

The Dread Queen

Part One

THE GOLD POCKET WATCH ticks with the cadence of a gallows drum, repetitive and precise, an earworm that digs deeper the longer it is heard. Here, even in the brilliant sunrise of a quiet, misty morning, the sound is a steady reminder that death lies on the fringes of every moment.

For most people, such an idea exists only in the abstract, but for Edwin Hardy, the idea of lurking death is his reality.

Before him, the hangman's noose, a shadow dark on the horizon.

Behind him, around him, out there somewhere, in the fields and the forests and beyond, is Persephone.

Or Cora, as he first knew her, when she was but a gorgeous woman who crashed into his life and stole his heart. Edwin hadn't been her first victim, though. Cora had a thing for taking hearts.

"STILL NO SIGN OF her," says Edwin, his voice cutting the stillness of the winter morning air. He senses Wilmore standing behind him. "But she's close."

Wilmore clears his throat.

"I'm tellin' ya, Ed, she ain't comin' back. Why would she?"

Edwin snaps the watch closed and places his Stetson back on his head.

"Because she has to, Wil," he says. "When the world seems as if it might never bloom again... she'll show."

Edwin looks back to the man behind him, musters a bittersweet smile.

"Just like the spring."

EDWIN EATS, THE WARM fire in front of him the only light for miles. His shackles, at wrists and ankles, hinder him only slightly. The soup is potato, one of Wilmore's tried-and-true dishes that Edwin has had a thousand times since they were teenagers. It never fails to be delicious.

Wilmore sits across from Edwin on his own log, watching the fire and packing a pipe with fresh-cut tobacco. Edwin knows that one eye always sits on him. He can feel the weight of it, that look of brotherly protection—half love and half exasperation.

"I'm glad your appetite is back," comments Wilmore.

Edwin keeps eating, offering no response.

Wilmore lights his pipe, takes a few puffs, and leans back as comfortably as one can while perched on an upended log. Stillness fills the night around them.

"Do you know what way she might be coming from, Ed?" Wilmore asks after a while. "I mean, if she comes?"

"From the south," Edwin grunts, soup dribbling down his chin. "But that's by our compass."

Wilmore frowns at this but nods.

"Just curious," he says. He looks at the woods around him and studies the darkness beyond the reach of the firelight, where shadows become living, breathing things.

"Maybe I'll keep watch tonight."

Edwin chuckles.

"Thought you said we didn't need to worry."

"Well," says Wilmore in that drawn-out way a man speaks while trying to find a lie. "I still say it's unlikely. Run off to save her own hide. But you never can be too careful." And Wilmore hugs himself a little tighter, scoots an inch or so closer to the fire. The cold of the night is creeping in.

"We'll be in town in a day or so," he thinks out loud, if only to reassure himself.

"We shouldn't be goin' back at all," says Edwin between bites. "Too dangerous."

"For you?" questions Wilmore.

Edwin finally looks up; his steely eyes meet Wilmore's.

"For everyone."

Wilmore frowns again and slumps into thought. A heavy silence falls between them.

"You sent her off once," Wilmore says after a bit, grasping for anything to keep his latent fears at bay.

Edwin shakes his head, the dull pain in his fractured, bloodied knuckles singing out to him, reminding him of altercations months removed. He sets his spoon in his bowl and clenches and unclenches his right fist several times, trying to rid his skin of the memory.

"Wasn't me that called her back," he admits. "I just made her hurt enough to listen."

"But you can best her," Wilmore says, though it sort of sounds like a question, a hint of desperation in his voice. Edwin picks up the spoon again, takes a bite, and chews, contemplating.

"She'll be stronger now," he says, looking Wilmore in the eyes again. "By the time she reaches us. She'll have been home, and she'll be mighty pissed. Bringing the spring, she'll be softer in nature, and there may be a chance to reason with her. But the longer she hangs to me, the worse she'll become."

Wilmore laughs, a rueful sound.

"What the shit does that mean, Ed?"

Edwin shrugs. "No other way to say it. She's not like us, Wil. Her life is bound to cycles, rules we can't even fathom. At different times, she's different things. One of those things is pleasant and lovely and good."

"And the other?" Asks Wilmore.

Edwin gives him a sideways glance.

"Is not."

Wilmore barks another weary laugh into the night air, short and pointed, almost like a cough.

"So what would you have us do, then, huh?" He asked, his agitation rising. "Go on the run, like you did?"

Forest. Trees. Nothing but branches and leaves, green and brown. Edwin runs, his face and arms caught by the underbrush, split open like so many cracks beneath the desert sun, each a reminder that nature has a way of catching up.

Edwin stops eating, his eyes growing distant.

"Yea. Sounds about right."

He kicks the lead ball shackled to his foot.

"Too bad you're hellbent on slowin' me down."

"Someone was gonna, Ed," says Wilmore. "Better that it's me."

Edwin shakes his head.

"I said ain't no one safe around me, Wilmore, not with her around. Not even

family."

Wilmore falls quiet again, his mind in thought.

Finally, he dares to ask the question that's been dancing on his lips since the night of the murders. Since the night almost a year ago when Edwin went on the lam.

"Edwin?" he begins, timid. "What is she? I mean... really."

Edwin smiles sadly but doesn't answer.

Part Two

"HAPPY ANNIVERSARY," SAYS CORA with a smile.

"Best two years of my life," returns Edwin. They clink their champagne glasses together, a toast of things to come.

It was late summer, weeks before the autumn would come to take what was beautiful and warm, and the two lovers were sharing a picnic. Edwin is clean-shaven, here in the memory, his wild hair pulled back. He looks as he used to, as a gentleman should.

Cora smiles.

"I got you something."

"What?" Edwin says incredulously.

"You want it now?" asks Cora, a devilish grin dancing on her lips. "You want it now."

"I thought we weren't doin' that," says Edwin. "Exchanging gifts. You didn't need to spend your money on me."

Cora's smile breaks wide, her tongue between her teeth like a mischievous child. "Now, who said I paid for it?"

She reaches behind her, opens the wicker picnic basket, and pulls a gold pocket watch from within it. It dangles from its fob as a lure dangles from a fishing line, sparkling in the sunlight. Edwin's eyes go wide.

"Oh, Cora, it's just like my father's," he says, taking the watch in his hand.

"I know," says Cora. Edwin looks at her, drowning in her sea-green eyes, his heart swelling.

"I love it," he says. Cora returns the gaze, her devotion equal.

"And I love you."

SUNRISE. The ticking of the ever-present pocket watch rouses Edwin before the dawn. He sits in the field, timepiece in hand. The minutes march on, unrelenting. Each tick the hope and fear of things to come. Each tock the pang of what has passed.

It happens this fast, Edwin knows, for he has lived many lifetimes, has seen many calendars come and go. Time slips away for all of us, and even clocks stop ticking as their gears seize like our veins, gripped by final heartbeats. Failure and fortune balance there on the edge of every second. Life and Death. Love and Loss.

Wilmore appears behind him again, as he always does, watching at first before speaking.

"You're up early," he notes. Edwin doesn't look back.

"Figured I wouldn't bother you."

Wilmore steps forward, a pewter mug of coffee in each hand. He offers one to Edwin, who gladly accepts.

"Thank you," he says.

Wilmore nods wordlessly and turns his eyes to the horizon, the rising sun like an egg yolk on the surface of creation, bringing to life a new day.

The brothers sip their coffee in silence, taking in the splendor of a brisk morning, hoping this moment of serenity will last, knowing in their hearts that it will not.

Finally, Wilmore breaks the stillness.

"We'll be in town by nightfall."

That same day, under cover of dusk, Edwin enters the town he had left behind all those months ago. Walking down the dusty middle road—his shackles scraping gravel, the lead ball heavy in his hands—Edwin can't help but think of the last time he was here. It's all he can ever think about, frankly, but returning to the scene of the crime, as it were, brings with it new pains and fresh memories.

In his mind, he's walking down the same road all those many days ago, trying to keep his composure, his legs wanting to run. He knows better than to draw such attention. Not yet, at least. But awareness and alarm, he fears, are inevitable.

He reaches the O'Brien place, the house next to the livery. Already, he can see the door sprung open, the first body splayed upon the porch, torn skin and marrow white beneath the moonlight, all semblance of humanity gone.

"God, no..." murmurs Edwin, though God seems nowhere to be found. He chokes back bile as he passes the corpse and presses on.

Edwin has been a settler since the time of settled lands—has been an explorer since his first few steps on this earth. He has traveled to the coast in search of gold, has gambled and drunk with whores and bandits from every corner of the realm; he's seen his fair share of highwaymen, of double-crosses, of things gone wrong, and murders most foul.

And to be honest, Edwin has taken a life or two himself, and he wasn't opposed to doing so again.

Still, nothing prepared him for the horrors waiting inside the O'Brien house.

Through the foyer, into the dining room with the table set and dinner half-consumed, Edwin finds another body. It's a young woman (beautiful Besty O'Brien, not yet eighteen) pitched forward into her dinner plate, half her skull missing, grey matter on display. So much blood—too much blood—paints everything.

Edwin gags.

"Cora?" He manages to cry out. "Cora!"

Edwin covers his mouth, passes by the table and enters the sitting room, searching for what he feared—what he knew—he would find.

In the center of the room stands Cora, clothed in white. Crimson pools dot her dress like puddles in a field of baby's breath. At her feet, the body of yet another victim.

In her hand, dripping like a pomegranate is a human heart.

"Cora," Edwin breathes, barely more than a whisper.

She cocks her head to the sound of his voice. A strange, animalistic rasp escapes her lips.

"Cora is gone," she hisses as she turns to face him. Dread pours over his heart like a black wave, capsizing him. He staggers, both his balance and his breath pulled beneath the flotsam.

Cora stands before him, her face coated in blood. She has torn into something raw and red the way a lion would, and she smiles a sickening grin, her rictus a scarlet nightmare.

"There is only Persephone," she growls.

The ghoul before Edwin shrieks in demonic glee, a sound not fit for this world, and Edwin finds himself screaming back, stricken with the grief and the hatred of it all.

As Persephone charges, her eyes full of hunger, no longer comprehending him, Edwin (whose knuckles had never touched a woman but had greeted many a villainous man) clenches his fists and braces for impact. The force sends hi—

But Edwin is spared the memory of the fight itself—that flurry of fists and nails and jaws and teeth—as the jeers of his former townsmen fall upon his present ears. They gather along the road to see the return of the murderous fugitive. At least,

that's the story they've told themselves. The murders had to have been committed by Edwin, after all. A man of flesh and blood. It couldn't be something more. Something carnivorous and wild. Such things didn't exist in this world.

Wilmore and Edwin reach the sheriff's office. Wilmore opens the door for Edwin and lets him enter first, away from the maddening crowd, taunts and curses on their lips and rotted fruit in their hands.

Wilmore closes the door on them.

HOURS LATER, THE FIRE in the hearth little more than embers, Edwin sits on a rickety cot in the corner. The shackles on his wrists and ankles have been replaced by the bars of a small prison cell. He speaks as if thinking aloud, his eyes unblinking as he stares into the ashes of the fire.

"I knew what she was, Wilmore. That's the worst part of it. But I never thought... I thought we had it under control."

"That's the tricky thing about control, Ed. The tighter we try'n hold it, the more it slips between our fingers."

Edwin lets that sink in. An unoriginal sentiment. But it does ring true.

"I'm not sorry I met her," Edwin finally admits. "I wish I could see her again right now." He blinks eventually, looks to the floorboards.

"But I am sorry I bound her here. I should've let her go. We knew the rules. We just didn't wanna follow them."

Wilmore is silent, looking at Edwin with sadness swimming in his eyes. He feels for his brother. No one can control who they fall for. Not really.

After a moment, Wilmore stands and goes to the cell, pulling a hunting knife from its sheath on his belt.

"Tomorrow," he begins, extending the blade through the gap in the bars, hilt first.

"If shit goes south... if she shows up and you ain't yet hangin'... you'll at least have something."

Edwin walks forward to take the knife, but Wilmore kneels instead and slips the blade into his brother's boot, tucking it away and out of sight. He stands again and manages a smile. Edwin smiles, too.

"You know, you could just let me go," he says, hoping to lighten the mood a little.

Wilmore chuckles.

"Believe me," he says with a genuine grin, the first one he's shed in weeks. "If Cora walked in through that door right now, I'd string her up myself. She's the villain here. But instead, I've gotta hang my baby brother."

Edwin and Wilmore lock eyes then, and Wilmore's voice falters as he continues.

"But I took an oath to be the lawman of this town, Edwin, and these people need retribution. They have the right to it. And unfortunately, the blood's on your hands, too.

"Like you said, you brought her here."

Part Three

THE MORNING IS A BLUR, warped and out of focus.

A small group gathers near a grove of trees just a mile or so from the northern edge of town.

A preacher man, an old leather Bible in his hands, reads scripture as a eulogy. Edwin tries to place it, to dial in.

Matthew 13. The parable of the weeds.

27 ... And the servants of the master of the house came and said to him, 'Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have weeds?' 28 He said to them, 'An enemy has done this.' So the servants said to him, 'Then do you want us to go and gather them?' 29 But he said, 'No, lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them. 30 Let both grow together until the harvest, and at harvest time, I will tell the reapers, 'Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn...''

Edwin, his hands bound behind his back, listens to the preacher's words. His eyes burn with tears. He never thought this life would end this way. Truthfully, he had always been a bit more bad than good, such was the way of things at times. But he never took an innocent life.

And now he'll die for six.

The men with the rope shove him to a stool over which hangs a thick tree branch. The people gathered to look do so with cold dispassion, awaiting the numb reprisal that comes with vengeful death—even the death of a man they think a killer. There's rarely satisfaction in it. It changes nothing, only adds another line to the coffin maker's ledger.

Edwin steps onto the stool and elevates himself above the crowd. He sees a few men with rifles standing near the back of things, their eyes on the horizon. A horse grazes nearby as well, the cares of man little worry to it.

The Hangman, hidden beneath a foreboding black hood, his muscles thicker than the branch Edwin is to hang from, takes the rope from the men and throws it skillfully to the sky. It returns, dangling from the limb above.

The men put the noose over Edwin's head, check to see that the knot is true. The Hangman pulls the rope taut until Edwin can only stand on tiptoes and ties it off around the trunk. The noose feels tight already, kissing skin like a viper's teeth. Edwin holds back his tears. He won't let them see him cry.

Wilmore stands near the preacher, unable to really look at Edwin. But Edwin looks at him, his watery eyes filled with fire and determination.

And fear.

"You keep an eye out for her, Sheriff!" he shouts to his brother. "Day and night. You understand me? Just because I'm dead doesn't mean she won't come lookin'. And if she finds out what's been done to me... there'll be hell to pay."

Wilmore just shakes his head in silent apology, in bitter denial. The preacher closes the Bible and folds his hands in a short, final prayer. The words are lost on Edwin, his senses already succumbing to that long and restless sleep, that awakening in the next life.

One of the men nods to the Hangman, who steps over and, without ceremony, kicks the stool out from under Edwin.

Edwin drops, but his neck doesn't give. His legs kick, his neck red and angry against the rope. Tears now stream down his face unhindered; he twists and struggles uselessly, life seeping from him with every attempt at an inhale.

Wilmore looks away, his heart breaking.

Edwin's vision clouds, darkness closing in.

And yet...

In the near distance, on the edge of failing sight. A figure rises forward from the

field beyond the crowd. She is dressed in white, the sun radiating off her like a pearl. Edwin is at once both elated and afraid.

His vision fades, his throat collapsing. He screams inside, wanting to cry out a warning, the last sound he'll ever make, for no one sees Cora approaching behind Wilmore, the claws on her gnarled hand sharp and at the ready.

Edwin falls to the ground, sputtering and gasping for air. His fingers, like fishhooks, tear at the slackened rope around his neck.

Wilmore is by his side, ax in hand, having just cut the rope, and he helps pull the noose from his brother's neck. Then, he pulls his knife from Edwin's boot and uses it to cut the binding from his wrists. Finally, he hands the knife to Edwin, who scrambles to his feet.

"What the hell?" Edwin cries, confusion still rocking his foggy head. "Where is she? What's—"

Wilmore points.

Edwin follows his finger and sees Cora in the center of the clearing, bodies scattered around her like constellations, each telling a story as old as myth.

There's the Hangman bent in half the wrong way, his ribcage opened to the sun like a blooming flower. Here's Henry Johns, the O'Brien's former houseboy, as innocent and unwitting as the family he once served.

And there lies the Preacher with Cora perched on top of him, a bloody yet beautiful vulture.

She's chewing on the man's heart.

"Persephone," Edwin breathes, barely more than a whisper.

She looks up, blood around her mouth and chin, and smiles with ruby teeth.

"My love," she exclaims, dropping the heart and rising. She rushes to him.

Wilmore staggers back; tripping on his own feet, he topples to the ground.

Persephone launches herself at Edwin, wrapping her arms around his neck. He catches her as she plants a crimson kiss full on his lips.

Wilmore watches in horror as the two embrace.

Edwin gathers himself, the taste of rusted iron pulling him back to humanity. He pushes Persephone away from him with a violent shove. She stumbles back but doesn't fall, forever lithe, and looks at him with big, pained eyes. Edwin spits blood from his mouth.

"You are not my love," Edwin growls, loss settling in.

Persephone—or is it Cora still in there?—looks hurt, her brow furrowed in child-like confusion.

"What do you mean?" she asks innocently.

"Cora was sweet and kind and wouldn't hurt a soul. You are nothing like her. You're a monster."

Persephone steps back; her hackles seem to rise like a threatened cat. She narrows her eyes.

"Don't be naive, Edwin. You knew what I was when we started this. And you loved it."

Edwin sets his jaw, shakes his head.

"Never."

But somewhere inside, he knows that he's lying.

"They all love it," she continues, her voice a sour purr. "You sad little men. You weak little gods. Cora is precious and light and toothache sweet, and it works to draw you in because you think it's what you want. But deep down..."

And Persephone's eyes harden then, anger rising, all traces of Cora gone.

"You always want me bad."

"Go back to hell!" yells Edwin, his control of the situation, however tenuous, completely shattering. Persephone just snarls at him, begins to pace like a lioness in her cage. Wilmore has yet to stand; he clings to the planet as if it'll spin away from him at any moment.

"I love you, Edwin Hardy," Persephone spits. "I came back for you. Our hearts beat as one."

Edwin lifts the knife in his hand as if remembering it only for the first time and points it menacingly at Persephone.

"The only heart you have is in your stomach."

Persephone cackles at this, a guttural, hellish sound, and tosses the idea from her.

"I am more than my desires, darling. More than just my curse."

"You are a curse!" cries Edwin, taking a step closer, his meager blade still outstretched. "An anathema. A scourge upon this realm!" But the fire leaves his eyes with this final admonition. He lowers his arm, his shoulders sagging. A sadness overtakes him then.

"You weren't meant to be here this long," he says softly. "And it was my fault. I know that. My weakness led to this. I wanted you here—I needed you here. But just look at yourself."

Persephone, the Dread Queen, Bride of Hades, snow-white in skin and dress save for ribbons of carnage, clenches her fists and breathes deep, her chest heaving.

Edwin's voice grows grim and deep, his eyes hardening, building up the strength to do what needs to be done.

"You should've stayed in the under-realm," he growls.

"I stayed here for you!" screams Persephone, her eyes burning with betrayal.

"I know!" Edwin yells back, his voice breaking, tears rushing up to meet him. He shudders, an uninvited sob that racks his chest.

He takes a deep breath.

"I know," he whispers. Then he brings his shoulders back, his chest strong. Standing tall, Edwin lifts the knife again. His arm doesn't even shake.

"But I almost died for you," Edwin continues, his voice now steady. "You won't hurt anyone else again."

Persephone grins then, a terrible grin, all blood-red and bone-white, more wraith than woman now.

"And who's going to stop me?" she taunts.

Edwin's breath quickens, his heart racing. She's called him out. There's no going back.

Persephone bares her teeth and charges to face her former lover. But right on her first few steps, a shot rings out. Persephone spins from the force of the blast, howling in pain.

Dirt and grass, she hits the earth hard and immediately begins writhing in pain, steam rising off her.

Edwin looks over, and Wilmore is standing beside him now, a smoking shotgun in his hand. He looks at his brother and shrugs, almost apologetic in a way.

"Rock salt," he mutters. "I, uh... had a feeling we might need it."

Edwin looks back to Persephone, screeching and rolling on the ground in pain. Hurt cuts through Edwin as well, unbridled. He knows it shouldn't, but it wrecks

him to see her like this now.

Still, he knows what has to be done.

"Give me the ax," Edwin says. Wilmore looks at him.

"What?"

Edwin shoots him a cold stare, and Wilmore understands. He bends down to retrieve the ax from where he first fell and hands it to Edwin.

"Are you sure you can do this?" he asks. Edwin looks at him again, sadness in his eyes, his jaw clenched.

"No," he admits. "But does that matter?"

The brothers walk over to Persephone, who has grown more docile now, whimpering like a wounded animal. The two men tower over her, resolute.

"I'm so sorry, my love," Edwin says.

Persephone looks up at him, her face covered in blood and dirt, her eyes wet with tears. She snarls, her teeth a jagged grin.

"You're not sorry. But you will be when my husband comes looking for you."

Wilmore shoots Edwin a troubled glare, but Edwin just lifts a hand and averts his eyes.

Not now, says the gesture. But soon enough...

And then he raises the ax over his head, the silver blade glinting in the morning sun. His aim on Cora's neck is true. It has to be; Persephone won't give him a chance for a second try.

With a sharp inhale, he steadies his breath.

And lets the ax fall.

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