

THE LEGEND OF THE DRAGON WEAVERS

By Henry Radcliff

I remember that day. I remember it well. The town of Veiled Gulch never really had much adventure going on. Mostly a quiet, farming town. A few farms had cattle, but mostly just fields of wheat far as the eye can see. Of course, that's once you climbed out of the canyon itself.

The town's name is a bit misleading. It's not so much a gulch as it is an open top cave. The original settlers stumbled upon it by accident heading up the Oregon Trail. Ground completely flat in every direction except this canyon that just opened up. Since there are tornadoes in these parts, settlers thought it would be safer to build down here. So, they did.

Canyon's a few miles long, and they only built about a mile in on the east side. But it's got everything we need. General store, feed shop, church, pharmacy where old Doc Ned keeps everyone healthy. Got a jail, too – not that we've needed it much. Usually just when someone gets a bit too rowdy here in the saloon. Not sure why they call it the Crimson Pirate, though. Ben Cope runs it. He says he used to *be* a pirate before his yearning to come out west, but no one who's ever come through has ever heard of the Crimson Pirate, the pirate not the saloon.

There's even a trail up top for the wagons to bring in supplies. Top of the trail, that's where you met Booker Elliott; he keeps watch on everything. He set up his house at the top of the trail and checks everyone that comes in or out. He claims to be part of our local law enforcement, but Sheriff Townsend denies it. Of course, he doesn't do anything about it either. Not many people leave the town. All the houses are down here, all lined up nice and pretty. Only got the one road so it's easy to find everything and everyone.

Canyon roof is only about fifty-feet across but it widens a lot down here. Feels like we have a roof over our heads all the time. It's nice and safe down here. Even watched a tornado pass over a few months ago. Lots of wind down here but nothing compared to topside.

But you were asking about that day. I suppose I need to tell you a little about who was involved, first. About two years ago, we had a new-comer to the town. Guy by the name of Jacob Easton. We'd heard about a guy with that name. Nasty sort. Heard he was terrorizing a few towns topside. Not a big outlaw – no bank robbing or stuff like that. But a, a nasty fellow.

And people soon found out why he was called the Iceman. Cold-hearted, that one. Near as I can tell, he never paid for nothing. Got a room at the hotel and scared poor old Emma Field into getting that for free – *for two years*. Almost seven-feet tall and built like a bull, but he was smart, too. Never did nothing untoward when Sheriff Townsend was around, and scared everyone so damn much that when a complaint was lodged, there were no witnesses. None that would testify, anyway.

I mentioned our church, right? Well, we used to have two pastors. One day, when the sheriff was checking out topside, Old Iceman shot Pastor Brown just for preaching about how the *meek shall inherit the Earth*. That is in the Bible, right? I'll be honest. I can't read so I wouldn't know.

I hear that people back east think that there's a whole lot of killing like that that going on in these frontier towns. Not much in this one. But the only times it's happened, it was the Iceman. Always did it when Sheriff went topside. I saw him do one once. Wish I hadn't.

Little Ollie Reed – couldn't have been more than ten years old. He just got some of that, oh, what-do-you-call-it? Chalk? That stuff that writes on everything. Anyway, he marked up a whole lot of stuff in the town. Not a big deal, washes off easy enough. But he drew something on Easton's saddlebag. Just ran by, scribble scribble scribble, and skipped off to the church.

Easton didn't care for it and shot poor little Ollie, right there in the middle of the street. Most people were in the church and didn't see nothing. I was running late that morning and, well. I saw. Iceman knew I saw, too. He just looked at me and said, "Do you want to be next?"

I said, "No sir." He told me that I didn't see what I just saw but if I did see it then I'd be next. He fixed me with a stare so cold. His blue eyes just glaring at me with... well, I don't know what but it put the fear of God right into me. (I need another drink. Hit me again, Ben. Thanks. Whew.)

But then we had someone else stumble upon our little town. Found out later that the Ross family, the most prominent and rich we've got around here, hired this man to come weave a, oh, what do you call those rugs you hang on a wall? Tape-pastry? Oh whatever. One of those, and this guy was supposed to be one of the best. Came from even farther west than we are. I hear it was San Francisco.

Anyway, he was an odd-looking fellow. His skin was dark, but not like one of them Africans. About halfway between mine and one of them. And his eyes were different too. Weird shaped. And I don't think he ever opened them all the way either. Walked into town with a mule on a rope. No way he walked here from California. Must have brought that mule on the train with him. That can't be cheap. And that mule was covered in rolls of fabric and saddle bags.

Now that I think about it, he was dressed a bit weird, too. Black pants we've got here. But his shirt was more wrapped around him like a robe, or something. And he wasn't wearing boots. Well not proper ones anyway. They were black, too, and looked like one of his toes was too big for it since it had a place to itself.

Iceman saw him coming into town and you could tell, there was something that just set him off. Of course, he got here the day after one of the Sheriff's topside visits, so it would be another week before Easton could do anything about it.

Well, this new guy settled in at the Ross estate. I say estate. I mean it's the biggest house in the valley, but, ah, whatever. I even met the new guy when he came into the store. He said his name was Taichi Kita, and he was from Japan. I'd never met one of them Oriental people before. He was a very polite guy. He bought a few needles and some fertilizer. I asked him what he needed fertilizer for in making a rug and he said that he also was growing some special plants.

He told me more about them but I don't remember what it was.

He came into town every day about the same time. Even came in here once. Drank water, if you can believe that. I mean, who comes into a saloon and drinks water.

Well, Iceman was in here at the time and just stared a hole through him the whole time. After Taichi left, I heard Iceman grumbling about hating those damn Asian people. I didn't hear why and I sure as hell wasn't going to ask.

But it was the next day you wanted to know about. That day, Taichi came into town and Sheriff was topside. Anyone who'd been paying attention knew that Iceman was going to have his big showdown today. Most everyone stayed inside. I was across the street at the store but I was watching out the window. Taichi had to know what was going on, too. He wasn't stupid.

And, sure enough, Iceman came out of the saloon right after Taichi passed. He pulled his gun and was going to shoot Taichi in the back. Cowardly way to do it. Looking back, maybe he was scared of him. I mean it would make sense. Taichi moved so fast. Never seen a person move that fast before. Iceman couldn't have been more than two feet away with a gun to his back and Taichi spun around and there was this bang of a gun.

Iceman screamed. I wasn't sure what happened until I saw the gun on the ground. Big old sewing needle stuck in the end of it. One of them crow-shaying kind. Just jammed in there. Bullet had nowhere to go and the gun just blew up in Iceman's hand. Well, what's left of it anyway. Half of it looked like it was blown off.

Taichi leaned in to him and said something, don't know what it was though. But he did the strangest thing. He took Iceman to Doc Ned's to get his hand fixed up. And Iceman let him. Next day, Iceman left and we ain't heard of him since.

About a week later, Taichi Kita left, too. Haven't heard from him either. But that rug thing he made is hanging in the town hall. Beautiful thing. Picture of a big lizard, or, dragon. Yeah, that's it. Dragon. He also left us a note saying that if there was more trouble in the town with someone like the Iceman, just send word, like the Ross family did. Apparently, they sent for Taichi not just for the rug.

I'm told the note says something like: Where there is injustice, there can be peace. We are here to help. And it was signed The Dragon Weavers.