

MODULE 3: RANCHES, CAMPS & RURAL NODES

Based on Modules 4–8 & 18 of the “Cartel Babies: Encyclopedia of Knowledge.”

INTRODUCTION

In Sinaloa’s interior, far from the cities and the main highways, a different world begins. Ranches, safehouses, storage sites, and full-scale labor camps form a hidden infrastructure that supports synthetic-drug production. These places are not random; they exist because the geography allows them, the culture normalizes them, and the cartel’s operational logic demands them.

This module draws from lived experience, rural patterns documented across the Sierra Madre, and the internal encyclopedia developed during the writing of *Cartel Babies*. It shows readers how these remote nodes function, why they remain invisible, and how they shape the novel’s world.

I. WHY RURAL NODES EXIST

Camps and ranch nodes survive because three conditions line up:

1. Geography—Mountain roads one-and-a-half to three hours from any city make surprise raids difficult. Steep switchbacks, blind turns, and single-lane bridges slow military convoys and give lookouts time to warn the interior.
2. Isolation—Valleys, ravines, and broken trails create natural shields. A camp may sit just over a ridge, invisible from the main road, its generators and voices swallowed by the terrain.
3. Community Pressure—Entire villages depend on cartel money. Ranch owners, mechanics, shopkeepers, and hired hands all benefit from the cash that flows through these operations. Silence becomes a survival skill.

No node exists alone. Each one links to others—storage ranches, safehouses in town, transportation hubs closer to the highway. Together they form an ecosystem of support structures around a labor camp like the one in *Cartel Babies*.

II. TYPES OF RANCHES & CAMPS

During the research and drafting of the novel, the internal encyclopedia organized rural nodes into several recurring types:

- Storage ranches—Low-profile properties used for precursors, fuel, ice, spare parts, and dry food. They look abandoned: rusted gates, half-collapsed roofs, a few dogs chained

near the entrance. Older men supervise them, preferring quiet utility over glamour.

- Rotation camps—Temporary sites where workers sleep while a lab is being built, moved, or collapsed. Tents and tarps dominate; animals graze nearby to disguise tracks.
- Full-scale labor camps—Semi-permanent complexes like the one in the novel. They include sleeping areas, kitchens, storage, lab buildings, and primitive recreation spaces.
- Rural safehouses—Small homes in nearby villages where lieutenants rest, money is counted, or short-term abductees are held in transit. On the surface they resemble any other family house.
- Support ranches—Properties that supply cattle, goats, or chickens to camps, or that receive chemical waste and garbage. These ranches may not host a lab, but they are tied into the same economic web.

Readers should imagine these categories overlapping. A single property may shift roles over time as pressure rises or falls.

III. LAYOUT OF A FULL-SCALE CAMP

A camp like Raúl's in Cartel Babies functions as a small, improvised town. While each site is unique, many share recognizable elements:

Perimeter and fencing—Simple barbed-wire lines mark the outer boundary, broken by dirt tracks and cattle gaps. On at least one side, the land falls away into ravines or steep slopes that serve as natural barriers. A few sections may have stacked pallets, scrap metal, or old vehicle frames to slow vehicles.

Sleeping areas—Workers sleep in long canvas tents or simple cinder-block rooms with tin roofs. The tents are usually army-surplus green or faded blue, patched with mismatched fabric. Inside are metal cots, foam mattresses, or bare blankets on plywood frames. Personal space is measured in inches, not meters.

Kitchen and dining zone—Near the center sits a rough kitchen: a tin-roof shelter with gas stoves or steel drums converted into wood-burning cookers. Large pots of beans, rice, and stews simmer throughout the day. A few plastic tables and folding chairs stand under tarps; most men eat standing, plates balanced in one hand, rifle slung over the shoulder.

Lab structures—The production area is often offset from the sleeping quarters, sometimes downhill so fumes drift away. Cinder-block rooms with tin roofs, few windows, and large barrels line the walls. Ventilation is improvised: cut-out vents, plastic tubing, and fans wired to small generators. The floors are stained with chemicals; leaks soak into the dirt outside.

Storage and armory—Shipping containers or locked outbuildings hold precursors, finished product, weapons, and ammunition. Some rifles and handguns stay visible on racks to project readiness; others are buried in sealed drums a short walk into the brush, insurance against raids.

Water and waste—Camps rely on black plastic tanks on raised platforms, fed by nearby streams, small wells, or trucked-in water. Latrines are dug downwind: deep pits lined with boards and improvised seats. In some camps there are chemical toilets for officers; workers use open pits. Trash burns in smoldering heaps—plastic, food waste, spent chemical containers—sending acrid smoke across the compound.

Animals—Cows provide milk and meat; goats eat food scraps and brush; pigs devour leftovers and, in stories told quietly at night, things no one wants found. Chickens and turkeys roam freely, scratching at spilled grain. Dogs patrol as living alarms. Cats appear rarely, usually near storage where rodents cluster.

Power—Generator noise is part of camp life. Diesel units rattle through the night, feeding single lightbulbs, a refrigerator, phones on charge, and sometimes a television tuned to music videos or soccer matches. When fuel is low, lights dim early and the camp falls into darkness.

Recreation—Between shifts, men kick a soccer ball on the flattest patch of ground or gather around a scarred table for cards and dominos. In some camps, a makeshift ping-pong table appears, its warped surface lit by a single bulb. Laughter and arguments drift over the compound, mixing with generator hum and animal calls.

IV. DAILY RHYTHMS & HIERARCHY

Life inside a camp follows a rhythm designed to keep production moving and discipline tight:

- Dawn—Animals are fed, fires are lit, and water is hauled. Scouts on the perimeter check radios and phones. A few men nap after night shifts.
- Morning—Cooking, cleaning, and minor repairs. Deliveries arrive from support ranches: propane, food, new workers, or precursors.
- Afternoon—Lab work intensifies. Temperatures rise inside sealed rooms. Supervisors monitor batches, purity, and yield.
- Evening—Finished product is packaged for movement. Vehicles are checked, weapons cleaned, and routes confirmed.
- Night—Loads depart under cover of darkness. Some workers sleep; others remain on watch, listening for distant engines or helicopters.

Hierarchy is clear even when it is never spoken aloud:

- The regional boss rarely appears in camp. His authority arrives through phones, money, and sudden orders.
- The camp commander lives on-site or nearby. He controls schedules, punishments, and rewards.
- Lab chiefs oversee chemical processes. Their word carries weight because mistakes cost money and lives.
- Workers—cooks, guards, drivers, and porters—sit at the bottom of the pyramid. Many are young men who felt they had no other paid path.

Raúl, in the novel, occupies that mid-tier: close enough to the violence to enforce it, far enough from the distant boss to remain expendable. Understanding this hierarchy explains why he both fears and abuses the system he serves.

V. SAFETY, DANGER & ECOLOGICAL FALLOUT

Synthetic-drug production is lethal long before the product reaches a city. Camps breathe danger.

Chemical exposure—Workers inhale solvent fumes, handle acids without proper gloves, and stand in rooms where spills are routine. Headaches, burns, and chronic coughs are common. Few workers have masks; those who do often remove them because of heat.

Fire and explosion risk—Improvised wiring, open flames, and volatile chemicals create constant risk. A dropped cigarette, a loose spark from a generator, or a misjudged mixture can ignite a chain reaction.

Ecological damage—Waste liquids are dumped into ravines, shallow pits, or creeks. Drums rust and leak into soil. Animals drink contaminated water. Vegetation yellows along drainage paths. These details echo in the poisoned landscapes of Cartel Babies—the way streams, rivers, and mountain air carry human decisions far beyond the camp fence.

VI. INVISIBILITY & COMMUNITY INTERFACE

From the outside, many camps try to look like ordinary cattle ranches or farming operations. Their survival depends on staying just plausible enough.

Villagers near a camp notice more trucks, more armed men, and more night movement—but they also see groceries being bought, school fees paid, and local fiestas sponsored.

The same system that terrifies them may also keep the electricity bill covered.

This double bind breeds silence. People learn not to ask questions about distant generator noise or the glow on a hill after midnight. The less they know, the less they can betray under pressure.

For outsiders like the narrator of *Cartel Babies*, arriving in this world means walking into a web where every favor, every ride, every glass of water carries unspoken context.

VII. NOVEL INTEGRATION

The camp in *Cartel Babies* is fictional, but it rests on this composite reality. Details such as:

- Tin-roofed kitchens and cinder-block labs
- Barbed-wire fences broken by ravines and cattle gaps
- Generators rumbling all night while young men kick a soccer ball in the dust
- Animals absorbing chemical runoff alongside human workers

...are drawn from patterns observed and researched across rural Sinaloa. Understanding how these nodes function deepens the reader's grasp of what it means for a foreign captive—and for Raúl's son—to call such a place home.

VIII. RESEARCH SOURCES

- Public reporting and investigative journalism on synthetic-drug production in Sinaloa and neighboring states
- Academic work on rural economies, narco-politics, and the sociology of violence
- Mexican government reports on clandestine lab seizures
- The internal *Cartel Babies* encyclopedia and field observations from years spent living in northwestern Mexico