Handling d6, Athletics d6, Guns d6, Melee Weapons d6, Survival d6, Unarmed Combat d6/Brawling d8

Donnie Holmes and Leroy Beck

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

Traits: Overconfident d6

Animal Handling d6, Athletics d6, Guns d4, Melee Weapons d6, Survival d6, Unarmed Combat d6

Lazy Pete and Hitch Belzer

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

Traits: Anger Issues d2

Animal Handling d6, Athletics d4, Guns d4, Melee Weapons d6, Survival d6, Unarmed Combat d4

Shade and Gang

Yoko Shade

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

Retractable layer blade (d6 W, ignores 1 point of armor)

Stun baton (d2 S, Mag. 10)

Powered heavy pistol with neural interface sighting modification (d6 W; range incr. 70, ROF 3, Mag. 15; +2 total skill step on attack) (*see the Newtech Goodies supplement, Badger's Bulletins for specific details*)

Three magazines of hollow-point ammunition (+2 step to damage but double armor protection)

Speed holster (*Average Agility + Guns to draw weapon as a free action*)

Light Sniper Rifle (d8 W, Range incr. 450, ROF 3, Mag. 5)

Two magazines of armor piercing rounds (-1 step to damage but ignore 3 points of Armor Rating)

6x telescope with thermal vision

(*extends her rifle's range increment to 1350*)

Traits: Allure d4, Dead Broke d8, Inherent Armor (wound, torso only) d6, Inherent Weapon d6, Enhanced Senses d4, Rotten Luck d8

Animals d4, Artistry d6/Photography d10, Athletics d6/Dodge d8/Riding d8, Covert d6/Sabotage d8/Stealth d8, Discipline d6, Drive d4, Guns d6/Rifle d8, Influence d4, Knowledge d4, Melee Weapons d4, Perception d4, Performance d2, Survival d4, Tech d2, Unarmed Combat d6

Sub-dermal Armor: Protects from all attacks to the torso, absorbing up to 3 Wound points of damage. Cannot be bypassed with an Extraordinary Success on attack.

Retractable Layer Blade: A 5" blade mounted in her palm, primarily as a holdout weapon and assassination tool. Strong and sharp enough to cut through thin steel with enough effort. Ignores 1 point of Armor Rating.

Cybernetic Eyes: Grants Shade night vision in dim or dark environments, halving all visibility penalties due to such conditions (round down).

Newtech long-range commpack (*reduced size, increased portability*)

Blackvine sticky bomb

Two foam barricade canisters (*see the Newtech Goodies supplement, Badger's Bulletins for details*)

Still-photo capture (*memory for 100 hi-res shots*)

Binoculars, Bio-canteen, Survival Kit, First Aid Kit, Gas mask, Lockpicks, Multi-tool

Yoko Shade spent five years as a "xiao da mei" (female bodyguard) in the Companion's Guild before retiring early to join the Independents in the Unification War. When the war ended she was only 19 years old and already a seasoned killer. Spending the next several years working as a gunhand on smuggling ships and with assorted

bandit gangs, she finally landed permanent employment with Damien Marus. Recognizing her talents he was quick to sign her up and outfit her with the latest in cybernetic implants and gear to maximize her abilities as a paid assassin. For her part in the deal she's currently indentured to Marus to pay off her implants, with the understanding that she's free to seek employment elsewhere when her contract is paid off (with significant interest, of course). Working alone she's already completed four successful hits for Marus but this is the first time she's been teamed up with partners of any sort. Already she finds it not to her liking.

"Graffiti" Bill Osprey

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

Heavy Revolver (d8 W, Range incr. 60, ROF 2, Mag. 6)
 Bolt-action Rifle (d8 W, Range incr. 300, ROF 1, Mag. 20)
 Mesh Armor

Traits: Combat Ready d10, Greedy d4, Criminal past d6

Animal Handling d6, Athletics d6/Dodge d8, Guns d6/Pistols d8, Melee Weapons d6, Survival d6, Unarmed Combat d6

Bill has only worked for Damien Marus for a short time, less than six months. As this is his first real bit of work he's bound and determined to show himself worthy of greater responsibility (and a bigger paycheck). Bill earned the nickname "Graffiti" by splattering a lawman's brains all over the walls of a crowded saloon ten years ago. Though it earned him both the respectable moniker and almost a decade in an Alliance rehabilitation station, it also landed him a spot in Marus' organization within days of his release.

Dudley Ladner

Agl d8 Str d8 Vit d8
 Ale d6 Int d4 Wil d8
 Init d8+d6
 LP 16

Heavy Revolver (d8 W, Range incr. 60, ROF 2, Mag. 6)
 Bolt-action Rifle (d8 W, Range incr. 300, ROF 1, Mag. 20)
 Mesh Armor

Traits: Steady Calm d6, Overconfident d4, Crude d4

Animal Handling d6, Athletics d6/Dodge d8, Guns d6/Pistols d8/Rifles d8, Melee Weapons d6, Survival d6, Unarmed Combat d6

Dudley has served Damien Marus for nearly a year now, as a bodyguard for one his mistresses. Though he suspects he was given this job because the lady in question was beginning to get a little too friendly for Marus' liking, he's eager to show he can handle anything Marus might have in mind. Well aware there are other gunmen making far more than he in the organization, he's looking for the promotion he's sure he deserves.

Harold Betts

Agl d8 Str d8 Vit d8
 Ale d8 Int d10 Wil d8
 Init d8+d8
 LP 16

Traits: Dead Inside d6, Devoted to a Cause d6, Eerie Presence d4, In Plain Sight d6, Out for Blood d6, Unstable d6

Artistry d6, Athletics d6/Dodge d8, Covert d6/Open Locks d8/Sabotage d10/Stealth d10/Streetwise d8, Craft d6, Discipline d6/Concentration d8/Torture d10, Drive d4, Guns d4, Influence d6/Charm d8, Knowledge d6/Philosophy d8, Medicine d4, Melee Weapons d6/Knives d8, Perception d6, Science d6, Unarmed Combat d6