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DEAD LANDS

**Christmas
Special!**

PERDITION'S DAUGHTER



Deadlands Dime Novel #1

PERDITION'S
DAUGHTER

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PERDITION'S DAUGHTER

Howdy, folks. Welcome to Christmas in the Weird West. In this twisted tale of the macabre, you'll learn how Betty McGrew came to be called "Bad Luck Betty" and why it's dangerous to mess with sly cardsharps like "Velvet" Van Helder. And by the end of this demented drama, you'll see how a gunfighter named Ronan Lynch left the world a hero and came back something much more.

PROLOGUE

Captain Ronan Lynch stood in the trench behind his men. The long line of Union blue stretched off into the night's thick fog. Artillery thundered in the distance. Its flash seemed to cling to the horizon, illuminating the thick fog and its own sulfurous cloud. What the troop could see of the horizon looked like some dim, twilight Purgatory between earth and Hell.

"Steady, men," Ronan said, his Colt revolver in one hand and his cavalry saber in the other. Behind him, hidden in the night, he could hear the muffled whinnies of his troopers' horses. He had assigned only half the usual horseholders, one for every eight horses, but he needed every man he had. The holders were having difficulty keeping the nervous beasts still. Ronan couldn't blame the terrified animals—the smell of death was thick here.

They were somewhere in Virginia; he couldn't remember the name of the nearest town. The Federal infantry was getting flanked by Confederates, and his lone cavalry troop had been sent to slow the advance of an entire regiment. They were less

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than fifty men with carbines and sabers sent to stop over four hundred Confederates with breech-loading rifles and bayonets.

All Ronan could do was dismount the men and help them dig shallow graves disguised as trenches. "There's movement in the mist, Cap'n," whispered Ronan's senior sergeant.

"Okay. Get ready, boys. Wait 'til you can smell 'em."

A shot rang out but hit no one. Sharpshooters most likely. Or the Rebs trying to tempt the Union boys into a hasty volley. Fortunately, most of Ronan's men had fought by his side since '66 and didn't take the bait.

"Here they come!" came a distant voice from along the line.

Suddenly a surge of gray emerged from the fog. The Rebs looked like lost ghosts wandering through the mists of Limbo. They halted. Ronan heard the ominous clicks of a hundred metal bolts. Or at least he thought so. Something sounded different, but there was no time to ponder it now.

"Down boys!" he urged as quietly as possible.

Hundreds of tiny flashes suddenly raced along the Rebel line, accompanied by a thunderous retort.

"Steady!" Ronan urged one last time. The Confederates hadn't yet detected the dark-clothed Yankees kneeling in their shallow trench, and so the shots flew overhead. Once the troopers fired back, however, they'd be illuminated. Ronan had to make their first return volley count. Their carbines were far inferior to the Rebel's longer-ranged, British-supplied arms.

The Confederates stopped firing, confused by the lack of return fire. From the mist, Ronan heard a thick southern accent. "Hold yer fire, boys! They've already skedaddled!"

The thud of four hundred boots sounded through the night as the Confederates cautiously advanced.

Now less than forty yards away, the Rebs would soon see the glint of a button or the shiny whites of angry eyes, and their shots would tell true. It was now or never.

"Fire!" Ronan yelled. The fury of his veterans' volley was fantastic. Rebels fell in droves a mere thirty yards from the hasty trench. "Reload!" Captain Lynch screamed.

The Rebels hesitated in shock only for a moment, then gave their infamous battle cry. "Yeeeeeee-haaaaaaa!"

The "Rebel Yell" tore into the Yanks like a thing alive, filling even the veterans with fear and dread. Ronan was ready to stop routers with the steel of his saber, but his men held.

"Fire at will, boys! Let 'em have it!" Ronan emptied his revolver into the ghostly ranks. Slowly, it seemed to Ronan, his troopers' carbines echoed his shots. They came in little spurts, each volley dropping fewer Confederates as the shocked attackers rallied.

Now they'd fix bayonets, Ronan thought, and close in for the kill. The cavalrymen had only their sabers—far inferior weapons in hand-to-hand combat. They'd be cut to pieces.

"Here they come!" cried the sergeant as the Rebels finally charged home. The gray line washed over Ronan and his veteran troopers. Dark blood shone in the periodic gunflashes along the shallow trench. Rebels yelled, and Yankees screamed.

Ronan finished reloading his sidearm just in time and plunged into the fracas. His Colt Walker felled four sons of the South before banging on an empty chamber. Ronan holstered the weapon and started swinging his saber. It should have been hopeless-brittle steel against the long reach of the bayonet could never win-but this particular Confederate regiment was armed with expensive repeaters which had no bayonets. Had they kept their calm, they could have shot Ronan's little troop to pieces instead of being goaded into a charge.

It was a miracle, but Ronan could see his desperate men were winning! Everywhere little patches of gray-clad Rebels were being slaughtered by dancing, slashing blue demons.

"Give 'em Hell, boys!" Ronan raged as he cut his way through to the center.

A Rebel officer finally realized his mistake and yelled for retreat. A few troopers made the mistake of giving chase and were rewarded for their courage by being shot down like dogs.

"Get back down!" Ronan yelled. "Regroup!"

The veterans resumed their positions. Some of them looked along the line and saw how well they'd fared. A handful of dead, a few more wounded, and twice that number of groaning Confederates. Some begged for mercy and found it at the saber of the troop's corporal.

"Get ready," Ronan said as he reloaded his Colt. "They'll be back!"

The troopers rushed into position, but there was no need. Minutes passed by like millennia. Some of the soldiers began to think the Rebs had simply bypassed them, but the older ones knew better. They could hear them moving quietly in the darkness less than fifty yards away.

"What are they doin', sir?" a young trooper near Ronan asked.

"I don't know. Just sit tight, and we'll see. And we'll handle 'em again. Got that, soldier?"

"Yessir," came a hesitant voice.

But the sounds from the night were not those of a regiment rallying. There were odd clanks and eerie rushes of air. Now and then a strange light played on the fog like a small but brilliant match struck behind someone's back.

Finally, seven grim shapes lumbered forth from the darkness, wearing some sort of contraptions on their backs. In their hands they carried long hoses capped by metallic nozzles. Burning black stones were fixed to the ends. The firelight from the flickering embers illuminated the Confederates' wild faces like angry demons.

Ronan suddenly realized just who he was fighting. "Run, boys! It's Hunley's Devils!" he yelled as he backed toward the horses tethered behind, but it was too late. The night suddenly erupted in gouts of freakish flame. The men in the line were engulfed in fire. Most dropped their weapons and staggered about blindly. The searing soldiers smashed into each other, melding their burning flesh and joining in a horrific chorus of destruction and Hellfire.

"Run!" Ronan yelled again as he stared at the infamous Rebel regiment. A few young replacements did as they were told, but his veterans would not budge. Those that were still able stood with their carbines and aimed into the flames.

The veterans fired futilely through the smoke and fire as Ronan continued to call for retreat. He found himself at the horses before he realized it. "Run!" he screamed. "Run, you fools!"

"Run!" Ronan screamed as he awoke from his nightmare.

CHAPTER ONE

December, 1875. Six years later.

Ronan sat facing the swinging bat-doors of the Number One Saloon in Dodge City. He was leaning back in his chair, one dusty boot on the scarred table in front of him and the other on the dirty floor. One hand gripped a bottle of cheap Kentucky whiskey. The other lie hidden beneath his tattered red poncho.

It was late. His night terrors rarely let him sleep. The memory of his encounter with the South's most famous and deadly regiment burned smoky holes in the twisted canals of his brain.

A boy named Tommy Beecher burst through the doors and almost died of lead poisoning. Ronan had been jumpy since he'd entered town and tussled with some cowhands from Texas. It was the same story every place he went. Folks just seemed to pick on him. And then folks just seemed to get dead. Maybe it was Ronan's lean frame or the deranged look his intense blue eyes and moppish brown hair gave him. Or Maybe he was just mean after being branded a coward by the country he loved.

"Mister!" said the boy as he spotted Ronan across the near-empty saloon. "Marshal Bassett's lookin' for ya! I heard 'im talkin' with Deputy Marshal Tilghman over near the livery. One o' them cowhands you tussled with here last night turned up dead."

Ronan twitched an angry eye. He didn't like killing, but truth be told, he didn't much like someone else killing a varmint he had his eye on exterminating himself. It just wasn't sociable.

"You wanna good place ta hide, mister? I'll tell ya for an eagle."

Ronan took a swig of whiskey, plunked the bottle down on the table, and waved the kid off. Tommy shrugged, ran back out onto the boardwalk, and shouted, "He's in here, Sheriff!"

Damn kids.

CHAPTER TWO

Ronan found himself on the High Plains under a starry night. He was sure he could've taken Bassett or Tilghman, but probably not both the cagey sons of bitches. Besides, discretion was the better part of valor, and the back door of the Number One had been wide open. Killing lawmen wasn't Ronan's style. He'd been one himself—once—after he'd been "retired" from the Army in '69.

This was the first time he'd been North since his discharge. His hunting grounds had been Texas and Kansas, where a hired gun had no trouble finding a buyer. This new city—this Denver—seemed so tame...so Eastern.

He could just make out the lights of the city in the distance when he came upon a small campfire.

"Howdy," came a woman's voice from the nearby darkness. Ronan moved his hand to his belt when he heard the cocking of a Winchester. "You won't need that, friend," the voice warned. "Less you've got less than peaceful intentions."

Ronan sat and waited for the woman to show herself. She was a better-than-average-looking, young woman with long, curly, sandy-brown hair. She wore a blue denim longskirt under a beige Stetson—an expensive outfit for a dirt camp outside of Denver.

"What's your intention with that Winchester, ma'am," Ronan grumbled, angry she'd got the drop on him.

The woman stepped near and patted Ronan's horse, tipping the rifle up in one hand as she stepped in close.

Ronan saw his chance. He reached down and grabbed the barrel, then flipped it around to catch the woman's hand in the cocking lever. "Yeeow!" she screamed.

"Leggo," Ronan grunted.

The woman's expensive hat fell off in the mud. As she reached for it with her free hand—trying hard to maintain some dignity—she slipped and fell as far as Ronan would let her into the muck.

"Goshdarn it!" she cursed.

Ronan twisted the rifle around again, freeing her hand. The buffalo gal fell flat on her rump and glared up at the gunslinger.

"That Denver?" Ronan nodded toward the city in the distance.

"Yep," the woman said gruffly as she rubbed her wrist.

"Whaddaya doin' out here?"

"None o' yer business, mister."

"Suit yerself," Ronan dropped the rifle into the mud barrel first and rode north.

CHAPTER THREE

Like any good Western boomtown, Denver was home to over a hundred saloons, gambling parlors, and bordellos. It took Ronan well over a week to make the rounds.

On Sunday, he rested, and that's when the trouble really began. There was a knock on Ronan's door at the cheapest inn in Denver. "Sir?" came the innkeeper's timid voice. Ronan kept his thumb on the hammer of his single-action Army Colt Walker anyway. Old habits died hard.

"Huh?"

"Mr. Backlund over at Backlund's Minin' asked to see you."

Ronan said nothing as he walked quietly to the door and threw it open. The innkeeper jumped back startled, then watched nervously as the gunslinger scanned the empty hall.

"I ain't no miner," he squinted.

"I—I don't think it's about that..."

"Yeah. Prob'ly not." Ronan drew a match along the doorway, lit his cigarillo, and walked downstairs. "Which way?"

CHAPTER FOUR

Ronan ambled into the office of Backlund Mining and smiled at the pretty secretary. "I'm here to see your boss."

"He's just through that door," the young brunette returned his rugged smile.

"Thanks," he said with a predatory grin as he turned and strode into a room full of people.

Directly in front of him, behind a large, mahogany desk, stood a heavysset man. His expensive, double-breasted suit hinted that this was the company's namesake himself. The lines around his bloodshot eyes revealed he was not a happy man.

A man in a red velvet suit and a matching derby over his short, sandy blond hair sat to Ronan's right. He shuffled cards deftly between his well-manicured fingers. The cardsharp smiled and nodded smugly at Ronan, whose lips drew up in disgust. He had little patience for dudes from back East.

To Ronan's left, staring at him in shock, was the young woman he had disarmed on the outskirts of Denver. "Ma'am," Ronan nodded with a mischievous grin.

"Mr. Lynch?" said Irving Backlund. Ronan nodded, and the heavy man gestured toward a plush seat between the other two visitors. "Have a seat, please."

Ronan extinguished his cigarillo on the bottom of his boot and stuffed the smoldering stub in his shirt pocket. Then he sat and propped his boots on Backlund's expensive desk.

"I've asked you here, Mr. Lynch, because I need some help dealing with a...problem."

Ronan looked slowly at the other two sitting on either side of him. "Looks like you've already got some help."

"Yes, well. This is a particularly difficult problem."

Ronan waited for the mine owner to name a victim. The only reason anyone ever hired a gunslinger was for killing. He might

do it—he needed the money—but he'd need to hear the hows and whys before he'd draw his six-shooters. He wasn't bitter enough about his past to go shooting school children...yet.

Still, if Backlund was in the right-in Ronan's mind anyway—and the money was fine, someone was going to catch a bullet.

Backlund seemed to sense Ronan's hesitation. "I need you to find my son."

The gambler continued shuffling, and the woman sat back in her chair, trying not to look flustered.

Backlund turned his back on the entire group and looked out the window over Denver's grimy streets. It was early, and the fog hadn't yet broken against the distant Rocky Mountains.

"Christopher is a sensitive boy," Irving groaned. "When his mother died a year ago, he was lost. We grew distant, and he lost interest in his work. Then...they came along."

Irving said "they" as if it was the secret name of Lucifer himself. "The so-called Church of the Divine Flame. Frauds and fakers! Debauchers!" Irving turned back around, his face red and his bloodshot eyes blazing. "They took advantage of his depression! Especially that—she-devil Carstairs!"

"Calm down, Mr. Backlund," the gambler drawled in a thick southern accent. "You're among friends here."

Ronan cast a squinting eye at the Southerner. He had killed more Rebels in the war than he could count, and he couldn't help but run his fingers along his revolver when he heard that hated accent.

Backlund sighed. "Excuse me, Mr. Van Helter, it's been a difficult few months."

"Velvet. Please, call me Velvet, Irving."

Backlund forced a half-smile and resumed his tale. Ronan's baleful gaze remained fixed on Velvet Van Helter for some time.

"They call themselves the 'Church of the Divine Flame.' But it isn't a Christian God they worship. In fact, I don't know what pagan religion they claim to follow. All I know is they got Christopher to give them all his worldly goods. This was bad enough, but then they moved on and took him with them."

"Did he go with them willingly?" the woman asked.

"Yes, Miss McGrew. It appears so, but there's more. I believe he's...enamored...with the lady who heads this un-Christian ministry, 'Lady' Cynthia Carstairs. She seduced him!" Backlund's cheeks quivered with rage. "I can't go to the law. They've done nothing illegal as far as I can prove, but Carstairs and her flock are fleecing the weak for everything they've got."

Velvet flipped a card through his fingers—a Joker—and shot a sideways glance at Ronan. "Mr. Backlund, I have no qualms about debunking these shysters, and Miss Carstairs sounds...enchanted, but it's possible your son won't see it that way. Do you want us to haul him back, even against his own will?"

Ronan couldn't believe how long it took the gambler to finish speaking. It was the most drawn-out Southern drawl he'd ever heard. Every word tread on his still-blue veins like a spiked boot.

"If that's what it takes, yes. But I'd rather you prove this witch is nothing but a common criminal. Then perhaps my Christopher will come to his senses and return to me."

Ronan took the stub of his cigarillo from his pocket and placed the slimy thing back between his teeth. Then he rubbed a match along Backlund's desk—marring it forever—and relit his cheap stogie. Both Velvet and Miss McGrew coughed slightly at the awful smell in the small room. "What's the pay?" Ronan asked.

Velvet and McGrew looked down at the floor, obviously unnerved at Ronan's directness.

Irving was a practical man, however. "\$250 apiece if you haul him back. I'll give you \$500 each if you can expose Carstairs as a common thief and bring Christopher back of his own volition."

"Where are they now, Mr. Backlund?" Velvet asked gently.

"A town called Derry's Ford, a day's ride southwest of Denver."

Velvet seemed to think it over for a moment, then finally drew the top card off his deck: a King. "That sounds fine to me, Mr. Backlund," he said reassuringly.

Miss McGrew nodded her agreement.

Ronan watched them both then leaned his head back and blew a cloud of noxious smoke. "How many followers Carstairs got?"

"Twenty? Thirty? Certainly no more than fifty," Backlund guessed.

"How many of 'em are heeled?"

"A few," Backlund hazarded. "Most are young men like my Christopher, after all. Oh, and she has a guard. A certain Mr. DuChamp."

"Edgar DuChamp?" Ronan asked.

"Yes, I believe that's him. You've heard of him?"

"Yup. He's a gunman. Fast, too. Killed a sheriff and his deputy back in Abilene. That's gonna cost extra."

"How much?" A trace of Irving's past toughness crept into his face. It was easy to see how this man had made his fortune.

"Let's see," Ronan stared up at the ceiling. "A passel o' hot-blooded young men all wantin' to protect their lady fair. And a gunman with a rep. That's at least a \$500 job just to bring your boy back. Pullin' the skeletons outta this Carstairs' closet'll cost you double."

"A th-thousand dollars?" Backlund stammered.

Velvet and McGrew looked disapprovingly at Ronan, but didn't object.

"Apiece?" Backlund pressed.

Ronan shrugged. "For me anyway."

CHAPTER FIVE

"Ronan Lynch: the Great Negotiator," Velvet prodded as they stepped out of Backlund's office. "Who would think a famous gunfighter would have such persuasive talents as well?"

Ronan grimaced at the gambler and walked on to his hotel, the others in tow.

"When would you like to leave, Great Negotiator?" Betty asked.

Ronan looked up at the clear, blue Denver sky. "Seems a nice enough day, Miss McGrew. Best go now, before the Church moves on to the next town."

The woman stared at him suspiciously for a moment. "Name's Betty. But you can keep callin' me Miss McGrew." She turned her backside to him and headed toward a stable across the street. "Meet you boys at the west end o' town in an hour."

Velvet shrugged and tipped his hat. "Then I will rendezvous with you there," he said before ambling off toward one of Denver's finest restaurants.

Ronan shook his head as his two "partners" walked away.

CHAPTER SIX

The awkward group was back together in a little over an hour. Betty McGrew was mounted on an immaculate white stallion. Ronan sat astride his dirty mare. Velvet rode a fine roan. Tethered to the pony's saddle was a mule, a large, well-traveled trunk lashed to its back. "A fashionable man has to change his clothes on occasion, Mr. Lynch."

Ronan shook his head and kicked his nag in the ribs. "Let's ride," he grunted.

A half day later found the trio moving through the rolling hills of Colorado. It was near dark when they heard a voice from behind them. "Hold!"

Velvet and Betty whirled instantly. Ronan kept his cool and turned slowly to see two masked desperadoes standing on a knoll behind them. "You meanin' to rob us, mister?" Ronan spoke to the nearest.

The bandit leveled a scattergun at the group and snarled, "Thet's right, feller. Now hand over yer money and leave those six-guns kissin' leather."

Ronan took the cigarillo from his mouth and inspected it as if looking for whatever caused it to smell so awful. "You mean, you two are gonna' rob us three?"

The desperado looked at his compadre and nodded. "Thet's right. What of it?"

"Don't seem like good odds to me."

"Huh?" was the second bandit's witty comeback, waving the Winchester at his hip.

Betty looked over at Ronan, remembering she had gotten the drop on the gunfighter a week ago. Could he really get both men before they fired?

Ronan stuck the cigarillo back in his mouth and cracked his knuckles. "Now put down those guns and scatter like rabbits so I don't have to spill your dinners into your innards."

The closest bandit cocked back both hammers of his scattergun defiantly.

Ronan continued unfazed. "Ever seen a man's stomach burst? All your dumplin's come pourin' out in a bloody stew. Nasty."

The lead desperado turned and looked hesitantly at his partner. Neither would back down in front of the other though, and so their fate was sealed.

"Just give us your money," said the bandit with the scattergun.

Ronan chomped down on his cigarillo and cross-drew his Army .44. His left hand flew to the hammer and slapped it over and over, sending a hail of lead up the knoll.

Velvet's horse reared, but he surprised everyone by staying mounted and spinning the horse to protect himself from any fire.

Betty's horse threw her to the ground. She drew her pistol as she landed, but when she looked up, the highwaymen were gone.

Ronan looked to either side of him, then nodded at Velvet. "Nice riding, Reb," he said as he trotted up the knoll.

Velvet followed, fingering his deck of cards nervously. "I was born in N'awlins," he said as he eyed the hill's crest. "Won a few equestrian events as a youth."

"Uh-huh," Ronan replied disinterestedly as he topped the knoll. Lying at the bottom were two very dead thieves leaking from five holes. Their horses stood nearby.

Betty came up behind them and pushed her Stetson back to rub her head. "Good shootin', cowboy."

Ronan headed toward the bandits' horses. "Naw. Missed once."

CHAPTER SEVEN

The next day, the trio rode into Derry's Ford. Less than a hundred souls eked out a living within the town limits. Perhaps another two hundred worked the land around it.

"If they're here, we won't miss 'em," Betty said as she surveyed the small town.

"Wyoming Territory?" Velvet asked of McGrew's accent.

"Ahyup, of late. Texas and Kansas before that."

Ronan grunted. He considered Texans a particularly distasteful subclass of Southerners, female or otherwise.

The trio rambled slowly down Main Street, drawing the stares of the townsfolk like moths to a flame. One of the stares belonged to a tobacco-chewing sheriff named Leland Turner. Turner sat on the porch of his jail, leaning back in an old but

sturdy chair made with his own hands. He spat a stream of juice as the three newcomers trotted slowly into his jurisdiction.

Turner watched as Ronan studied him the way only a gunman could. He wiped the tobacco juice from his thick, black mustache on the back of his sleeve and let his chair fall forward slowly. He rose, then walked into the muddy street to intercept the visitors.

"I'll have those guns," he said simply.

Velvet raised his hands to show he carried no weapon. Betty just smiled and overended a Peacemaker and a Winchester 73. Ronan merely leaned forward on his pommel and chewed on the short stub of a cigarillo.

"You somethin' special, mister?" Turner asked, his gun hand empty and open as he reached for Betty's firearms with his left.

"My momma said so," Ronan grinned with clenched teeth.

Turner remained firm. "This town's quiet. It's gonna stay that way. Less you got a badge, I'm takin' that shooter."

Ronan surveyed the residents of Derry's Ford as they bustled through the streets. The town was all decorated for Christmas. Snow frosted the tin roofs, and wreaths hung from the doors and windows. There was no danger here.

The gunslinger slid his hand slowly down to his Colt. "Here ya go, Sheriff. Watch that hammer-she's got a light touch."

"Yup. Spect she has," Turner took the weapon then turned his back on the trio and walked silently back to his humble jail.

"Is there a saloon in this town, Sheriff?" Velvet called.

Turner stopped on the porch and pointed toward the center of town with Betty's rifle. "The New Moon'll set you up. Stay outta trouble. It's two days to Christmas, and I don't wanna kill nobody on a holiday."

"Will do, Sheriff," Velvet beamed as he trotted downtown.

The New Moon Saloon was everything Velvet had hoped for. Despite the town's size, the inn was well-furnished, well-stocked, and home to a game of poker even in the early afternoon.

Besides the players, there was only one other person in the main room. A white-haired and haggard old man lay passed out in the far corner, an empty bottle of whisky still clutched in his hands like a baby with its mother's milk. He wore a battered, dark suit and a sadly soiled white collar. Velvet sniffed and turned his attention to the livelier table.

"Miss McGrew, would you be so kind as to fetch our rooms while I insinuate my wicked self into a game?"

"Sure, if you'll quit callin' me Miss McGrew. You make me feel like some kinda ol' maid when you say that."

"If the girdle fits..." Ronan said as he walked past Betty and Velvet to the rooms upstairs.

Betty seethed beneath her Stetson. Velvet blushed, the red in his cheeks contrasting sharply with the dark green, velvet outfit he had taken from his immense trunk this morning.

"Two rooms, please," Betty said to the girl behind the counter.

"You mean three, ma'am?"

"Nope, just two. If that man's here, I'm stayin' elsewhere."

Velvet smiled as Betty tipped her hat and walked out the front door of the saloon. He had his eye on a game between four players. The first was a middle-aged blonde in a dress that probably passed for fashionable hereabouts. The second was an older man wearing a three-piece suit-also far from fashionable to the New Orleans elite. The third was an older man with the look of a prospector the gods of fashion had totally forsaken.

The fourth man earned a careful study by Velvet. He wore a New York black suit and a matching hat that rested on a hook above him. His white shirt was clean and well-pressed-no small feat in these parts, Velvet was sure. What interested him most-and he only caught a glance as he leaned in to sit-was a long, wooden-handled, Buntline revolver. Both the weapon and the black leather holster it rested in looked well-oiled.

"Season's greetings, friends! Mind if I join you folks?" Velvet asked politely.

The woman grinned, "Why, we'd be charmed."

The well-dressed man nodded his approval, and the prospector mumbled something about 'tin horns,' though he didn't object.

Velvet pulled out his chair, removed his velvet derby, then took and kissed the lady's hand. "I am Velvet Van Helter, madam. Of the N'awlins Van Helters. Perhaps you've heard of us?"

The woman batted her thick eyelashes as Velvet sat. "No, sir. I'm afraid my roots are planted firmly in the North. I'm Annabelle Jenkins. That's Mr. Edgecomb; he owns the Derry's Ford bank. This is Mr. DuChamp," she pointed at the man with the Buntline, "and this engaging conversationalist," she pointed to the prospector, who squinted back at her suspiciously from behind his cards, "is Pauly something or other."

"It's a pleasure to meet you all. What's the game?"

"Dealer's choice," Annabelle said as she threw in her previous hand. Edgecomb grinned, showing a pair of Jacks on a game of draw and raked in the pot.

It was DuChamp's deal. He threw five cards to each player, including Velvet, and said "Same game. Jacks or better to win."

"It's a dollar ante, hon," Annabelle said to Velvet as she studied his neat sandy hair and devious blue eyes.

The prospector, sitting to DuChamp's left, bet first. He opened with two bits. Edgecomb drove it to five bucks even.

Velvet drew a worthless hand and asked for three cards on his draw. DuChamp leaned forward to slide them across the table, and as he did so, a silver pendant on the end of a leather necklace fell out of his shirt. It was in the shape of a flame.

Velvet stayed in blind as he waited for the bet to come back around to him.

"Ain't you gonna look at your cards, sugar?" Annabelle asked.

"No, ma'am." Velvet shook his head. "It's only polite to pay into the pot a few times, seeing as how I joined late and all."

Velvet motioned for the attention of a serving girl. "Now, I'll be more than happy to buy everyone a drink, if they'll take it."

The girl who had given Betty the rooms gawked at Velvet's outfit as she approached. "Those are some fancy duds."

"They're from N'awlins. All the rage there, I can assure you." Velvet handed her a silver eagle and noticed the revealing gown. "What is your name, darlin'?"

"Sally Mae. I work here-day and night, if you know what I mean."

Velvet studied her shapely figure. "I do indeed. For now all I require is a refill of my friend's glasses and a bottle of sherry for myself. You can keep the change."

Sally Mae scampered off, delighted at the generous tip.

"Thankee, mister," Pauly the prospector grinned through his remaining teeth and patted Velvet on the back.

"Thank you, hon," Annabelle echoed.

DuChamp said only, "What have you got?"

Pauly threw in his cards. "Pair o' eights won't win."

Annabelle showed a pair of tens and a glimpse of her bosom as she leaned forward to toss in her cards.

DuChamp was about to show his hand when Velvet interrupted. "Wait, friend. Before you show me those cards, I'm curious about something. I noticed your pendant, and I wondered if it had anything to do with the Church of the Divine Flame."

"None of your business," DuChamp answered bluntly.

"You are, of course, right. That's why I'm willing to bet you for the information. You see, I'm something of a lost soul myself, and I'm interested in learning what this movement is all about. Will you take the chance?"

"What's in it for me?" the gunslinger asked suspiciously.

"If I lose, I'll double the pot."

DuChamp studied Velvet's eyes and didn't seem to like what he saw there. Still, he nodded his agreement and flipped over a pair of Kings. "Looks like I'm having myself a merry Christmas."

Velvet sighed and flipped over the three cards he had drawn. A pair of deuces.

DuChamp snorted a laugh and reached forward for the pot. "Sucker bet. Anyone can tell you what the Church is all about. They've been preaching here in Derry's Ford for a month."

"Ah, good," Velvet placed his right hand on DuChamps', then flipped over his two original cards with his left. One of them was a third deuce. "Then perhaps you can tell me a little more."

The others at the table gasped and then sat speechless—and suspicious. Accusing Velvet of cheating was impossible, since he hadn't even touched three of his cards.

Everyone expected DuChamp to fly into a rage. It was obvious the man didn't like being played. His actual reaction was far worse. The gunman grinned and nodded as he released his hold on the pot. "Maybe I will. Come on out to the church tomorrow, and you'll find what you're looking for."

Velvet nodded slowly before breaking the silence. "Tomorrow then. Now let's forget my soul-searching and play some cards."

CHAPTER EIGHT

"What's all the yellin' about?"

Ronan sat straight up in bed. He didn't recognize the voice at his door, but it was young and female, and that was good enough. On the other side stood Sally Mae, who had pulled an extra shift this busy night. She nearly wet herself when Ronan threw the door suddenly open.

"I'm sorry, mister," she panted, her eyes eagerly dancing over Ronan's shirtless form. "I thought I heard you call out."

"Sorry, miss." He holstered the sidearm in his hand. "I had a nightmare. Dreamed I was sleeping alone tonight, and that just ain't natural."

Sally Mae smiled at the hint and looked shyly down at the floor. The last of the night's customers, Velvet, had gone to bed—alone—a half hour ago. No one would miss her if she put in a little overtime. After midnight, it was the day before Christmas, and she was feeling charitable.

Ronan watched the saloon gal attempt to be demure and grabbed her by the arm. "You ain't no schoolmarm."

"No, but there might still be a few things I can teach you." Sally Mae stepped willingly into the darkness and shut the door behind her, already loosening the bow on her dress.

CHAPTER NINE

The morning of Christmas Eve broke like the tops of Ronan's two fried eggs—hard and messy. He had stayed up most the night with Sally Mae. Sleep wasn't a close friend anyway, so the girl's company was welcome, but it only added to the dark bags beneath the gunslinger's eyes.

Velvet was his usual cheery self as he sauntered downstairs. His velvet suit of the day was a bizarre pale yellow. The usually grim Ronan nearly choked on his breakfast at the spectacle.

"What the Hell are you s'posed ta be? You're the color o' these nasty eggs."

"I can assure you, Mr. Lynch," Velvet said nonplused as he sat next to his grubby friend, "daffodil yellow is the very cutting edge of style in more civilized parts of the world."

"You do kinda look like a egg," said Betty as she joined them.

Velvet grimaced but stood and pulled a chair out for the buffalo gal.

The owner of the saloon walked over with two steaming mugs of Arbuckle's coffee and mumbled a hello. Then he took Velvet and Betty's order and shambled back into the kitchen. The New Moon was empty except for the three unlikely companions.

"I met your Mr. DuChamp last night," Velvet said as he tucked a napkin behind his cravat.

Ronan stopped chewing. "He was here?"

"Hm-hmm," Velvet drank of his java. "That was him sitting at the table last night."

Ronan grimaced.

"He didn't seem so bad," Velvet grinned. "In fact, I managed to wrangle an invitation of sorts to the Church's compound"

Betty took a draw on her Arbuckle's, "You work fast, mister. We oughta go right after we wolf down some vittles."

"I agree. What's our plan?" Velvet and Betty turned to Ronan.

"Whaddaya mean?" Ronan asked with his mouth full, egg yolk showing at the corners of his grimace.

"We can't just go riding in shooting everyone," Velvet chastened. "I was thinking we could pose as lost souls looking for a good cause to dedicate ourselves to. That way we can find out what the church is all about and try for Mr. Backlund's more generous reward for exposing this Miss Carstairs."

"Sounds good ta me," Betty said.

Ronan grumbled something contrary but agreed with his silence.

As the group settled their bill with Mr. Jenkins, Velvet slipped the saloon owner an extra silver eagle. "We were wondering if you could tell us where that new congregation's located, friend?"

Jenkins' face puckered and contorted in disgust. "Bunch o' wackos," Jenkins grumbled as he took the money. "Just follow the trail south of town. Can't miss 'em."

"Hmm. Seems Mr. Backlund isn't the only one who thinks the Church is less than noble," Velvet said as the saloon keeper walked briskly away.

Ronan stood and threw his grimy napkin down on the table, "Let's ride."

CHAPTER TEN

The compound was less than seven miles from town. From a distance, the trio could see a smattering of wood and tin buildings and a number of small tents. The entire area was fenced in with ten-foot-high barbed-wire walls.

"Looks like they don't want anyone gettin' in without an invite," said Betty.

"Or out," murmured Velvet.

The trio rode to the front gates unmolested. When they got within fifty feet, a lone sentinel carrying a rifle challenged them.

"What can we do for ya?"

Velvet took a deck of cards from his coat pocket and shuffled them nervously as he answered. "Mr. DuChamp invited us here today for a tour of the compound, friend. If you could just inform him that his gambling companion from last night has arrived, I'm sure he'll remember."

The guard studied the group for a moment, then nodded and headed off toward the largest of the newly constructed buildings.

"When's the last time you saw a church that needed armed guards?" said Ronan.

"And barbed-wire fences," added Betty.

The guard returned a few minutes later and inserted a large iron key in the gate's padlock. "Come on in," he said.

Ronan waited for the guard to ask for his Colt, but the man only eyed the six-gun appreciably. For some reason, that unnerved Ronan more than handing it over.

The man led them to the main house in the compound. Edgar DuChamp, wearing a fine black suit and derby, stood on the front porch smoking a long cheroot. He stared at the three through the white smoke, no doubt sizing them up for trouble.

"Good morning, sir," Velvet smiled warmly. "I've come to take you up on your offer to learn more about this holy congregation."

Velvet dismounted and folded his riding gloves neatly into his wide sash. "My two friends here are also pilgrims who have lost their way. I hope you don't mind?"

DuChamp grinned and shook his head. "Come on in. The minister of our congregation is expecting you."

The interior of the plain building was startlingly extravagant. The walls were papered with a dark maroon pattern-Ronan thought they looked bloody-and the furnishings were expensive and decadent. Odd paintings hung around the room and lined the walls of a long staircase leading to the upper reaches of the house. Most of the portraits were of rich young men wearing styles from fifty or even a hundred years ago.

Overhead hung perhaps the most extravagant furnishing of all, a gas chandelier. A brilliant but smoky flame burned at its center, casting the room in flickering dimness.

Velvet felt perfectly at home.

"Nice place," Ronan said as he sat in an overly plush sofa and propped his dusty boots on a cherry table.

DuChamp stood over him, puffing on his pipe. He slowly put his right shoe on Ronan's shin and calmly pushed the boots off the table. It was the gunslingers' equivalent of name calling.

Ronan looked down at his feet, grimaced, and slowly put them back up on the table.

DuChamp once again nudged the offending boots to the floor.

Ronan looked up, squinting meanly.

Betty stood horrified, her hand unconsciously moving toward her pistol.

Velvet tried to maintain his composure, but his nervous hands found the deck in his pocket and began shuffling it furiously.

"Gentleman!" came a voice from the stairway. All eyes in the room—save DuChamp's—turned instantly at the lilting voice of Lady Cynthia Carstairs. She wore a white dress that flowed like a summer nightgown. The barest hint of her slender form was visible through the gossamer cloth. The jet-black hair and piercing dark eyes of an Egyptian queen hovered above it all. Velvet thought this beautiful creature could easily be the living descendant of Cleopatra herself.

"C-charmed, mademoiselle," he stammered as he rose and extended his hand.

Lady Carstairs crossed-no, glided-across the room and extended her own delicate hand. Velvet took it, kissed it gently and slowly, then fought for control of his words. "Madam, my name is Velvet Van Helter. Of the N'awlins Van Helters. Perhaps you've heard of us?"

Lady Carstairs shook her head politely. "Though I did live in New Orleans once. A long time ago."

Velvet smiled, unnerved for some odd reason. "These are my associates, Mr. Ronan Lynch and Miss Betty McGrew."

"Associates?" Lady Carstairs asked.

"Yes," Velvet pressed. "We've come to learn about your church, if you would be so kind."

"Certainly, Mr. Van Helter." Lady Carstairs sat in a plush love seat that framed her lithe figure like a throne. Her accent was difficult to place. It was thick, vaguely east European, yet with an occasional Mediterranean purr.

"Our church is founded on a simple principle. We seclude ourselves from a sinful world so that we suffer less temptation."

"Temptation from what?" Velvet asked in his long and sincere Southern drawl.

"The temptation of money, for one. Everyone who lives here pledges their personal fortunes to the community. Everyone has plenty, and there is no cause for greed."

"My, that would keep everyone honest, wouldn't it?" Velvet turned his head toward Betty and rolled his eyes in disbelief. "From what other temptations do you protect your flock?"

Carstairs let her long delicate fingers trail down the milky skin of her bosom, "Temptations of the flesh, Mr. Van Helter."

Velvet blushed. He could see how this eastern beauty could seduce the many young men who lived in her compound.

"You see, we are all the children of creation, and the divine flame that is our soul should not have to dance with only one partner for all eternity."

Velvet, Betty, and Ronan stared in disbelief while Lady Carstairs' words sunk in.

"I think I might like this place," Ronan finally spoke when he realized the cult's personal practices.

Betty stood and placed her hands on her hips. "Well, I think that's downright sinful! This ain't nothin' but a big cathouse. It's no wonder you got all these young bucks snookered into givin' you all their dough. Why, I bet their bunkhouses ain't got crushed velvet sofas and chandeliers from France."

Velvet was horrified. Ronan grinned, and after watching Carstairs' pleasant, knowing smile remain unchanged, turned his gaze to DuChamp, who continued puffing quietly on his cheroot.

"My apologies, my most gracious hostess, for my friend's—"

Betty interrupted Velvet by putting her hat on her head and turning about suddenly for the door. Unfortunately, she turned so quickly her skirt caught a small serving tray beside her and sent a bottle and several empty glasses spilling to the floor. "Goldarn it!" she blushed as she stomped on out the front door.

Velvet turned, his eyes still blinking in shock at having his cover blown. "Again, my apologies, sir and madam. We only met—I mean—she hasn't—"

"Save your apologies, Mr. Van Helter. They are not required," Carstairs interrupted. "We know why you're here. Now you know what our congregation is all about, and you can decide whether or not we're as bad as you've been told."

"Just the same, ma'am," Ronan interrupted. "I'd like to hear about the flock from one of the sheep instead o' the shepherd. If you catch my drift."

Carstairs' brow creased slightly. "I'm sure Edgar would be willing to share his feelings with you."

"Actually, I was thinkin' of a friend o' mine that joined your crusade up in Denver. Christopher Backlund. He around?"

Carstairs raised her head. Velvet sensed she had seen through their thin pretense some time ago and was only waiting to discover their real purpose in visiting the estate. Now it seemed her curiosity had been sated.

"Certainly, but Christopher is in the mountains on an errand. Perhaps we could send him into Derry's Ford this evening?"

"That'd be just fine, ma'am. I see by that table Betty knocked over that a good drink ain't against your faith, so tell ol' Chris to find me at the saloon and I'll buy him an eggnog."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

It was dinner time before Christopher Backlund showed up at the New Moon. The blond youth was wearing tattered denim trousers and a soiled shirt. Whatever wealth he'd enjoyed with his father in Denver was obviously no longer a part of his life.

Christopher entered the flophouse with DuChamp right behind him. The gunslinger pointed to the table where Ronan, Velvet, and Betty were sitting and made his way through the crowd.

"There's your friend," DuChamp nodded toward Ronan as he stopped short of the table to light his cheroot.

Christopher nodded hesitantly and walked up to the table, hat in hand. He wore thick glasses half-hidden by his moppish hair. "Which one of you is Ronan Lynch?"

Ronan nodded and rubbed the thick stubble on his chin. "Here, old buddy. Don't you remember me?" Ronan said more weakly than he'd hoped.

Christopher placed his hands on the table and leaned in low. "Look, mister," he said quietly. "I know why you're here, and you're wasting your time. My father's wealth didn't help my mother. Only a simple and pious life is rewarded by the fates."

"Look here, son," Betty put her hand on Christopher's. "Yer paw is worried 'bout you and wants you home for the holidays."

Christopher pulled his hand away from Betty's and stood upright. "Tell him I'm just fine and leave me alone." With that the young man turned and walked past DuChamp toward the door.

Ronan's nerves were tensed. An easy thousand bucks was walking out the door. DuChamp had obviously come to keep them from simply dragging the boy kicking and screaming back to his old man. He had even placed himself in the perfect position to stop the trio's pursuit. Despite his looks, this Easterner was no tinhorn fresh off the train.

Betty was less aware of DuChamp's subtle warning. She stood abruptly to chase after Christopher. Unfortunately, as was often her lot in life, she had tucked the checkered red tablecloth into her skirt when she sat down. When she stood, all the plates and glasses on the table came crashing around her boots.

The jumpy patrons near her table were on their feet in a heartbeat. By the time everyone had sat back down, Ronan was gone and the saloon's door was closing fast.

Outside, Ronan saw Christopher Backlund mounting a two-seated buckboard parked at the saloon's boardwalk. He jumped onto the wagon without a word, shoved the stunned youth aside, and grabbed the reins.

"Yaah!" he cried as he slapped the leather sharply and put the cart's two mules into motion.

The door to the New Moon burst open behind him. DuChamp was on the porch, his weapon drawn. Ronan reached over and dragged Christopher across his back, spoiling DuChamp's shot.

"L-let me go!" screamed Christopher. "What are you're doing?"

"Earnin' a quick five hundred bucks, junior. Ya already messed up the easy grand. Now shut up. I gotta drive."

But Christopher was not the greenhorn Ronan had taken him for. He pushed the gunslinger's hat down over his eyes. When

Ronan released him to clear his vision, Christopher kicked with all his might and sent Ronan tumbling into the dusty street.

Velvet, Betty, and most of Derry's Ford were now watching. The buckboard rumbled on another hundred yards before the animals finally petered out. Ronan rose slowly to his feet and shook his head angrily at the youth. He turned slowly, knowing instinctively what was going on behind him.

DuChamp walked casually into the street and holstered his weapon. It was a long-barreled Buntline, the most accurate hand-cannon in the world. It was slow on the draw though, and Ronan was fairly certain that would give him the edge he needed to beat the rival gunman.

"Kidnapping is a hanging offense, Mr. Lynch," DuChamp said as he shook out his fingers.

It was a thin threat: If Ronan didn't settle things right here and now, DuChamp would have a certain Sheriff Leland Turner on his bruised backside.

Betty and Velvet moved to the edge of the boardwalk. The gambler shuffled his cards nervously while Betty fretted with her food-stained skirt. "I sure didn't mean things to go this way. I'm just clumsy. Ever since I was born..." she trailed off, realizing everyone's attention was riveted on the showdown in the street.

Ronan said nothing. He merely wiggled his fingers and waited for DuChamp to make the first play. The loser was going to meet the Maker. The first to draw was likely going to jail. DuChamp was too smart for that. He'd need a little goading to slap leather.

"You don't have a chance with that twelve-inch barrel," Ronan said in a gruff whisper audible to DuChamp and every other craning ear in Derry's Ford. "I'll be smokin' ceegars and drinkin' brandy in the saloon before you clear your holster."

DuChamp only smiled. "Would someone fetch the sheriff?" Though he spoke to the crowd, his eyes never left Ronan's. "It seems this scoundrel won't draw, so he'll have to swing."

Ronan grimaced. He wasn't about to lose face by backing down, and he sure wasn't going to jail. He was thinking about jerking his six-shooter when he heard a sharp crack from the boardwalk of the New Moon. Betty—"Bad Luck" Betty from this day forward—had stepped through a rotten plank in the boardwalk. It cracked like a rifle shot.

Ronan's gaze shifted for a fraction of a second. His hand flinched. It was all the provocation DuChamp needed.

Two shots rang out so close together as to sound like one long, continuous thunderclap. Smoke rolled from both gunmen's barrels.

Ronan felt a strange sensation in his gizzards. He looked down and saw a stream of red fluid coating his pants and boots before pooling in the pockmarked street. Then he followed the blood trail into the dirt.

DuChamp holstered his pistol. "Someone summon the sheriff," he said grimly. "And an undertaker. This boy unwrapped his Christmas present a day early."

CHAPTER TWELVE

The undertaker was disappointed. Gut-shot, Ronan was dead, he just hadn't caught on yet. He lay semi-conscious on a hard cot in the jail. The doctor nodded good night to Sheriff Turner, said there was little more he could do, and went home. Velvet knocked on the door less than a minute later.

"Sheriff Turner," he called softly as he opened the door slowly. Velvet kept his hands visible to make sure the sheriff knew he wasn't there to break his friend out of the hoosegow.

"Whaddaya want?" Leland answered.

"The doctor tells me the wound is mortal. I was wondering if I could sit with my companion during his last hours."

Sheriff Turner frowned as he thought about it. "I reckon there's no harm in it, but I'll have your weapons first."

Velvet smiled. "Willingly," he said as he stepped into the office with his hands in the air.

The sheriff looked at the egg-yolk yellow velvet suit and shook his head as he patted the gambler down. He found only a beaten set of cards in one of the suit's pockets.

"All right. I'll lock you in the cell with him. I hear anything funny, and I'll shoot first and give my apologies later. Got it?"

Velvet nodded and headed directly into Ronan's cell. When Sheriff Turner finally left, he took out his worn cards and shuffled them.

"Time to tell you a story, Mr. Lynch," Velvet whispered. "When I was a young lad in old N'awlins, one of our servants was a Haitian woman we called Minuit. It's spelled like 'minuet' by sounds like 'meanwee'. That's French for 'midnight,' for that was the shade of her jet-black skin."

Velvet sat at a small table beside Ronan's groaning form. He laid the cards out in a standard Klondike pattern and began playing solitaire.

"I'm sure Minuit's real name was something else, but she chose it herself when my family set her free. That was long before Lincoln or Davis freed the slaves, by the way. I know you once fought for the Union, so you should know my family has long abhorred the institution of slavery.

"Anyway, Minuit used to tell me stories of her home. She was old enough when she was captured to have studied black magic. Though my parents never knew, Minuit taught me something of her knowledge as well.

"Though I will never admit this to you when you are conscious, the powers of magic are, I assure you, very real."

Velvet's face twisted in consternation. He lost his first game of Klondike. Unfazed, he shuffled the deck and dealt again.

"But I was never truly comfortable with voodoo. Too many strange spirits to deal with. One day, Minuit told me there were other forms of magic. One of them, she understood, was hidden in the pages of a very particular edition of *Hoyle's Book of Games*. I was eighteen at the time and already a successful gambler, so needless to say I was quite intrigued."

Velvet lost his second game and leaned back in his chair to shuffle. He cracked his knuckles, stretched, and went at it again.

"I found the book—you can find most anything in N'awlins, you know—and began to read. At first I thought Minuit was mistaken. There was nothing there but rules and examples of play. It was nearly a year later—while learning the finer points of bridge—that I noticed some of Mr. Hoyle's examples made no sense.

"So I studied them more closely. Eventually I was able to discern a pattern—a code if you will—in the pages of this unlikely grimoire.

"With Minuit's help, and I'll admit the intervention of a few of N'awlin's houngans—that's a voodoo priest, Mr. Lynch—I was eventually able to decipher the entire book.

"And you wouldn't believe what I learned."

Velvet smiled as his third game broke lucky. He placed the last card into its stack and leaned back. There was no visible effect, but he knew the wound inside Ronan's stomach was mending.

"Those few of us who know the secrets call ourselves 'hucksters.' It's dangerous at times. One still has to contact the spirits to work magic, but I think you'll agree the effects are nothing short of miraculous. Besides, casting a hex is a gamble. I suppose that's why I'm drawn to it. There. That should do."

Velvet leaned back, exhausted. He pushed his yellow derby over his eyes and began to doze.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Velvet woke with a start. His chair, which he had leaned back against the wall, fell forward suddenly. Sheriff Turner staggered through the doorway of the adjacent room. His eyes were big as silver dollars as he moved toward the bars. He fell into them, his bloody hands sliding down the cold iron as he slumped to the floor. A growing stain and the unmistakable tear of a knife wound showed clearly on his back.

Velvet looked up and saw several masked figures in the doorway. The lead figure held a long knife in his hands. Blood dripped from the silvery point.

Velvet instinctively reached into his pocket and grabbed his cards. Healing wasn't the only hex in the huckster's repertoire. He narrowed his gaze in concentration and felt five cards leap from

his deck into his fingers. He glanced at them quickly: a full house. Velvet stretched out his hand, letting the cards fall. He knew they'd somehow be back in his deck when he needed them. They always were.

A ghostly white vapor, invisible in the dim room, silently shot from his open palm and slammed the murderer squarely in the chest. The crack of the man's ribs was almost deafening as he flew backward through the doorway. Blood dripping from the doorframe confirmed the kill.

Velvet fingered his deck once more as another figure appeared at the threshold. The cards flew into his deft fingers once more. This time, however, he glanced at the hand and saw the leering face of a Joker. His flirtations with the wild spirits that gave him his powers had backfired.

Icy fire shot through his veins and slammed into his brain. He convulsed backward, then smashed his head into the wall before falling forward into the unyielding iron bars.

Ronan looked groggily at the dark-clad figure kneeling over Sheriff Turner's still-twitching body. The man cut the lawman's throat where he lay, then took the keys from his belt. He opened the cell door and stepped over Velvet toward Ronan. Beyond this second figure, Velvet could see a third. This one wore a mask, but there was little mistaking the round spectacles of Christopher Backlund.

Everything went black.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

"Come on, Velvet. We gotta get you outta here now!"

Velvet saw only inky blackness with patches of red. The voice was definitely that of "Bad Luck" Betty McGrew.

"Arcane backlash." That's what Hoyle had called it when the spirits—manitous, the Indians called them—fought back and won. It was rare, but Velvet knew the manitous could cause much more than pain. Madness or death could come from a misstep in the dark dance with those mischievous spirits.

"Help me out here, Velv. Everyone in Derry's Ford's gonna blame you for Ronan's escape if we don't get you outta town."

"Escape?" Velvet muttered as he began to stagger under his own power. He glanced back at the cell as he stumbled out. Sheriff Turner still lay beside the bars. The bloody knife rested near where Velvet had fallen—no doubt planted in his hands by the blood on his palms. Ronan, however, was nowhere to be seen.

"Why did they take him?" the huckster asked himself as Betty dragged him out the back of the jail. She had all three horses and Velvet's mule (complete with trunk) waiting.

Betty helped Velvet into his saddle, then climbed onto her stallion. "I reckon somethin's up. I heard some locals say the

entire Church packed up and headed off into the desert earlier tonight. They musta taken Ronan with 'em. Let's get on out there and pick up their trail. Then we can ask that bitch Carstairs ourselves."

Betty kicked her stallion in the ribs and bolted into the night. "Yee-hah!"

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Ronan batted one beaten, swollen eye. The other wouldn't even think of coming out of its bruised hibernation. Wherever he was, it was dark. An occasional flash of lightning lit his surroundings just long enough to blind him.

"Some way to spend Christmas Eve," he muttered as he struggled to all fours.

Ronan felt a cool, damp, earthen floor beneath him. He reached out and found wooden crates and what felt like stone statues of some sort. The storm that raged around him was at least beyond four walls and a roof, for he could feel no wind or rain, although he could hear it moaning through a door or shutter that wasn't quite shut.

Slowly, his lone eye grew accustomed to the occasional lightning flash. He was in a basement, surrounded by boxes and crates of odds and ends. A gold candelabra jutted from one box, and a miniature dragon carved of green stone stuck out from another. Several statues surrounded him and seemed to leer at him harshly in the infrequent illumination. Though Ronan pretended to be far less civilized than he once was, his education at West Point told him these pieces were old and valuable enough for a museum.

Several paintings rounded out the odd collection of treasures. There were portraits of English Lords and French Renaissance impressions, but the piece that caught his lone eye most was that of Lady Carstairs.

Ronan dragged himself toward the painting and pulled himself to his feet by its heavy gilded frame. He could feel his bones shift painfully as he did. Someone had worked him over good, but he didn't remember more than vague flashes of fists and splintered boards.

The portrait of Lady Carstairs showed her in a fancy Parisian dress. Ronan was sure Velvet would have approved. He pulled that painting back to look at the one behind it and saw yet another image of Lady Cynthia Carstairs.

"Vain bitch," he muttered. This painting was far older and showed Carstairs in a style of dress Ronan had only seen in musty old textbooks. Another portrait behind that showed her in an almost medieval gown, and the one leaning against the wall was positively ancient.

Either Carstairs had a major hankering for having her picture made in old clothes or she was older than the spittle on Ronan's grandma's chin.

There was the sound of iron on iron, a key in a lock perhaps. Ronan dragged himself into the darkness and winced at the brilliant illumination of a lantern.

"Where are you, Mr. Lynch?" came DuChamp's steady voice. "I'm sorry my shot wasn't cleaner. I was aiming for your heart, you know, but you are fast, and I had little time to aim. Pity."

"He's not dead," came the voice of Cynthia Carstairs. How did she know, Ronan thought? Was she truly some sort of witch?

"I'm afraid your pain is not yet over, Mr. Lynch," DuChamp warned. "You see, our congregation is about to begin its final pilgrimage, and we must leave you behind as a lesson to those who would follow."

DuChamp shone the bullseye lantern into the corner Ronan had dragged himself. Carstairs peered curiously over his shoulder. She looked older this Christmas Eve. And perhaps frightened somehow.

"Wait, Edgar," she said as the gunfighter reached for Ronan. "I must do a reading."

"Now?" DuChamp was agitated. It was obvious he was in a hurry to leave before more trouble arrived. "I'll fetch your cards."

"No! I need something more powerful. There's something strange about this one. Something I can't quite see." She leaned closer but remained at a cautious distance. "Fetch the hounds."

Edgar's lip curled in disgust. Ronan didn't understand what was about to happen, but he knew he wasn't going to like it.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

It was beginning to snow. Hard. Flurries had been falling all night and into this Christmas morning, but the real storm hadn't broken yet. Suddenly, an unnatural bolt of lightning arced across the plains, thunder boomed like cannons, and the big flakes cascaded down out of the low, gray sky.

Velvet and Bad Luck Betty approached the Church compound carefully. Even from a distance, flashes of lightning revealed the camp had been abandoned. The tents were gone. The buildings had been left open. Scores of horse prints and wagon tracks in the thin, damp snow testified to the congregation's mass exodus.

Even the walls near the gate had fallen down, most likely as the church members' wagons rolled out of the compound. The coils of tangled barbed wire lying across the main gate made entry difficult on foot and impossible on horse.

Worse, hanging from the long plank over the main entrance was a swinging figure. Velvet knew instantly who it was. It took Betty a few moments longer.

Ronan Lynch hung by his neck from a frozen rope. His dark, white-crested body dripped blood into the steaming, snow-covered ground below. Someone had tied a bright red ribbon around his chest in a gigantic bow. It didn't need a tag. Velvet knew who the grisly gift was from.

"For God's sake, Betty! Help me cut him down!"

Betty was already aiming with her Winchester 73. A single shot cut the rope above Ronan's head and dropped his limp form into the crimson snow.

Velvet was on him in a heartbeat. He slid his hands out of his gloves and felt of the gunslinger's raw, meaty neck. "He's dead."

Betty jumped back on her stallion and galloped toward the main house. She was pretty certain Carstairs was already gone, but she had to be absolutely sure.

Velvet looked solemnly after her as he draped Ronan's body across the back of his mare and then rode toward the house. Betty stormed out just as he approached. "She's gone."

Velvet sat staring, still stunned. His devil-may-care attitude often failed in the face of serious adversity.

Betty stood in the cold, one hand on her hip and the other on her rifle. She looked about one last time before committing herself and Velvet to the chase. That's when she noticed an odd whimper coming from the open doors of the root cellar.

Betty wandered over to the dark hole. She could see traces of blood and obvious drag marks and footprints.

She heard the whimper again. "I'm goin' in, Velvet," Betty said quietly. Something was wrong. She could sense it and, more importantly, smell it. It stank like wet animal and rotten meat.

Velvet watched Betty disappear into the root cellar. He dismounted slowly and staggered to the entrance.

Betty stopped at the bottom of the stairs. She tucked her rifle under her arm and reached into a pouch on her side. From this she drew a long match and dragged it along an overhead beam.

"Good God 'n' gravy! Lookit this mess."

Velvet took two cautious steps into the cellar and drew a handkerchief from his pocket. This he placed over his mouth and nose at the smell of the dead animals lying about the otherwise empty root cellar.

"It's the entrails," the gambler said through his rag. "She's a diviner. Some use tea leaves. Some use cards. She uses entrails."

Betty turned and looked back up the short staircase at Velvet. "How do you know this stuff?"

Velvet shook his head. "I was raised in N'awlins, Betty. A boy can't help but learn."

Betty's eyes narrowed as she watched Velvet's grow wide. She turned quickly, but not fast enough. One of the dogs—somehow still alive despite having been gutted like a Christmas turkey—was leaping across the room at her!

The creature's guts trailed behind it like some kind of fleshy spring. Betty went down under a bloody splat of wet fur and gnashing teeth.

Velvet stepped further into the root cellar and pulled his cards from his pocket. A huckster needed no physical props to cast a hex, but Velvet's deck had once been owned by a greater magician than he, and this fact gave him some advantage against the manitous he tempted fate with.

The gambler concentrated and felt a number of cards leap into his hands. He held out his palm and watched as ghostly white energy raced from his outstretched palm and slammed into the snarling canine.

The hex was weak, however, and the animal pressed its attack. Velvet's thick coat and underlying trademark jacket saved his arm from the first bite. He knew it would not weather a second.

Velvet's free hand snapped up in front of the animal. He concentrated, ignoring the pain of the monstrosity's crushing maw, and cast his soul-blasting hex once again. This time Lady Luck smiled on his chewed-on self. The dog burst apart from inside, spattering the cellar walls with its innards.

Betty was faring far worse. She was a crack shot with a rifle but had little more than grit to protect her up close. Velvet moved to help her and was instantly jumped by another of the gruesome dogs.

Betty's arm was a bloody mess, though half of it might have come from the growling animal she wrestled with. "All right, varmint!" she gritted her teeth. "That's enough! You're messin' up my coat and your breath's worse than a Texas longhorn with the fever!" Betty reached under the animal and grabbed a loop of slimy innards. Still cursing the animal as its teeth finally found her bone, she lassoed the innards around its neck and yanked. The dog's head snapped back, releasing its hold on her arm.

In one fluid movement, Betty kicked the howling dog backward, grabbed her rifle, spun it in one hand to cock it, and put a bullet smack between the canine's eyes.

"Looky there, Velv—" Betty turned to Velvet just in time to be showered by the gruesome remains of another canine. Before the rich gore covered her eyes, Betty saw screaming ghostly mists racing from Velvet's open hand and into the exploding dog.

"Sorry, Betty! Are you all—"

"What in tarnation was that?" Betty stood and wiped the blood and meat from her face. "I saw what you did. I just don't know what the Sam Hill I saw!"

Velvet shifted his gaze about the room, "Later. We'd better get out of here first.

"Nope. I ain't a-movin' 'til I get answers. Far as I'm concerned, you're cavortin' with the devil, and that bothers me more than three half-dead dogs tryin' to figure out who gutted 'em."

Velvet nodded and knelt down to examine one of the dogs. "I understand, Betty. But I have to tell you these dogs were more than 'half-dead.'"

"Whuddaya mean?" Betty's accent seemed to grow thicker when she became upset.

"They were already dead when we got here. Or 'undead,' you might say."

"Wha—?"

"You heard me—and part of your mind already knows it." Velvet stood and walked briskly towards Betty. He was about to change how she saw the entire world. "The other part of your mind is just trying to rationalize what you saw."

Betty staggered away from Velvet. In an instant he had gone from a citified, tinhorn dandy to a narrow-eyed child of Satan.

"And yes, I do consort with evil spirits. It's the only way to do what I do. I try to tame them, conquer them even. Most of the time, I'm successful." Velvet began to shuffle cards again. "Every now and then, I lose. That's what happened when Ronan was taken at the jail."

Betty shook her head, still trying to deny the obvious.

Velvet held up his hand and smiled as eight cards materialized. He flipped them toward Betty, revealing a full house. Behind him, one of the dogs rose from the ground and spun in the air.

Betty spun her rifle about and plugged the critter twice.

Velvet dropped the dog and shook the gore from his coat sleeve. "Come on, Betty. It's that time of year to believe. Santa Claus may not be real, but I sure am."

Betty shuffled around the huckster and angled towards the stairs. "I'll stick with St. Nick if it's all the same to you."

Velvet followed slowly, allowing Betty to back out of the root cellar's stairwell. "Actually, Betty, it's not. You've seen what I can do, and I suspect Miss Carstairs can do far more. The dogs are proof of that. If we're going to stop her, we'll need to work together. That means I can't be hiding my little tricks from you."

Betty finally reached her stallion. She rubbed the snow off its haunches, comforting both her and the beast. When Velvet made no move toward her, she calmed down and slid her rifle back into its saddle holster.

"Is that how Ronan survived bein' gutshot?" she asked. "You do some kinda magic on 'im?"

"Yes." Velvet looked at the freezing corpse of Ronan Lynch lying across his horse's flanks. "Though it seems to have done little good in the end."

Betty stared at the gunslinger and nodded slowly, allowing herself to come to grips with what she had seen in the cellar. "All right, Velvet. I guess I ain't got much choice in the believin' business, but I still feel like I just got tricked into buyin' a barrel full o' loco and the store won't take it back."

Velvet smiled and mounted his horse.

"Besides, Tight fire with fire!" my pappy always said, and I want a piece o' that Carstairs bitch. She killed a friend. A low-down, ornery cuss of a friend I'll grant, but a friend just the same. An' I don't much like her morals neither."

Velvet nodded. "Then let's put Ronan in the ground and go after that witch."

"Witch is too kind a word for that Hell-spawn," rang a voice from behind them.

Velvet and Betty were startled by the voice. They spun to see it came from a dark figure approaching slowly through the snow atop a black nag. He wore a black duster, a black hat, and a white collar. It was the drunk from the New Moon.

"I'd wish you a good day on this normally joyous mornin', but this is anything but good." The rider stopped, his chin buried against the cold into the collar of his coat. When the haggard face emerged, the bloodshot eyes and blazing nose of a drunkard were made all the brighter by his shock of white beard and hair.

"Father?" Velvet asked hesitantly.

"Reverend Bernard Owlsley, actually, though I've been out of practice for...some time. Ever since I saw *she*. had returned."

"Carstairs?" Betty asked.

The Reverend nodded. "You were about to follow her, yes?"

Both Velvet and Betty nodded slowly.

"Then let's bury your friend and move on, for there is little time. I'll tell you what you want to know as we travel."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The trail wasn't difficult to follow. There were over fifty cultists in Carstairs's congregation, and a number of horses and wagons. Time was the real enemy. The slow but constant snow and the whispering wind which hinted at an approaching storm could wipe out the trail in a matter of minutes.

The three riders knew better than to gallop. Their horses were already cold and exhausted. Velvet, Betty, and Rev. Owlsley were also worn out from digging a shallow grave in the frozen earth for Ronan Lynch. Their plan was to return after their adventure and move him to a regular cemetery, but they didn't want hungry wolves to get at him before they returned.

Reverend Owlsley sipped at a metal flask. He winced with pleasure and pain as the liquor ran down his throat. If it no longer calmed his mind, it at least warmed his elderly bones against the cold. Owlsley offered his flask to Betty, who refused, and to Velvet, who took a polite swig.

"Fifty years ago, my brother joined a group which called itself the Keepers of the Sacred Flame." Owlsley huddled forward in his saddle and pulled his coat tight around his legs. "My father

died under a plow in Tennessee. My brother was heartbroken. There was a woman nearby who promised the desperate absolution. In my brother's case, she also offered open arms."

Betty rode slightly ahead of the group. She had worked as a tracker before. "Sounds just like Carstairs," she said as she studied the trail.

Owlsley's face emerged from his coat collar like a eclipsed sun. "It was Carstairs," he said hoarsely.

Betty stopped and wheeled her horse about. "What are you talkin' about? You said your brother joined this cult fifty years ago. I saw Carstairs with my own eyes and she ain't a day over twenty-five."

Velvet raised a thick eyebrow at Betty, reminding her of what she had just learned in Carstairs's basement.

"Aw, Hellfire," she said and turned back to following the trail.

"She went by a different name then. Wright. Emily Wright. But it was her just the same."

Owlsley rode on quietly for a while, warming himself and steeling his mind for the return to the past.

"It was harmless enough for a while," Owlsley finally continued. "Then, just around Christmastime, she led my brother and twenty other young fools out into the hills."

Velvet felt a strangely excited chill run up his spine. He was curious about the occult—it was the reason he was touring the West away from his beloved New Orleans.

"She had built an altar up there." Owlsley's face once again retreated turtlelike in his coat. "I watched them from a distance."

Owlsley pulled his flask from his vest pocket and drained the last of it. This time he did not offer any to his companions.

"She started to sing some unearthly tune. The rest joined in. Some of 'em couldn't sing—I know my brother couldn't—but they were all wailing in the same Hellish key just the same.

"There was a storm like there is now. The howling wind joined their unholy chorus. I was entranced. I didn't want to watch anymore, but I couldn't look away either.

"Then her followers started dancin' around the fire. It was strange, what with all that wind and a dirty rain kickin' up, but that fire kept burnin' bright as ever.

"After half an hour or so, one of the cultists stopped. He was a big fellow, one of our local bullies. He looked up at Wright and turned back toward the fire. I couldn't believe it. He stuck his big meaty hooks right down into that fire and pulled out a flaming log."

Owlsley reached a woolen glove into the darkness where his face was hiding. Perhaps he was wiping away a tear.

"Then that savage took the burning log and caved in some other feller's noggin. The blood was so red, so bright in the firelight.

"I looked up at Wright, expecting to see a look of shock and horror, but she was smiling! Grinning like a damned Chesire Cat!

"The blood was like a drug to the rest of her followers. They went mad. Some grabbed logs; others drew knives. They started cutting and killing each other. I saw my own brother strangle a woman with his bare hands."

"And all the while, Miss Emily Wright, whom most thought was no worse than a seductress, laughed and cavorted above them. I can't prove it, but I think she took their souls. She looked about forty when she left town. When it was almost over and there were only a few confused souls left bashing and stabbing each other, Emily Wright wasn't a day over eighteen.

"I don't know what happened after that. I couldn't watch anymore. All I know is everyone that marched into those hills with her died, and I never saw her again. Until this year.

"I joined the priesthood after that and have lived the last fifty years tryin' to forget. Then last January I see this feller handin' out handbills for the Church of the Divine Flame, and who's picture do I see on the bill but Emily Wright's.

"That's when I took up with the demon drink. It's been my constant companion for the better part o' twelve months now.

"What made you come here tonight?" Velvet asked quietly.

"I was...beggin' for a drink at the New Moon this mornin' when DuChamp came in to settle the Church's tab. He said they were leaving the area tonight after they took care of some business. I reckon your dead friend was that business."

Betty paused to study the fading trail. The snow was beginning to make tracking difficult. "You think she's taking them out for another of her dances?"

"I'm sure of it," Owsley answered. "And I can't just sit back and watch this time."

The trio rode in silence for some time after that. Velvet knew of vampires, of course, and Wright/Carstairs certainly shared some of their traits. Since she didn't drink blood from the neck or turn into a bat-as far as he knew-he was certain it'd take more than a wooden stake and some holy water to defeat her.

The huckster's thoughts were interrupted by Betty. "Up ahead," she whispered as loudly as possible over the howling wind.

The group saw an overturned wagon in a shallow pass. Boxes and other debris were scattered about, and Betty could see the dark outline of a body lying in the snow. "Looks like somebody got in Carstairs's way. I'm gonna go help."

Velvet and Rev. Owsley followed slowly. Betty drew her rifle from its sheath and rode up to the body. "Somethin's strange," she called back, but it was hard to hear her over the whistling wind. "This feller ain't got much snow on top of his coat."

Velvet looked at the low steep walls of the pass. "Betty! Run! It's a trap!"

The man lying at Betty's feet opened his eyes and smiled like a lunatic. "Gotcha now!" he squealed as he pulled a pistol from under his coat.

Velvet felt cards leap into his hand but hesitated. Owsley would not likely take kindly to his use of the arcane arts, but he had to do something!

Owsley solved his dilemma for him. The Reverend raced forward, drawing an old cap-and-ball revolver from his fur coat. The man on the ground turned towards the thundering nag, fired, and missed. The Reverend returned fire, and his second bullet struck home. The cultist sat up and screamed as his warm blood melted the snow around him.

Just then, another figure emerged on the canyon wall. Betty had this one cold as Christmas. Her rifle cracked twice, both shots telling true.

Velvet saw another form on the opposite wall. This time the Reverend's back was to him, and his hex would have no living witnesses. An icy blast screamed from his palm to the pass wall, striking the ambusher square in the neck. The murderer dropped his weapon and slid down the steep slope, grasping his bleeding throat.

The ambush was over in seconds. The man Betty had shot with her rifle was dead, and the one whose throat had been punctured by Velvet was moments from meeting the Grim Reaper himself.

The cultist who had been the bait was in the best shape. Reverend Owsley's balls had crippled his arm for life and caused a slow bleeder in his chest. He'd likely live a few painful hours.

"Where are they headed?" Owsley asked the man in a voice surprisingly filled with compassion.

The man blinked twice, as if waking from a deep sleep. "I—I don't know. Into the mountains. There's an...altar some of us built a few weeks ago. It's another three, maybe four miles."

Velvet rubbed his chin. "Her hold over him seems to have vanished. Perhaps the pain has cleared his head."

The Reverend nodded. "I can't take you back to town yet, my son. But we will pick you up on our way back." Owsley dragged the man under the wagon and made a makeshift shelter. "Fetch me those quilts," he called to Velvet and Betty, pointing to the scattered provisions thrown from the cultist's wagon. As they did so, the Reverend quietly placed his hands on the cultist's wounds. "Forgive me for my sins, Father, and don't let this young man suffer for 'em."

Velvet and Betty dragged the blankets under the wagon just in time to see Owsley pull his bloody hands back from the man's wounds. "The Lord be with you son. On this anniversary of the day His own son came into the world, he has shined on you." The man was looking better already.

As Betty crawled back out and headed for her horse, she declared, "I don't wanna know."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

"They're coming," Carstairs said to DuChamp.

"So. I'll take care of them," Edgar replied. He spun the cylinder of his freshly oiled Buntline. "Just like I took care of that gunslinger."

Carstairs eyed her champion carefully. She wasn't so sure that issue was resolved.

"It is time to begin the Fire Dance. You are about to witness something few other mortals have seen—and none survived."

Edgar stood and pulled on his overcoat. Carstairs had told him the truth months ago, when he had somehow resisted her charms. She respected that and hired him on as her protector. He had seen what she could do and knew she was truly a creature woven from supernatural fabric. Yet this 'Fire Dance' she had been building toward these long months—this was something else entirely: a bloodbath that would grant her eternal life.

Truth be told—and the truth was a dangerous thing around the vain Cynthia Carstairs—she was rapidly starting to age. At first, it was only a little less luster to her raven-black hair or a sign of fatigue in her otherwise youthful exuberance. Just now, Edgar was certain he had spied crow's feet and several gray hairs.

Edgar stood, ready to leave his mistress' tent and start the ritual. "Cynthia," he said over his shoulder, "This dance. What will you do with me when we're finished?"

"The same thing I've done with all my protectors through the ages, Edgar. Set you free."

Edgar DuChamp wasn't sure he liked the sound of that. Nor did he like the sound her drying lips made as she spoke. She had aged a decade in the last hour. Would her thirst for immortality claim his soul as well?

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Velvet, Betty, and Rev. Owlsley hiked carefully down a steep canyon wall. The trail below had been blocked by an avalanche, most likely instigated by Carstairs' followers. It had forced them to abandon their horses and cost them precious hours.

"She knows we're coming," Velvet said as they started back on the trail.

"Why?" Betty asked.

"Why block our path? The ambush should have stopped us."

"Maybe she's just playin' it safe."

"I don't think so. Besides, we know she's a diviner. There's a pack of hounds back at the compound that can attest to that."

Nothing else was said for several hours. It was near-freezing here in the high Rockies, and talking only served to let frigid air into their aching lungs.

Finally, at the summit of a low, dark mountain Owlsley recognized as Black Peak, a flicker of light revealed the final camp of the Church of the Divine Flame.

"There they are, Reverend." Betty's breath hung in heavy clouds around her mouth as she spoke. "What's the plan now? We can't just go shootin'. Half them people don't even know what's goin' on. Our friend at the ambush proves that."

"In this case, the rattle shakes the snake. We must circumvent the teeth and head straight for the tail," said the preacher.

"Huh?"

"We must avoid the deluded followers and strike at Carstairs herself," Owlsley explained.

"And DuChamp," Velvet added.

It was another hour before the trio circumnavigated the backside of the mountain. Night had fallen, and the congregation was in a shallow bowl near the apex of Black Peak. Their tents were erected on the western slope, while Carstairs' covered wagon sat on an elevated ridge to the bowl's north. Halfway between her wagon and the bottom of the bowl, a crude stone altar stood. Just in front of that was the large bonfire that had drawn the heroes to the Church campsite.

Velvet, Betty, and Reverend Owlsley knelt at the eastern rim of the bowl, looking directly down at the spectacle below. The congregation was already dancing about the fire. They chanted, "Holy Flame, cleanse our sins!" and threw things into the fire.

"They're burning the last of their earthly possessions," Owlsley explained. "They won't be needing them after tonight if we don't stop this madness."

Velvet sighed. He was sure a witch like Carstairs would have protection against any old cowhand's bullets. It would have to be magic. It would have to be him.

"Hold on, Reverend," he sighed. "I've got a plan. If you can distract the sheep, I think I can take out the shepherd."

"What about me?" asked Betty.

"Concentrate on DuChamp. I can't deal with him and Carstairs at the same time."

Betty stared at Carstairs' wagon, knowing DuChamp and his deadly Buntline were likely within. "All right, Velvet. I'll trust you."

"Good. Let's go."

CHAPTER TWENTY

Reverend Owlsley strolled straight into the campsite, Bible in one hand and a piece of hickory in the other. At the top of his lungs, he sang "Bringing in the Sheaves," an old Baptist hymn.

Carstair's followers stared in disbelief, their dance momentarily brought to a halt. DuChamp stood unbelieving on the ledge above the fire. He shook his head sadly then slowly drew his Buntline.

Carstairs emerged from her tent dressed in a pale white robe. It was ludicrous to wear such a thin garment in this weather, yet she seemed untouched by the bitter cold and biting winds. She walked solemnly to the ledge above the bonfire, ready to lead her unwitting congregation to its doom.

Edgar turned at her footsteps but kept both hands on his pistol. "Trouble," he said.

Her eyes widened at the sight of Owlsley preaching to her stunned followers as she finally recognized him. "Shoot him! Shoot him now!"

"Shoot him, Edgar!" she screamed. "I warned you something was wrong! Shoot him!"

"Hi there!" came a voice from behind Edgar and Cynthia Carstairs. It was Velvet. The Reverend's ploy had allowed him to get close.

DuChamp and Carstairs spun, but Velvet was ready. A white bolt of mist filled with the ghostly faces of the damned raced from his mouse-skin gloves and slammed into Carstair's milky bosom. She flew over the lip of the ledge, toward her congregation, and out of Velvet's sight.

DuChamp shook his head and pulled back the hammer of his Buntline. "Goodbye, Mr. Van Helter," he said grimly. "Say happy birthday to Jesus when you see him."

A shot rang out in the distance. DuChamp looked down and saw bits of stuffing spilling from his heavy coat. He spun just in time to see a rifle flash from the opposite rim of the bowl. This sank into his coat and came out the other side in a trickle of dark blood.

"Thanks, Betty!" Velvet whispered as he readied his cards again. He was all set to help DuChamp join his mistress in Hell.

Then disaster struck. Cynthia Carstairs rose above the lip of the bowl, carried on the winds of a miniature blizzard. The thin material of her gown fluttered violently, matching the rage on her withering face. She said nothing but squawked in fury at the surprised huckster.

DuChamp dove over the lip and aimed into the darkness, waiting for the next flash of Betty's rifle. He trusted his mistress would have little trouble dispatching the gambler.

Betty, ill-fortuned as usual, fired at Carstairs. Her shot flew into the maelstrom the witch had created, and it spun off wildly. DuChamp grinned, aimed, and fired. It was an impossible shot, over two hundred yards with a handgun. But if there was a shooter with the accuracy and a pistol with the range, it was DuChamp and his Buntline.

Betty felt the round slam into her hand and race up her arm, shattering the bones within her heavy coat. She screamed as the snow-covered ledge she lay upon collapsed and sent her sliding into the bowl.

* * *

Reverend Owlsley had managed to keep the cultists at bay until Carstairs rose into the air with her pet storm. Now he dropped his Bible at his feet and stared in disbelief at the hovering witch. Christopher Backlund, among others, shook off his surprise and reached into the fire for pieces of burning wood. He and the rest of the brainwashed mob moved toward the unwitting priest with murder on their minds.

Owlsley backed up slowly. Over thirty deranged and bloodthirsty cultists had him surrounded. He twirled the hickory stick in his hand one time, felt its weight, and asked the good Lord for strength. Then he went to swinging.

* * *

DuChamp crawled back up the lip of the bowl. He was sure Carstairs could handle herself, but there was no sense taking chances. The gunman stopped dead in his tracks when he came face-to-face with a dark form standing at the top of the slope.

"Y-you're dead!" DuChamp stammered. The fire below illuminated the dead gaze and pallid skin of Ronan Lynch.

"Not any more," the gunslinger grunted.

* * *

Velvet slung another soul-blasting hex into the hovering form of Cynthia Carstairs and wasn't too surprised when the ghostly faces splattered off her self-made storm like piss in a hurricane.

Carstairs screamed and raced forward like some deranged raptor. Blazing bolts of fire sped from her hands. They slammed into the snow around Velvet's boots and sent the huckster fleeing into the steamy darkness.

Velvet's panting breath came in hot sweaty bursts. He could feel the sticky moisture clinging to his scarf as he climbed the bowl. Carstair's bolts exploded in the earth behind him. She was taking her time now, enjoying the her prey's despair.

Velvet reached a small outcropping of rock and dove into the shadows. Carstairs hovered above, the winds of Hell whipping about her tattered gown. "Die!" she said as a rain of dark hate blanketed the shadows of Velvet's hiding place.

* * *

Owlsley faired well against the first three cultists. But now the tide was set to overwhelm him. Christopher Backlund stepped forward, a blazing log in his hand.

Suddenly a rifle shot rang out. The burning log flew from Backlund's hand and spun end over end into the snow. Betty had regained her senses. She sat on the slope of the bowl over a hundred yards off, her rifle propped on one knee. Her good hand gripped the trigger while her other lay useless in the snow. Her head was bent low as she set her aim along the sight of her Winchester.

"Keep a-swingin', preacher!" she cried as she snapped off another shot and crippled a cultist.

Owlsley blessed her repeatedly as he attempted to take the fight out of the deluded mob.

* * *

Velvet knew more tricks than Carstairs thought. His magic and the deep shadows he had hidden in allowed him to move himself instantaneously to another patch of shadows a short distance away without covering the distance in between. The patch he targeted was located in the darkness of Carstairs' own wagon. Within, he hoped to find something that would defeat her. If only she didn't find him first.

* * *

Ronan, or something that looked a great deal like him, had the drop on DuChamp. "Holster that piece," he said.

DuChamp craned his neck back and forth, trying desperately to get a good look at his opponent's face. Could it truly be Lynch? Besides the burning whites of his eyes and a patch of pale skin, the rest of his face remained bathed in shadows.

"I said holster it," the man demanded a second time.

DuChamp slowly raised the Buntline and slid it back into his now snow-filled holster.

"The next time you hear that bitch scream," the figure said, "draw."

Sweat rolled off DuChamp's forehead and dropped steaming into the snow.

* * *

Owlsley felt the power of righteousness in his arms as he cracked the skull of a burly farm-boy and waded into the throng. Every time a cultist got the upper hand, a rifle shot rang out and sent him or her sprawling. So far, Betty's incredible aim maimed many but killed none.

* * *

Velvet rifled through the incredible things in Carstairs' wagon. She would likely hear his clumsy searching, but he had to act fast. The boxes in her wagon were filled with treasures beyond belief, but nothing that would help the huckster defeat her.

He sat back in the plush cushions exasperated. Ironically, they were crushed red velvet. He was going to die in style at least.

Something pressed against his nether region, something hidden inside a pillow. He reached down and felt something long and cylindrical inside. He drew forth a golden dagger from a nearby crate. In seconds, he gutted the pillow and gawked in amazement at what was inside. It was a human leg-bone.

Velvet held the bone in exasperation. He could hear Carstairs floating towards him, the howling of her unearthly blizzard growing nearer. Then something inside the bone shifted. Velvet turned it on-end and saw a shallow plug of wax sealing the hollow bone. He dug it out in a heartbeat and pulled forth an ancient weathered scroll.

Velvet struck a match and smiled at the scrawled letters written upon the scroll. Latin. His knowledge of the old language paled only to his mastery of English and French.

* * *

Carstairs saw the glow within her wagon. She moved in close, furious but perplexed over the huckster's strange escape. Her skin had the look of bark now, and she could feel the strength in her bones fading.

She hovered nearer the wagon and gripped the canvas roof in her cronish claws. With a mighty tug, she ripped off the covering and gaped in awe at the smoking match lying atop a torn pillow. Velvet had pulled his vanishing act once again.

Carstairs screamed in rage.

* * *

A young miner held a smoldering log high over his head. Owlsley ducked and waited for Betty's rifle to disarm the blood-simple youth. He heard only a dull click in the distance followed by muffled cursing. Owlsley swung low and smashed his hickory stick into the side of the miner's leg. The sickening crunch made the man drop his makeshift weapon, but he lumbered on toward the Reverend just the same.

Owlsley backed away, stumbling through the wounded, groaning cultists as the three left standing suddenly realized their advantage.

* * *

DuChamp heard his mistress scream. His hand moved in slow motion toward his Buntline. He had just touched its familiar wooden handle when the snowy slope beneath his feet crumbled away.

Edgar rolled head over heels down into the bowl, caught up in an avalanche. Rocks smashed into his head and stained the sliding snow around him a dark red.

* * *

Owlsley saw the approaching wave of snow and turned to run. His maddened attackers ignored the rumbling and gave chase only to be swept up in its white tide.

It wasn't a big slide—just big enough to knock the combatants off their feet and bury the wounded up to their waists. The blazing bonfire was quickly no more.

The avalanche had saved the preacher for a moment, but now he was trapped. He watched as the crazed form of Christopher Backlund rose from the bloody snow and staggered toward him, murder in his eyes.

* * *

Velvet stood at the lip of the bowl. There was no sign of the mysterious figure he had seen confronting DuChamp.

Carstairs was already racing toward him. Velvet stood calmly, flipping cards between the fingers of one hand and studying the icy cliffs topping the western edge of the bowl.

Carstairs, the ancient, aging crone that had murdered hundreds of young men, flew sideways at her prey and then stopped dead in her tracks. In Velvet's left hand was an old, fading scroll.

"*In nomine ex mortis*," he said. "I read your contract. How you came by your powers. And what it would take to send you to Satan's waiting arms. The fire is the source of your power, and every fifty years it takes a little rekindling."

He cast his gaze downward and said, "This little avalanche I started ought to cool you down. Long enough, at least."

Carstairs turned her withered face and looked down at the bonfire still barely smoldering beneath the mound of rock and snow.

"Now it's time to meet those who've kept your fire burning over the centuries. The dead await, Cynthia Carstairs."

A hand of cards appeared in Velvet's mouseskin gloves. Full house. He looked at Carstairs, then at the icicles glistening from the western cliff. One of them broke suddenly and tumbled toward the snowy slope below. Then it turned point first and raced toward Cynthia Carstairs.

"*In nomine ex mortis*," he repeated.

* * *

Edgar DuChamp pulled himself up out of the snow. He thought maybe he had escaped the sinister avenger when he heard the dull crunch of footsteps in the snow behind him.

DuChamp stood and turned slowly. The pale moonlight revealed his worse fears were true. Ronan Lynch, whom he had shot, beaten, and hung, stood before him. The pale gunslinger's neck was ringed with dried blood and one dead eye leered at him from its swollen lids.

Ronan tapped his holster. "When the bitch screams," he reminded his executioner.

* * *

Owlsley looked up just as Christopher Backlund raised his own hickory stick. He was set to bring it smashing down on the Reverend's head and send him to his loving Almighty.

* * *

Carstairs' storm began to fade. She sunk lower and lower as she desperately tried to regain some shred of her fading power. Her struggles paid off, and the ancient crone rose back into the air and managed a gout of flame that made Velvet reel backward.

The huckster struggled and maintained his concentration. The man-sized icicle raced through the night and slammed into Lady Cynthia Carstairs' withered bosom. The point broke through her parchment skin and erupted from her back like a frozen, gory geyser. Hot blood flowed down her thin gown and fell steaming and hissing into the snow.

Carstairs spun, her head back and her arms stretched out to the uncaring heavens. Her long existence was at an end. She spared one last hate-filled gaze at Velvet as her skin crumbled into ancient dust. As it hit the snow, it seared into the ground.

Her dying breath was the most unearthly scream any of the gathered mortals would ever hear.

"Peace on earth," Velvet murmured, "and for you, finally, in it."

* * *

Once more DuChamp heard his mistress' scream. His well-manicured hands reached down for the long Buntline. He felt its grip in his bloody hands.

Six shots rang through the night so fast they could have been one long roll of thunder. Ronan Lynch stood in front of Edgar DuChamp, his six-gun smoking in the winter night.

DuChamp cleared his holster a lifetime too late. The heavy piece hung limply on his finger as he looked at the fur flying from his ruined coat. He could feel warm blood running down his pants, filling his boots.

DuChamp fell to his knees. The snow around him began to melt with the heat of his spilling innards. "How?" were the last words his lips ever uttered.

Ronan slowly began to reload. How? He didn't know himself. Merry Christmas.

* * *

To be continued in the *Deadlands* Dime Novel #2!



PERDITION'S DAUGHTER

THE ADVENTURE

Howdy agin, folks! The good Lord mighta opened the pearly gates fer the rest o' us, but some just ain't satisfied with their rightful time on this earth. When you find folk like Cynthia Carstairs, it's the job o' every right-thinkin' fella to put 'em deep in the dirt where they belong. Here's yer chance.

One helluva way to spend a Christmas, eh?

THE STORY SO FAR

Irving Backlund is a wealthy man. As owner of Backlund Mining, Inc., a prosperous Denver-based concern, Backlund has the type of money of which most men can only dream. All of this meant

nothing when a carriage accident took his beloved wife Anna from him. The only person more affected by Anna's sudden departure from this earth was Irving and Anna's 22-year-old son Christopher.

Christopher was devoted to his mother, and her death broke something inside him. Grief stricken, he left his job running one of his father's mines and disappeared. Even with Irving Backlund's extensive resources, it took him months to follow his son's trail. Finally, news reached him that his son had joined a religious community, the Church of the Holy Flame.

Overjoyed to find that Christopher was safe, Irving sent first one letter, then another, and yet another with

no reply. The fourth finally garnered a response, a terse letter from Christopher, saying he now understood his mother's death had been punishment for his father's sins. Christopher swore off contact with him! The Church of the Holy Flame had showed him the way, and he would not turn back from salvation.

Backlund was staggered! Grief must have driven the boy mad! In desperation, Backlund investigated the Church. What he found chilled his heart.

THE CHURCH OF THE HOLY FLAME

The Church is an isolationist group located near the trail town of Derry's Ford. Formed a little over three years ago, the Church teaches that the material world is inherently evil. Only through cutting one's self off from it can the true grace of God be achieved.

When he spoke to relatives of other Church members, Backlund became even more disturbed. It seemed his son was hardly the first to join the Church and sever all friendly ties. Backlund heard several similar stories: wives leaving husbands, fathers abandoning families, sons and daughters denying parents.

Everything seems to revolve around the Church's leader, Lady Cynthia Carstairs. A

beautiful and charismatic woman with a mysterious past, her hold on her followers is almost unnatural. Backlund is convinced his son has fallen under the spell of this woman and she is deliberately driving Christopher away from him.

Having heard the stories of the other Church members' families, Backlund can't shake the feeling there's something evil at work here. He can't put his finger on it, but he'll be damned if he's going to leave his son in the middle of it. He intends to have his son back from the Church's grip, whether through persuasive force of words or just force.

A HIDDEN EVIL

Shrewd man that he is, Backlund's instincts are correct. Cynthia Carstairs is far more than a charismatic spiritualist. Her real name is lost to the mists of the past. She was born in the time of the ancient Greeks and has since sustained herself on the souls of her fellow mortals.

The Church of the Holy Flame is merely a tool for gathering souls. Lady Carstairs has bound these poor people to her with a combination of magic and guile. She preys upon those in the throes of despair, offering hope to the hopeless. When she captures their hearts and minds completely, she destroys them.

During the Great Revival of the 1820s, she formed a similar cult and led all her followers to their deaths. Now 50 years later, she has returned to repeat what worked so well for her before. She is assisted by Edgar DuChamp, her most loyal follower, and by the fanatical devotion of her 75 disciples, including Christopher Backlund.

Lady Carstairs intends to lead her followers out to a specially prepared spot in the Colorado Rockies and, through sorcery and her personal magnetism, drive them into an ecstatic death frenzy. This feast of souls should sustain her for years to come.

To make matters worse for young Backlund, he has entered into a dalliance with the beautiful Lady Carstairs. While he has fallen in love with her, she looks forward to savoring his terror when she finally drinks his soul.

THE PRIEST WHO KNOWS TOO MUCH

The only outsider who knows the cult's secret is the Reverend Bernard Owlsley. Back in the 1820s, he witnessed the fate of Lady Carstairs' former followers. The events drove him almost mad and led him to the priesthood.

Now the head churchman of Derry's Ford, Colorado,

Owlsley's terror at an unaged Lady Carstairs' return has driven toward the demon drink. Her very presence has caused the only man who might be able to warn his flock of the evil that dwells near them to render himself powerless.

Fortunately for Owlsley, Lady Carstairs thinks nothing of him. While her divinations have told her of some small threat to her somewhere in town, she has been unable to pinpoint the drunken priest as the source.

THE CEREMONY

Lady Carstairs' plans should come to fruition soon. She plans to lead her followers on a "pilgrimage" out to the desolate spot of her former atrocities, declaring Church members need a period of fasting in the snow-capped mountains to avoid God's judgment. Once at the desired location, Lady Carstairs can feed on the deaths of her followers and sustain her unnatural life even longer-unless she is stopped.

THE SETUP

Irving Backlund has extensive influence and connections in Denver within both business and the government. If the posse has been involved with the Pinkertons in a favorable or competent capacity, Backlund's inquiries for help may lead him

to them. Also, if any of the heroes' past actions have led them to involvement with the press—even rags like the Tombstone Epitaph—Irving Backlund may have heard of them. He is a desperate man, willing to take a chance. Past involvement with the mining industry could also forge a connection with Backlund. Backlund Mining is a huge company and owns many smaller concerns.

However you want to play it, the posse receives a note from Irving Backlund:

*Dear Sirs,
I have heard of your past exploits and find that you may be of some service to me. If you could stop by my offices at 4 o'clock this afternoon, I believe I may have a proposition for you that may be of mutual benefit to us.*

Your attention to this matter is appreciated.

Sincerely,

*Irving Backlund
Pres./CEO Backlund
Mining Inc.*

MAJOR PLAYERS

Several people figure largely in the web that Cynthia Carstairs has woven in which to capture her prey.

LADY CYNTHIA CARSTAIRS

The woman calling herself Cynthia Carstairs has been walking the world since before the birth of Christ. She made a pact with the Devil for eternal life, but with some strings attached. Her life force is now contained in her soulflame, a fire which grants her invulnerability while it burns.

Unfortunately, the fire grows weaker as the years pass. To extend her lifespan, Carstairs must absorb the lives of others into a bonfire created by her soulflame every 50 years or so. If she doesn't manage to do so by this Christmas, she's going to die of old age.

Her strength is also her weakness. If her soulflame is ever put out, she is as hurttable as anyone else.

The vixen's magical abilities are formidable, but not in a direct way. Her powers of divination give her a view into the future, albeit a blurry one. She can affect the weather to a certain degree, summoning and controlling storms. Her binding hex can enslave the will of others, turning them into her loyal servants.

Lady Cynthia prefers to avoid combat if possible. However, her long exposure to the life force energy of other beings has strengthened her

immensely, and one does not live several thousand years without picking up at least the basics of hand-to-hand combat.

Psychologically, Cynthia is pretty well divorced from her humanity. She has killed so many for so long she really doesn't even consider people as human anymore.

Cynthia is a very beautiful woman. She is dark complected with thick, black hair and deep brown eyes. She looks vaguely Greek or Italian, seemingly in her late twenties or early thirties. She has a low musical voice that is very pleasant to hear, and she speaks flawless English. She dresses simply but elegantly in gowns of black, gray, or white. She wears only one adornment: a pendant in the shape of the Church of the Holy Flame's symbol.

PROFILE

Corporeal: D:2d6, N:2d10,
Q:2d10, S:4d6, V:2d12.

Fightin': Bowlin' 2, Fightin':
Knife 3.

Mental: C:1d10, K:3d12, M:3d10,
Sm:2d10, Sp:2d10.

Scrutinize 5, Overawe 2, Tale-
Tellin' 4, Persuasion 4.

Magic: Divination, Storm
Calling, Ritual of Life,
Corporeal Tweak, Binding
Ritual, Fire Blast (treat like a
Soul Blast), Flight (moves on
wind; pace: 16).

Edge: Tough as Nails (+6 Wind).

Gear: Ancient Greek dagger.

Special Note: The variety of magic that Lady Cynthia practices is far more ancient than Hoyle's system of cards. In combat, Lady Cynthia simply requires 1 Wind for every success (up to 3 at a time) she needs for a hex. For major hexes, she usually uses the life force of other living beings.

Special Abilities: Lady Cynthia is immune to damage (and only suffers Wind from magical attacks) until her soulfire is snuffed.

EDGAR DUCHAMP

The one man who knows the whole truth about Lady Carstairs is Edgar DuChamp. A gunslinger of no little renown, he met up with her five years ago out East while exhibiting his shooting skills at an exclusive Massachusetts club.

Carstairs figured that a champion with DuChamp's way with a gun could come in handy, and she made a bargain with him. In exchange for his protection, she would show him the secret of her longevity. He suspects she plans to show this to him the hard way, but he's willing to play along, hoping he can learn enough to claim eternal life for himself.

Edgar DuChamp is a stocky fireplug of a man, clearly in good physical shape. He attended college at Harvard,

and he considers himself to be above the rabble he encounters out West. His pride as a gunslinger could be his doom, but so far no one's been able to refute his boasts.

DuChamp looks about 35 with thinning brown hair, a thin brown mustache, a hooked nose, and dark brown eyes. He wears small, round glasses. His clothing is a simple, dark suit and white shirt. His only jewelry is a lapel pin of the Church's flame icon. Outside the Church compound, he wears a pair of matching pistols on a well-worn gun belt. They are not just for show.

PROFILE

Corporeal: D:3d8, N:2d6, Q:2d8, S:3d6, V: 2d12.

Shootin': Pistols 4, Fightin': Brawlin' 3, Dodge 3, Fightin': Knife 3, Fannin' 2, Sneak 3, Quick Draw 5.

Mental: C:2d6, K:1d6, M:3d6, Sm:2d6, Sp:1d6.

Scrutinize 3, Overawe 2, Guts 4.

Edges: Tough As Nails (+4 Wind).

Gear: Buntline revolver, knife.

REVEREND BERNARD OWLSLEY

The head churchman of Derry's Ford has found refuge inside a bottle, unable to face the terrible threat of the Church of the Holy Flame.

In the wake of their father's death in 1826, Bernard Owlsley's brother Ward joined a religious group known as the Keepers of the Sacred Flame. Under the spiritual advice of a Miss Emily Wright, he severed all familial ties. When the Keepers went on a pilgrimage into the woods, Bernard followed, determined to talk to his brother.

What Bernard witnessed nearly drove him mad. Emily Wright led her followers into the hills to a strangely colored rock at the base of a cliff. There Bernard watched the Keepers kill each other in a frenzied dance around a bonfire. Bernard's brother killed a woman with his bare hands, then had his head caved in with a rock in a murderous chain of events. For the rest of his days, Owlsley would dream of Emily Wright's laughter and look of sublime joy.

Fleeing the scene of the carnage, the young Owlsley stumbled in the mountains for days. He found a wagon train heading east and washed up in St. Louis. There he entered the priesthood, trying to put the memory of those terrible events behind him. Eventually he returned to his home state, to Derry's Ford, a town near the one in which he'd been raised. He became the town priest and ministered well to his flock until just over two years ago.

When the Church of the Holy Flame came to town, Owlsley saw Lady Cynthia riding proudly at the head of the caravan. Owlsley was sure that Carstairs knew nothing of him and hadn't recognized him from that fateful day so long

ago. Still, shocked and frightened out of his wits, he crawled right inside a bottle and hasn't come out since.

The townspeople don't understand what turned their preacher from their trusted spiritual advisor to the town



drunk overnight. They love him too much to replace him, so they just hope he gets better.

A strapping man about 6 feet tall, the Reverend Owsley is still hale and hearty in his 62nd year. A full mantle of pure white hair tops his head, and a short beard graces his rough-hewn face.

His drinking has taken its toll. His blue eyes are sunken and bloodshot, and his face is pale and drawn. There is still a fire in his eyes, dim though it may be. He wears well-made but simple clothing of dark colors. Around his neck, he wears an intricately carved wooden cross about three inches long. The ends are capped with silver.

PROFILE

Corporeal: D:2d4, N:2d6, Q:2d4, S:1d10, V:1d12.

Fightin': Club 4, Dodge 3, Horse Ridin' 3.

Mental: C:2d6, K:2d6, M:3d6, Sm:2d6, Sp:2d12.

Scrutinize 2, Academia: Christianity 4, Professional: Theology 4, Persuasion 3, Tale-Tellin' 4, Faith 4, Guts 2, Trackin' 3.

Edges: Sense of Direction and the Voice (+2 to overawe).

Miracles: Protection, Inspiration, Smite, Lay on Hands.

Gear: Heavy walking stick (club), Bible, cross, and Job (his horse).

CHRISTOPHER BACKLUND

Christopher Backlund's story is perhaps the saddest of all. The sudden loss of his sainted mother to a totally random accident shook the very foundations of his Christian faith. Half mad from grief, Backlund became a drifter for months. He finally ended up in Derry's Ford, having heard of the Church of the Holy Flame. The easy words and subtle magic of Lady Cynthia Carstairs soon enthralled him, and now he is as devoted to her as possible.

Complicating things even further in this situation is his physical relationship with Lady Cynthia. He is in love with her, or so he believes. This may lead him to foolish acts of heroism in her defense.

Christopher is a handsome man in his early twenties, with black hair and green eyes. He is dressed in the standard drab clothing of the Church.

PROFILE

Corporeal: D:2d8, N:2d6, Q:2d6, S:2d8, V:2d8.

Shootin': Rifles: 2, Climbin' 2, Dodge 2, Fightin': Brawlin' 2, Fightin': Knife: 2, Sneak 2.

Mental: C:2d6, K:1d6, M:1d6, Sm:2d6, Sp: 3d6.

Scrutinize 2, Search 2.

Gear: Winchester 73.

SHERIFF LELAND TURNER

Sheriff Turner just wants to keep things as quiet as possible in his little town. He's heard tales of other places where cutthroats duel it out in the streets in broad daylight, and he's not having any of that in Derry's Ford. While he's polite at first to any potential troublemakers, he's not afraid to back up his words with lead and lots of it.

Leland Turner is in his early thirties, with black hair, large muttonchops, and brown eyes. He chews tobacco—a habit his wife detests—and has a bit of a pot belly. Basically he's in good physical shape, but life is pretty quiet here in Derry's Ford. From his days in the Union army (he was honorably discharged), Turner is a dead shot with a rifle and no slouch with a shotgun either. He's happy to use both to keep the peace.

PROFILE

Corporeal: D:2d6, N:2d6, Q:2d6, S:2d6, V:3d6.

Shootin': Pistols 2, Shootin': Shotgun 3, Fightin': Brawlin' 3, Dodge 3, Sneak 3.

Mental: C:2d6, K:3d6, M:2d4, Sm:2d6, Sp: 2d4.

Scrutinize 2, Overawe 3.

Junk: Peacemaker, knife, badge, double-barrel shotgun (back at the jail).

CHAPTER ONE: FATHERS AND SONS

Just about everyone has heard of Backlund Mining. It is one of the largest Denver mining companies, and its head, Irving Backlund, is a wealthy and well-known figure.

Anyone who cares to make a Fair (5) area knowledge: Denver roll remembers that the Backlund family was in the news about 8 months ago. Anna Backlund, Irving's wife of thirty years, was killed in a tragic carriage accident, and the Backlunds' only son disappeared soon after. The once-sociable Irving Backlund has been a recluse ever since.

BACKLUND MINING INC.

Backlund Mining Inc.'s offices are located in the heart of Denver's downtown. The Backlund Building is a seven-story affair of red brick. When the heroes arrive at the company offices, they are directed to the seventh floor. The interior of the building is nicely finished with plaster walls and oak flooring.

A company secretary ushers the posse into Irving Backlund's outer office. His secretary greets them and asks them to wait just a moment as



she disappears into the inner office. The outer office is spacious, with the secretary's desk and an assortment of comfortable chairs. Nice but nondescript paintings hang on the walls.

After a brief wait, the secretary emerges from the inner office. "Mr. Backlund will see you now," she says, gesturing to the inner office door.

MR. BACKLUND'S DILEMMA

As the posse enters, Irving Backlund stands at the window to his large office, looking down onto the Denver streets

through a picture window. Bookcases line the wood-paneled walls of the room, and plush chairs sit in front of the large desk. A shrouded portrait, presumably of his deceased wife, hangs on the wall behind his desk, and a smaller portrait of a handsome man in his early twenties hangs beside it. The large desk is unkempt and messy, strange for a man that seems to run such an organized operation.

As they enter, Backlund turns to face them. He is a portly, prosperous gentleman in his late fifties, balding, with white hair and a walrus mustache. He wears a perfectly tailored suit with a silver

pocket watch on a chain. A pince-nez perches on his nose. He wears his grief on his face.

"Gentlemen," he says in a strong, deep voice "please take a seat. I need your help, and I can make it worth your time."

Backlund proceeds to explain the situation, from his wife's death under the wheels of a carriage to his son's disappearance and subsequent reappearance among the ranks of the Church of the Holy Flame. When describing the notes that he sent and the one that he eventually received, Backlund's voice becomes strained.

"This is the note I received from my son," he says, sliding a piece of paper across the table. "It was postmarked Derry's Ford, Colorado."

Dear Father,

It is all so clear to me now. Mother's death was our fault, yours and mine. Our sins dragged her down to Perdition, and only full repentance of our sins can save her. I have found the way with the Church of the Holy Flame, and to save Mother's soul I must break my ties with you and the rest of the material world. This is how Lady Carstairs has seen it. Do not try to contact me again, Father, for I shall not reply. Mother's soul hangs in the balance.

Christopher

"Now gentlemen, allow me to assure you that I miss my wife more than life itself, but I do not buy into any damn fool notions of it being my fault or my son's that she died. This Carstairs woman, she's the leader of this...church, and she has filled his head with this filth!

"I don't what she has done to him, what spell she has woven, what color wool she has pulled over his eyes, but I will not have it! Christopher is all I have left in this world, and if it takes everything I have to get him back, then so be it.

"Each of you has a reputation for dealing with unusual situations, and I feel this falls into that category. I want you to be my agents. I am an old man, unsuited to the rigors of the trail. Go to this town, and bring me back my son—preferably by Christmas!" At this point, Backlund nearly loses his composure. He stops for a moment to blow his nose in a kerchief, then stands to look out the window again. In a much quieter voice he says:

"...or at the very least find out for sure Christopher made this choice of his own free will. If not, then use whatever means you must to bring him back."

Backlund turns suddenly and stares at the posse, a grim look on his face.

"I'll pay each of you \$500.00 in gold if you recover my son; \$250.00 if you can prove to me that he is with that blasted Church of his own free will. Do we have a deal?"

Assuming the players accept his offer, Backlund reaches into his desk and produces a small, leather folio. It contains all the information he's gathered about the Church of the Holy Flame and Derry's Ford. The folio also includes a trail map to Derry's Ford and a photograph of Christopher Backlund.

As the posse rises to leave, Irving Backlund returns to his window to watch the sun set across the Rockies.

THE JOURNEY TO DERRY'S FORD

Whatever preparations that the group wishes to make are up to them. Denver is a large city, and any standard equipment is easily available.

The journey to the town itself is uneventful unless you're in a particularly bad mood. The trip takes about four days by horse or five by wagon. The trail from Denver passes through a few other small towns on the way, and the posse may elect to stay in one or camp out under the stars. The weather is seasonably splendid.

The heroes arrive on December 23, 1875.

CHAPTER TWO: WELCOME TO DERRY'S FORD

Derry's Ford, CO: Fear Level 2
Traffic on the trail is brisk.

Near the final day of travel, Derry's Ford comes into view. A small town on a bend in the Big Sandy River, it sees a lot of traffic from Denver. The streets, both of them, are hard-packed dirt, and the air is full of dust from the wagons and horses passing through or stopping by.

Despite the bustle, people seem to have had time to hang wreaths and trim trees all across town. With Christmas only two days away, the mood is friendly and festive. No carolers can be heard in the streets (the choir has suffered along with the church), but all else seems fine.

ASKING ABOUT THE CHURCH

Most townspeople are more than willing to discuss their opinions of the members of the Church of the Holy Flame. Since they moved near the town about two years ago and built their compound, the Church members have kept to themselves, coming into town only for supplies and occasionally to send or receive mail. They grow their own food,

and have been known to sell any excess to local farmers. Strangely, their crops have done well even in dry years.

The compound itself is located three miles southwest of town. A few people have actually been out to the compound and can describe it in rough terms (see the next chapter for a complete description of the compound).

Lady Cynthia herself never comes to town, but a man named Edgar DuChamp seems to be her right hand. He always accompanies Church members to town, no matter what their business. DuChamp has been known to stop at the New Moon for a drink on occasion, but only by himself.

He is a small but stocky man who always wears a pair of six shooters when he comes to town. While no one has ever seen him draw either of his hoglegs in anger, those few who have seen him shoot speak in admiration of his skill in the fine art of firearms.

As for the other Church members, they are very polite but interact with the townspeople as little as possible. They don't seem frightened, just unsociable.

Of course, any group that keeps that much to itself is bound to generate rumors. A few interesting things can be picked up from wherever you deem appropriate:

RUMORS

The Church leaves food out for the local coyotes and dogs, but other farms near the Church never have a problem with the animals. (TRUE)

Edgar DuChamp is an outlaw ex-gunslinger. (TRUE and FALSE. DuChamp is a gunfighter, but he's long dead as far as the law knows.)

Occasionally it rains over the Church's land—and *only* that land. (TRUE)

Lady Cynthia is a witch and has been seen riding a broomstick across the night sky! Se keeps a black cat by her side at all times. (FALSE. Close, but no cigar)

The Church members have secret orgies under the full moon. (FALSE)

Reverend Owlsley refuses to talk to any Church members. Perhaps they remind him of who he once was. (TRUE)

The Church holds services every evening just after sundown. Outsiders are *not* welcome. (TRUE)



**BARBER SHOP/
DOCTOR'S OFFICE**

Description: A tiny, frame building with a barber pole out front and a doctor's shingle on the door.

Occupants: John Taylor (proprietor; a thin, ancient man with palsied hands; he's as likely to hurt as help any patients; his haircuts are downright dangerous).

BLACKSMITH

Description: A small, brick building with double doors opening out from the front and a constant clanging inside. The only place in town to get a horse shoed or metal worked.

Occupants: Fyodor Klablinski (proprietor; a hulking man of Russian birth; his accent is nearly as thick as his curly, black beard) and two local, young men (assistants).

THE CARLTON HOTEL

Description: A run-down building with peeling whitewash. A fleabag hotel in the most literal sense of the phrase.

Occupants: Philip Bassinger (proprietor; weathered ex-miner who won the place in a poker game several years back; apparently the loser folded a great hand just to ditch the place on "Fleabag" Phil) and 1d4 sorry guests.

**DERRY'S
FORD CHURCH**

Description: A large, wooden building with a brick facade and a cross atop a low bell tower. Mostly abandoned these days, and locked.

Occupants: No one.

**DERRY'S
FORD HOTEL**

Description: Three-story, wooden building with 15 guest rooms (\$1.50/night, including dinner) and a well-appointed parlor and dining room. Patrons get 20% off when stabling their horses at Kelso's.

Occupants: Josiah and Selma Falkworth (proprietors; black couple in their early forties; as pleasant and courteous as can be), Sallie Mae Westhall (maid and occasional desk clerk; pretty, young lady of 20; likes to flirt with the guests); 2d6 guests going to or coming from Denver.

EDWARDS' TAILORING

Description: A pretty, little, two-story house. The Edwards live upstairs.

Occupants: Samuel and Emma Edwards (proprietors; they've been here for several years, and all their children have been raised here; they're both fit and happy and in their late forties) and their three children (ages 3 to 13).

**ETHEL'S ROOMING
HOUSE**

Description: A large, wooden building with an extra house added on. There are four rooms (\$25/month, including breakfast), and they are almost always full.

Occupants: Ethel Tubbs (proprietor; middle-aged, steel-haired, solid woman with a mean way with a rolling pin) and 2d4 guests.

THE FORD

Description: The safest crossing spot for the river. Three sturdy ropes slung from posts span the water to help with crossing. A raft is available on both sides of the river to ferry across delicate items. The river's about 5' deep here, and it runs slowly.

HOMES

Description: The townsfolk occupy these wooden structures of varying sizes, scattered around town.

Occupants: One or two adults and 1d4-1 children.

KELSO'S TRAIL POST

Description: A large, weather-beaten building with a corral out back. Lots of space for horse and wagon storage. Serves as the post office.

Occupants: Jim Kelso (proprietor and postmaster; a

wiry man in his late thirties, with thinning brown hair and small, round glasses); 1d4 locals helping with the shipping and receiving.

MAYOR'S HOUSE

Description: A handsome, two-story, wooden home showing off brass fixtures and a fresh coat of paint.

Occupants: Luther Neally (mayor; see *Town Hall*) and his wife Beverly (sweet, middle-aged woman with the most pleasant disposition in town; she's the reason everyone votes for her husband).

THE NEW MOON

Description: A real nice bar, generally kept calm by the two owners/enforcers.

Occupants: Tim and John Olsen (proprietors; burly men with long, blond hair kept back in ponytails; Tim sports a handlebar mustache, while John has a full beard; they stop most fights before they start-with the business end of their scatterguns if needed) and 3d4 well-mannered customers.

OWLSLEY'S HOUSE

Description: A small, wooden house, once well-kept, but now in disrepair.

Occupants: Reverend Owlsley (town drunk; see *Major Players*).

SHERIFF'S OFFICE

Description: A low building housing the Sheriff's office and five small jail cells.

Occupants: Leland Turner (sheriff; see *Major Players*) and Zeke and Ezra Pintz (deputies; both brothers have brown hair and blue eyes; Zeke has a mustache, and Ezra a goatee; in their twenties, they're Turner's nephews; otherwise he'd fire them for their constant bickering).

SWENSON'S HARDWARE

Description: A small, wooden shack, kept up nicely and crammed with dry goods.

Occupants: Jock Swenson (proprietor; Norwegian immigrant; short, blond hair, blue eyes, early thirties; works hard to house, clothe and feed his wife Catherine and their seven young children).

TOWN HALL

Description: A long building that houses the office of the mayor, the land assayer, and the town clerk (Luther Neally in all cases). Court is held here when the local circuit judge comes to town.

Occupants: Luther Neally (the whole town government; a ready man with bright red hair going white at the temples).

SHERIFF TURNER'S HOUSE

Description: A small, wooden home with a tin star tacked to the front door.

Occupants: Sheriff Turner (see *Major Players*) and his hound Bert.

STORAGE WAREHOUSES

Description: Places of all shapes and sizes, but no amenities. These warehouses are rented out to passing wagon trains, etc., by Jim Kelso. He keeps them tightly locked and lets one of his large dogs loose in each of them at night.

Occupants: No one on any regular basis.

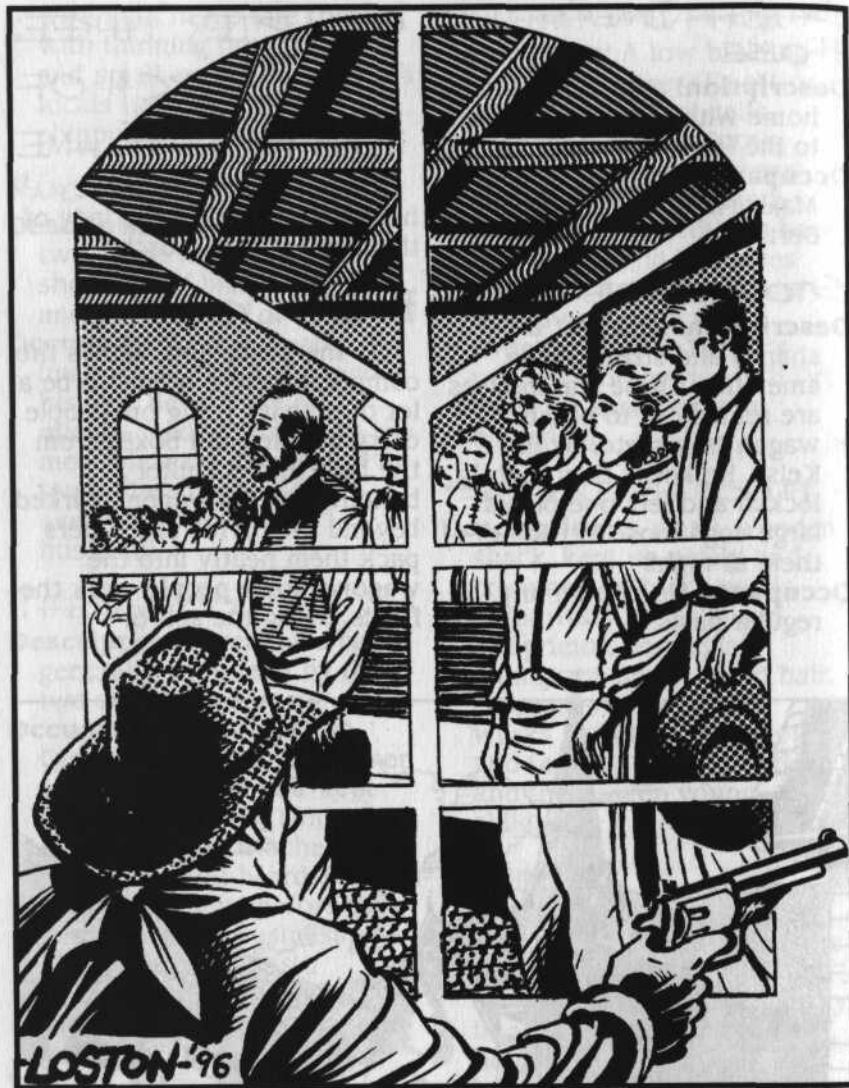
CHAPTER THREE: THE CHURCH OF THE HOLY FLAME

The plot thickens as the heroes finally meet the lady of the leady of the church.

BY DAYLIGHT

As the posse approaches the compound, there seems to be a lot of activity going on. People carry bundles and boxes from the barn and dormitory buildings to the wagons parked beyond the corral, and others pack them neatly into the wagons. Some people work the fields, tilling the soil or





bringing in the remnants of the last harvest.

The heroes are spotted as they approach, and a few folks make their way quickly to Lady

Cynthia's residence. Edgar DuChamp emerges wearing his six-shooters and walks with a group of men to meet the heroes when they reach the

head of the road into the compound. The other folks go about their business.

Backed by several burly men, DuChamp hails the posse in a polite but cold tone and asks their business. DuChamp listens politely to the posse's story, whatever it may be.

If the heroes have a convincing cover story that would reasonably get them access to the compound and DuChamp does not see through their ruse with a *scrutinize* check, he asks them to wait while he gets his mistress.

Events unfold similarly if the posse tells DuChamp their true reason for being there.

Otherwise DuChamp asks the posse to leave when they are finished speaking. "We have no use for your worldly ways here. This is a place of God. You are intruders. Please leave."

Should the posse fail to obey, DuChamp begins to make veiled threats and may even attempt to *overawe* one or more of the heroes. Just when things are getting tense and perhaps almost violent, Lady Cynthia Carstairs makes herself known, speaking from the porch of the house.

"Stop! This is a place of God, and I will not have violence here. Edgar, bring our *guests* into the house. I would speak with them and allay their suspicions." With that, she sweeps quickly inside.

A MEETING WITH THE LADY

DuChamp ushers the posse members into the large house where Lady Cynthia awaits. She wears a plain, gray cotton dress, conservatively cut, yet she still manages to look ravishing. She bids the group to sit and, after sending DuChamp off, asks them how she and her humble disciples can be of assistance.

Unlike when talking to DuChamp, the posse is unlikely to be able to put one over on Lady Cynthia. If the group lays out a false story to her, she smiles broadly and asks that they please dispense with the pretenses.

"The truth shall set you free, sayeth the Lord. So let us have the truth. Why are you here?" she asks. If the posse persists in lying, she sighs deeply and expresses her regret she can do nothing to help them. She calls for DuChamp and asks him to show the posse out.

Should the heroes come clean about why they are there, Lady Cynthia listens attentively.

"I can certainly understand a father's concern for his child," she says when the heroes are done. "I assure you that all of my disciples are here of their own free will. Allow me to dispel Mr. Backlund's doubts and yours. Edgar!"

When DuChamp enters the room, Lady Cynthia asks him to fetch Christopher. DuChamp nods and departs, returning in a few minutes with a man in tow. It is indeed Christopher Backlund, healthy and hale. While DuChamp is gone, Lady Cynthia evades all questions about the preparations being made outside and about the Church in general. She claims that these are private matters, not for outsiders.

"You sent for me, Lady Cynthia?" Christopher asks respectfully as he enters. Any posse member with *scrutinize* may make a Hard (9) check at this point. Success determines there is a certain familiarity about the way he addresses her that seems to go beyond the teacher-disciple relationship.

Backlund is happy to answer any questions the posse has about why he is with the Church. He claims to be there totally of his own free will, and he sincerely believes the teachings of Lady Cynthia. When told of his father's concerns, Backlund looks sad, but he explains that he truly believes it is necessary he is separated from the world at large, including his father.

"Tell my father that I love him dearly, but I must do this. For mother. I think I have said enough. May I go, Lady Cynthia?"

She nods her assent, and Backlund leaves the house, returning to whatever task he was about when he was summoned.

The conversation with the posse concluded (at least in her mind and especially DuChamp's), Lady Cynthia asks the heroes to please leave. DuChamp escorts them back to their horses and watches them as they depart.

THE CHURCH COMPOUND

THE BARN

Description: A large, wooden barn full of farming implements, fifteen draft horses, and a loft full of hay. There's also a root cellar used for food storage

Occupants: 1d6 fanatics during the day.

THE CHURCH

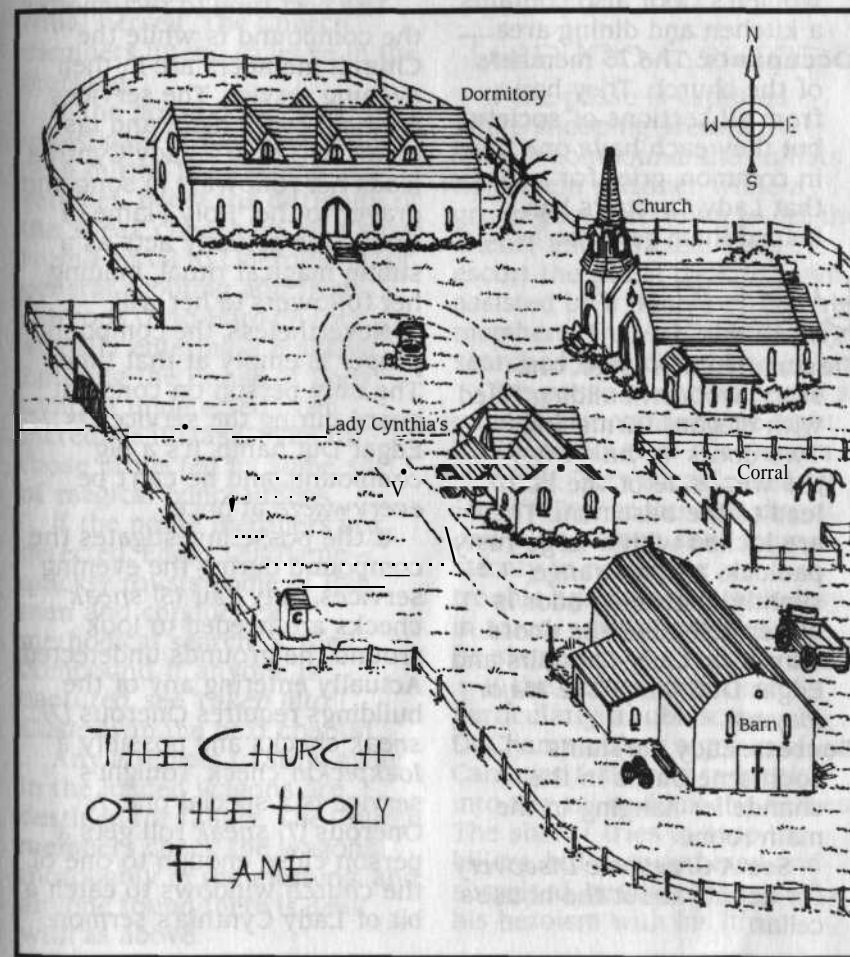
Description: A large, wooden building with a tall steeple. Instead of a cross, an icon of a flame hangs above the main door. Inside, there's a pulpit and enough pews to hold about 100 people.

Occupants: Every member of the Church during morning and evening services. Otherwise only 1d4 people cleaning the place during the day.

Secrets: One strange thing about the church is the total lack of any Christian symbolism within it despite the cult's Christian themes. Only the Church's Holy Flame symbol graces the walls of this building. It takes a Fair (5) *Cognition* roll to figure this out.

THE CORRAL

Description: A fenced-in area in which the Church members train their horses. Ten wagons are parked on the far side of the corral, partially packed for a trip. There's nothing incriminating in them at all.



THE DORMITORY

Description: A large, two-story, wooden building, sexually segregated by floor. The men live on the top floor; the women on the ground. Each floor is divided into three large rooms. The men's floor is completely used for sleeping, while the women's floor also contains a kitchen and dining area.

Occupants: The 75 members of the church. They hail from all sections of society, but they each have one thing in common: grief for a loss that Lady Carstairs has helped them get over.

LADY CYNTHIA'S RESIDENCE

Description: A large, one-story, wooden building filled with elegant furnishings. Two doors in the ground on the west side of the house lead to the basement. They are locked with a large rusty padlock, and a strange, slightly disturbing odor is discernible near the doors.

Occupants: Lady Carstairs and Edgar DuChamp (see *Major Players*).

Secrets: Lady Carstairs' soulflame burns in the chandelier hanging in the main room.

See *A Gruesome Discovery* for details about the house's cellar.

VISITING THE COMPOUND AT NIGHT

Some folks may think that a nighttime visit might be in order. There are no real guards posted at the compound at night, but the dormitory and Lady Cynthia's house are occupied during that time.

The best time to reconnoiter the compound is while the Church members are in their evening service. The services are held every night and last about two hours. Lady Cynthia leads her followers in song and prayer to the "Holy Flame of God." This actually acts as a subtle magical ritual, binding her followers to her will.

Nevertheless, the compound proper is empty at that time. The only person on constant guard during the services is Edgar DuChamp. It's a big compound, and he can't be everywhere at once.

If the posse investigates the compound during the evening services, only Fair (5) *sneak* checks are needed to look around the grounds undetected. Actually entering any of the buildings requires Onerous (7) *sneak* checks and possibly a *lockpickin'* check. Tonight's service is a special one. A Onerous (7) *sneak* roll gets a person close enough to one of the church windows to catch a bit of Lady Cynthia's sermon.

From the bits and pieces audible through the windows, the heroes can make out that the Church members are about to embark upon a journey of spiritual renewal. This pilgrimage will culminate in a holy purification ritual that allows the Church members to cleanse themselves of their sin. Lady Cynthia will lead this ritual herself. The Church members intend to leave in the morning.

If the posse decides to investigate at any time other than during the evening services, boost the difficulty of the *sneak* checks up by a step, from Fair (5) to Onerous (7) for general scouting and from Onerous (7) to Hard (9) for actually entering a building. Entering the House of Lady Cynthia undetected is an Incredible (11) task, even for those protected by some sort of magical concealment.

If the posse members are detected, Edgar DuChamp quickly rousts some of the men and conducts a methodical search of the compound. If anyone is captured, see *Taken Into Custody* in the next chapter.

Any attempts to stow away in the loaded wagons are destined for failure. The Church members check the wagons thoroughly in the morning, and anyone found there is dealt with as above.

CHAPTER FOUR:
THE PILGRIMAGE
BEGINS

The time has come for Lady Cynthia to lead her followers to their doom. She takes steps to ensure no one can trail her and her minions.

TAKEN INTO CUSTODY

If the posse is captured while snooping around the church compound, the cultists hold them prisoner while a group goes into town to get the sheriff and his men. They escort the posse back to town, assisted by a couple of church members. There the heroes are searched and tossed into jail.

The posse members spend a quiet but uncomfortable night in the confines of the Derry's Ford jail. They are released by Sheriff Turner the next day at dawn. He admonishes them sternly to not cause any trouble again during their stay in town, which he hopes will be short.

If the heroes have been particularly troublesome, DuChamp orders a group of Carstairs' followers to break into the jail and kill the heroes. The sheriff tries to stop the killers, but outnumbered and surprised, he's likely to pay for his heroism with his life.



BAD FOOD

Should the heroes not run afoul of the law, they still don't escape Lady Cynthia's reach. Her divinations have pinpointed them as trouble, and she is not willing to take chances.

DuChamp shadows the heroes to wherever they dine. Then he sneaks into the kitchen and drugs their food. Once the posse eats the food, make a secret Hard (9) *Vigor* roll for each player. Any who fail begin to feel drowsy about an hour later, passing out in a space of about 15 minutes. They are unawakenable by any normal means until the drug wears off at dawn the next day.

WHILE YOU WERE SLEEPING

Once the heroes are released from jail or wake up, they find that it's been snowing (and lightning and thundering) for several hours. Most of the town residents find it perfectly wonderful that they're going to have a white Christmas, although the heroes may have cause to regret it.

The Church pulled out of the compound in the middle of the night. By now, the snow has all but obliterated the tracks of the Church's wagons, so although they may not know it, the heroes need to get moving.

CHAPTER FIVE: A GRUESOME FINDING THE PATH DISCOVERY

Eventually, the posse likely returns to the Church. The ride back out is uneventful but cold and slippery from the softly falling snow. Lightning flashes, and thunder rumbles, hinting at the snowstorm's supernatural nature. Cruel Marshals might require a few *horse ridin'* or *teamster* rolls, but most of you aren't that vindictive.

A CLOSER LOOK

The corral, stable, and barn are empty. All of the Church's horses and wagons have been taken with them. All of the riding tack is gone as well.

The dormitory contains little of interest. The many rooms are filled with beds and simple furniture, and a few personal things been left behind. None of it has any great value, but its presence suggests the cultists think they're returning.

The church also stands empty. A few hymnals lie in the pews.

A quick search of Lady Cynthia's house reveals that—unlike her followers—Lady Carstairs has taken all her personal belongings with her. The place is entirely empty.

The house's cellar offers more concrete evidence of something strange going on.

A strange odor emanates from the houses's cellar. The basement doors are secured with a rusty lock, but a fist-sized rock and a Fair (5) *Strength* roll can break it.

When the cellar doors are opened, the odor resolves itself into heavy incense mixed with the stench of rotting flesh. As the heroes descend the steps into the basement, have them make Fair (5) *guts* checks.

In the darkness, the corpses of three feral dogs lie on a large stone block hewn directly out of the ground. Another four carcasses in various states of decay are scattered about. All have been neatly disemboweled. Their entrails lie in a pile on the left side of the room. Smudge pots held the incense sit in the four corners.

As the heroes inspect the cellar, the carcasses struggle to their feet and lurch hungrily toward the heroes (Onerous (7) *guts* rolls for them).

These are the rotted remains of the dogs Lady Carstairs used for her divination rituals. They are just whole enough to pass as pitifully alive—until you notice the huge slits in their bellies. Although their insides are missing, the dogs' teeth and claws are still in perfect working order.

There are seven of these critters here, a Christmas present left by Lady Cynthia for anyone snooping about. Their only thoughts are to kill anything that moves. They are strong enough to batter their way through the cellar door if locked on them. As they are dead, they are no longer distracted by things like food, fire, or pain. They fight until they are dismembered or their noggins are destroyed.

THE REVEREND RESURFACES

The advent of Christmas and the impending horror Lady Carstairs is about to carry out brings Reverend Owlsley back from the brink of spiritual collapse. He decides to ride out to the compound to take on the terrible woman by himself. He arrives too late to catch her, but just in time for the heroes.

He arrives at the height of the fight and lays into the undead dogs with his solid-oak walking stick. The posse may not recognize him at first, as his whole manner has changed. Charged by the inner light of his faith, he is a firecracker, damning the "unholy critters" to the fire below as he whacks away with his club.

When the fight is over, Owlsley quickly introduces himself, even if he has met the posse before. With the fog of

alcohol removed, he is a clear and concise speaker, and he quickly explains himself, telling the story of what became of his brother and how Lady Cynthia's return drove him to drink. He moves on quickly to ask how the situation stands.

When he is appraised of what has happened, Owlsley stops to think for a moment. Then he speaks.

"I am but one old man, and alone I can do little against such a fiend, but together we can defeat this foul woman, this daughter of perdition. She has vanished, along with all her victims-to-be, but we can save them if we act quickly."

Owlsley points out that the Church members have a good eight-hour start on the heroes. "If we want to catch them, we have to leave immediately. Otherwise it may be too late."

CHAPTER SIX: WHITE CHRISTMAS

When the heroes are ready, Owlsley leads them into the mountains to the northwest. He is an learned tracker from his days before he entered the priesthood, and he leaps to the challenge of finding the trail of Carstairs and her hapless followers. This is an Easy (5) *trackin'* roll, but it must be made every hour or so because of the gently falling snow.

Owlsley is a pleasant traveling companion. He is sharp-minded and passionate about his newly restored faith. Scoundrels and overly brazen women receive impromptu lectures along the trail.

The posse is making good time when Lady Carstairs' hand touches them again.

AMBUSHED!

Lady Carstairs' divinations have shown her she must leave a little something behind to impede the posse's progress if she is to complete her bloody ritual. Forced to improvise, she resorts to the simplest technique: brute force.

Lady Carstairs has left some of her most fanatical followers behind to lie in wait for the heroes. They have orders to kill the heroes, obviously "tools of the Devil" trying to stop the Church's "Holy Pilgrimage." Needless to say, these poor folks have bought the story lock, stock, and barrel.

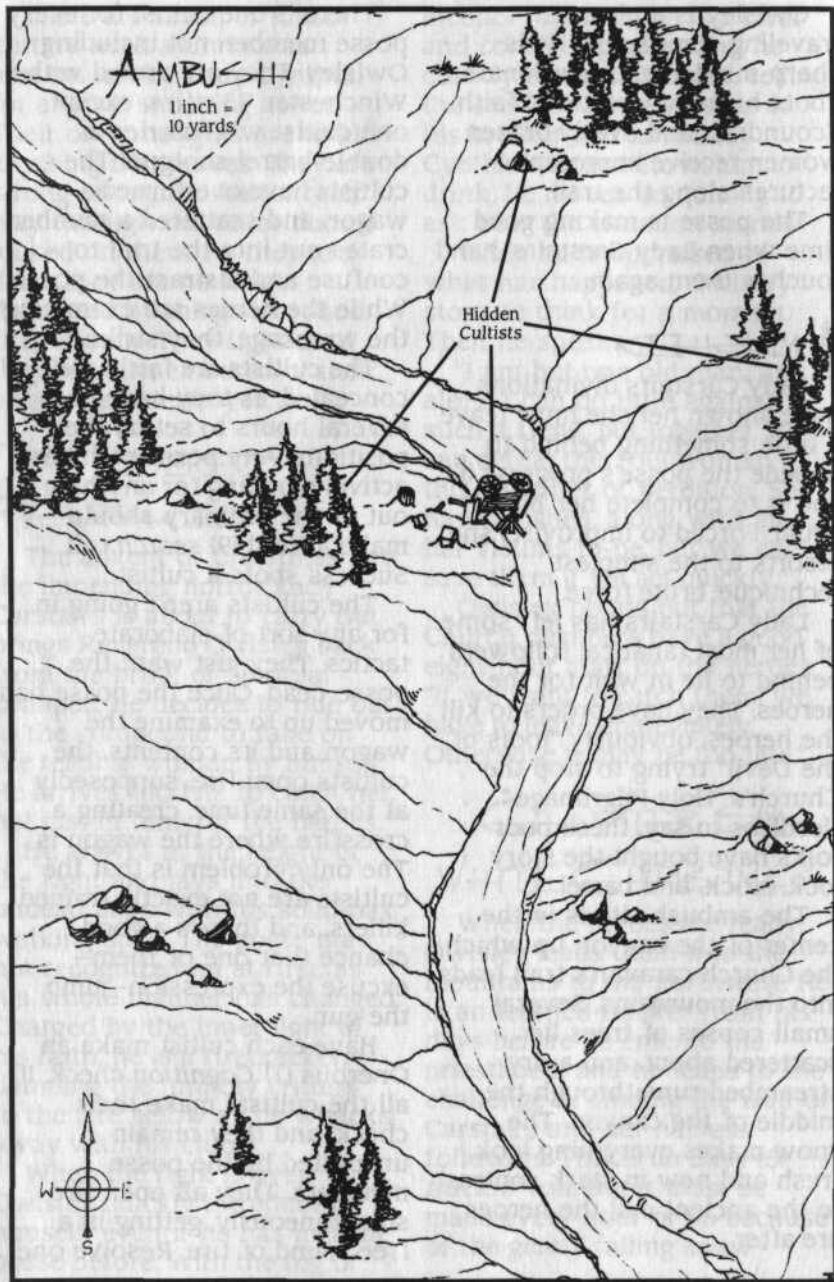
The ambush site is in the center of the canyon up which the Church caravan's trail leads into the mountains. Several small copses of trees lie scattered about, and a dry streambed runs through the middle of the canyon. The snow makes everything look fresh and new in stark contrast to the ancient evil the heroes are after.

There is one cultist for every posse member, not including Owlsley. They are armed with Winchester 73 rifles, except one cultist who carries a double-barrel shotgun. The cultists have overturned a wagon and scattered a number crates out into the trail to confuse and distract the posse. While the heroes are examining the wreckage, they strike.

The cultists are fairly well concealed, as they have had several hours to set up their positions. Any posse member actively looking for anything out of the ordinary should make a Hard (9) *search* roll. Success spots a cultist.

The cultists aren't going in for any sort of elaborate tactics. They just want the posse dead. Once the posse has moved up to examine the wagon and its contents, the cultists open fire, supposedly at the same time, creating a crossfire where the wagon is. The only problem is that the cultists are not exactly trained killers, and there's a good chance that one of them—excuse the expression—jump the gun.

Have each cultist make an Onerous (7) *Cognition* check. If all the cultists make their check, and they remain unspotted by the posse members, they all open fire simultaneously, getting in a free round of fire. Resolve one



shot for each of the cultists, then go to normal combat.

If any cultists fail the check, they open fire on the posse early, ruining the surprise. Resolve those shots, then go to the normal combat sequence.

The cultists try their level best to kill the players, fighting with no regard whatsoever for their own personal safety. If they fail, they have no intention of being taken alive. Their place at the feet of the Lord has been assured to them by Lady Carstairs.

Cultists that have suffered serious wounds or worse suddenly break free from Carstairs' control of their mind. They are contrite and apologize to the heroes for attacking them, but they are terrified of the woman and refuse to help them against her.

WALL OF SNOW

The weather is clear and cold. Snow falls softly all around. The terrain changes gradually from plains into foothills, the Rockies looming in the distance. Occasionally, the posse may just catch a glimpse of Church's caravan on the horizon (an Onerous (7) search check).

Then, just after noon, the heroes see a lightning bolt in the distance, followed soon after by a long, thunderous rumbling. Have all the posse

members make a Onerous (7) *Cognition* check. Even those that fail can tell that the sound came from the direction in which they are heading. Those who succeed recognize the sound of an avalanche.

About an hour later, the source becomes evident. The canyon the heroes have been riding up into is filled with a wall of rock and snow at least 35' high.

Lady Cynthia has decided to take no chances, calling down a lightning bolt out of the clouds to slap this final obstacle in the path of enemies she's not even sure are coming. Owsley's face registers a bit of distress when he sees this obstacle. "Time is short, and she is getting desperate," he says solemnly. "We shall have to climb over it."

Surmounting the avalanche is not a simple task, and carrying a wagon or horses over it is out of the question. If the posse brought climbing equipment, the climb is slow but a lot less dangerous. If only rope is handy, the climb is still slow and a bit more dangerous. Climbing with no equipment is, of course, the most dangerous of all.

With climbing equipment, each posse member should make three Fair (5) *climbin'* checks. With only rope, the difficulty of the *climbin'* checks jumps to Onerous (7), and with



no rope at all, the *climbin'* checks becomes Hard (9). A failed check will result in a fall of 1d10 yards, and the *climbin'* check has to be made again. Going bust on a *climbin'* check results in a fall of 1d20 yards. Watch your step! That last one's a doozy.

By the time the posse crosses the avalanche, the sun has set behind the mountains, and the temperature is plunging. Against a butte two miles ahead, the flickering light of a huge bonfire is visible through the falling snow. The ceremony has already begun.

CHAPTER SEVEN: THE ALTAR OF BLOOD

By the time the posse crosses the two miles to the ceremony site, the ritual is already in full swing. The natural bowl in which the Church members dance drops down about 50' to the base of a huge butte. The wagons and horses of the Church members are parked and tethered at the rim of the snowy depression.

The incline down into the bowl is scattered with scrub and boulders, but the bottom area is clear except for one large stone. Lady Cynthia stands upon this stone with Edgar DuChamp. Before them, the members of the Church of the Holy Flame are just beginning to dance around a huge bonfire.

THE DANCE OF DEATH

Lady Cynthia has already started the Unholy Ritual of Life by the time the posse arrives, and the 75 disciples of the Holy Flame have begun the ritual dance she has taught them. A dead horse lies next to the huge bonfire, its throat cut open and its steaming blood soaking the ground. Lady Cynthia used the horse to

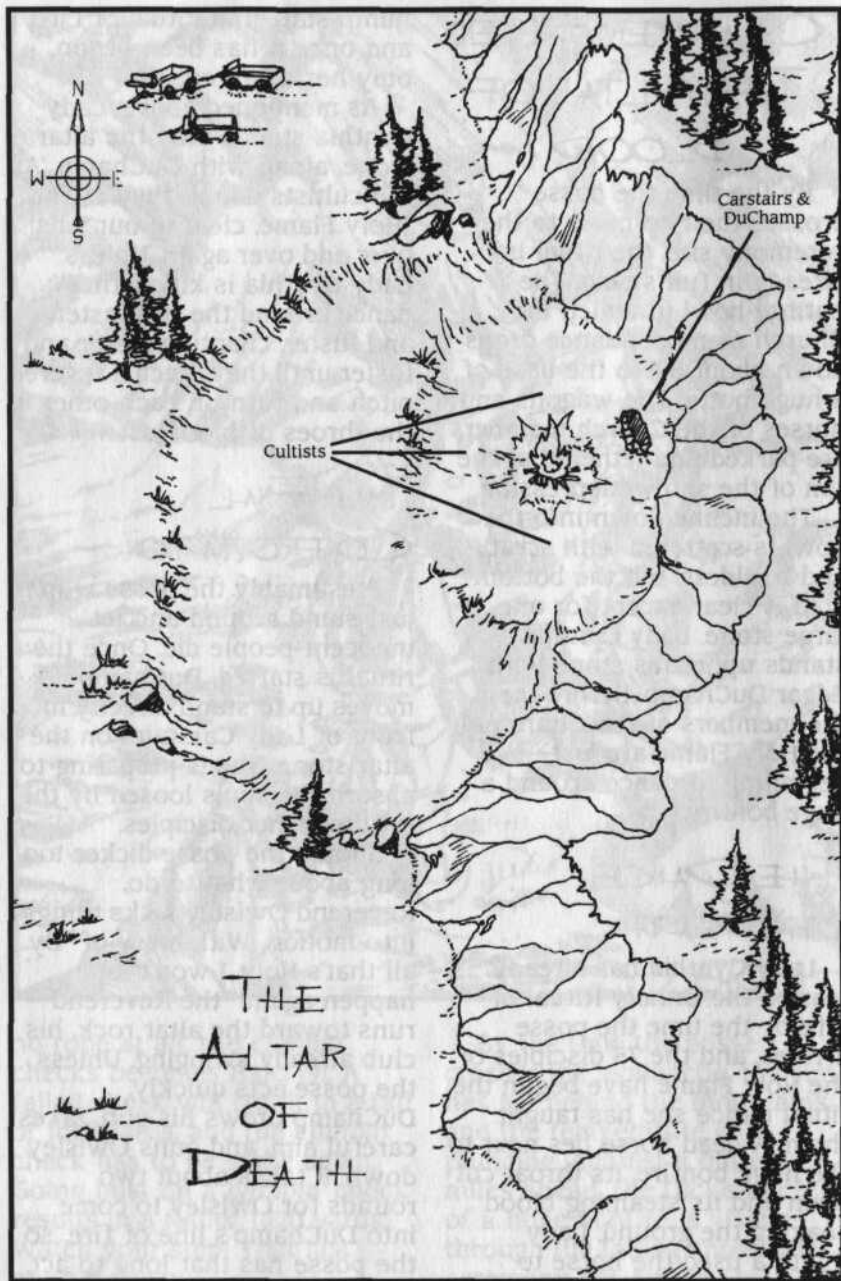
"jump-start" the Ritual of Life, and once it has been begun, only her death can end it.

As mentioned above, Lady Cynthia stands atop the altar stone, along with DuChamp. As the cultists dance, they chant, "Holy Flame, cleanse our sins!" over and over again. Unless Lady Cynthia is killed, they dance around the fire faster and faster, chanting faster and faster until they reach a fevered pitch and turn on each other in the throes of bloodlust.

THE FINAL CONFRONTATION

Presumably the posse won't just stand around and let innocent people die. Once the ritual is started, DuChamp moves up to stand directly in front of Lady Carstairs on the altar stone. She is preparing to absorb the souls loosed by the deaths of her disciples.

Should the posse dicker too long about what to do, Reverend Owlsley kicks things into motion. With a cry of "By all that's Holy, I won't let it happen again!" the Reverend runs toward the altar rock, his club already swinging. Unless the posse acts quickly, DuChamp draws his gun, takes careful aim, and guns Owlsley down. It takes about two rounds for Owlsley to come into DuChamp's line of fire, so the posse has that long to act.



Three rounds after either the posse or Owlsley acts, the first group of 1d10 cultists kill each other, strangling, beating, and battering each other to death. Each round after, another 1d10 are shoved off this mortal coil.

As soon as any gunfire breaks out, DuChamp throws Lady Carstairs and himself to the ground behind the altar stone. DuChamp blasts away at the heroes until he's out of ammo (he's got a box of 50 shells), then draws his knife and prepare for a last stand. Lady Cynthia *corporeal tweaks* him to the best of her ability, then defends herself with her powers.

Both fight to the death. When Lady Carstairs dies, the spell over her followers is broken. The surviving Church members collapse unconscious.

Lady Carstairs can only be killed if the bonfire (now her soulflame) is put out. Starting an avalanche is the best way. This can be done by use of explosives, gunfire, or magic.

THE AFTERMATH

Matters seem grim at first glance. Christopher Backlund is once again a man without faith and also without his lady love, demonic though she turned out to be. The other disciples are left spiritually bereft as well. They willingly follow just about anyone at this point, as

despondent and betrayed as they feel.

Reverend Owlsley becomes their beacon in a time of darkness on the journey back to Derry's Ford. His renewed faith renews theirs, and he spends many hours ministering and counseling them. It is a cheerier if not cheerful crowd that arrives in Derry's Ford.

The townspeople are a bit dumbfounded when their formally drunken priest ride back into town at the head of a crowd of folks singing hymns, but most are just happy to see their preacher back to the way he was. And Owlsley is more than happy to tell the tale of what has happened, of the evil woman who enthralled good people and tried to destroy them all. The rescued cultists back up the story and bring the posse in on the telling as well (a good time to use those *tale-tellin'* skills).

Christopher Backlund agrees to return with the posse to Denver. There is nothing more for him here, and it seems his father needs him. Irving Backlund lives up to his end of the deal and more. He assures the posse that should they ever need his help, he will be there.

Before the posse leaves town, the Reverend Owlsley asks for their assistance with one final act: the burning of the former compound of the Church of the Holy Flame.

BOOT HILL

CHRISTOPHER
BACKLIND

Attack:
Rifle 2d6/4d8
Club 2d6/2d6+1d6
Defense:
Brawlin' 2
Hits: 30

LADY CYNTHIA
CARSTAIRS

Attack:
Knife 2d10/4d6+1d4
Defense:
Brawlin' 2
Hits: 36
Special Abilities:
Immune to normal damage until soulflame put out.
Spells:
Divination, Storm Calling, Ritual of Life, Corporeal Tweak, Binding Ritual. Pay 1 Wind per success and raise (up to 3 at a time).

DISCIPLES OF
THE CHURCH OF
THE HOLY FLAME

Attack:
Rifle 2d6/4d8
Club 2d6/2d6+1d6
Defense:
Brawlin' 2
Hits: 30

EDGAR DUCHAMP

Attack:
Pistol 3d8/3d6
Defense:
Brawlin' 3
Dodge 3
Hits: 34

REVEREND BERNARD
OWLSLEY

Attack:
Walking stick 4d6/1d10+1d6
Defense:
Dodge 3
Walking stick +1
Hits: 30
Special Abilities: Blessed, the Voice.

SHERIFF IELAND
TURNER

Attack:
Pistol 2d6/3d6
Double-barrel shotgun 3d6/
2d6+4d6
Defense:
Dodge 3
Brawlin' 3
Hits: 30

UNDEAD DOGS

Attack:
Bite 3d6/4d6+1d6
Defense:
Brawlin' 3
Hits: 20
Special Abilities:
Immune to Wind and physical stress.



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