

## Moonlight on the Gallows

by Scott Cimarusti

The oblivious moon peers blindly down at the young woman as she weeps a silver rain alone in the shadow of the gallows, a soul's worth of tears trickling down her cheeks.

The soulless structure before her thrums with the echoes of a thousand desperate pleas of the condemned and the wailing entreaties of the bereft.

Even the wind still whispers of the impotent prayers uttered here, chilling her ears and her hollowed-out heart.

If this composition of wood and sorrow were ever to be dismantled, the vacant ground would remain forever blighted by a seemingly endless river of tears and a cacophony of lamentations.

For it is despair that reigns here, and reigns alone; immune to the machinations and whims of mortal men dispensing their brand of justice. It is impervious even to time, the only true healer of body and spirit, which is forever merely a bystander here.

The young woman wipes away her tears with the heels of her trembling hands in a quick gesture of defiance, as if she can will away the grief that has a stranglehold on her heart.

At midday tomorrow, her beloved will walk the thirteen steps to the platform where a noose awaits his neck—the neck she has lovingly kissed more times than she could ever count. And with a pull of a lever by the executioner's hand, he will be taken from her forever.

Though not if she has her way.

She reaches into the folds of her cloak to retrieve the cloth pouch that the old woman gave her not an hour ago in exchange for the strange silver coin that she had found in the box buried in her mother's vegetable garden.

The coin with the familiar letters forming arcane words in a tongue similar to hers: LIBERTY and IN GOD WE TRUST on one side.

On the other side, UNITED STATES OF AMERICA and HALF DOLLAR, whatever those words meant.

On the LIBERTY side of the coin, there is the profile of a neatly groomed man with what she regards as purpose in his etched silver gaze. On the flip side, the likeness of a majestic bird of some kind—similar to the hawks that prey upon her messenger pigeons. The bird is partially obscured by what looks like a shield. In one talon it grasps a leafy branch; in the other, a cluster of arrows.

Like those wielded by the fabled Archers of Laummoren in an age long past.

The crone had cackled with delight upon laying her rheumy eyes upon the otherworldly silver coin that the young woman had offered as payment for the promised contents of the cloth pouch.

Before the exchange could be completed, though, the hag had abruptly jerked from the young woman's reach the promised pouch, one milky cataract-shrouded eye regarding her buyer's eagerness with malicious glee.

"Ye must wait until the full moon is at its exact peak," the old woman croaked, her toothless maw curled into a mirthless grin. "Before ye sprinkle the contents of the pouch 'neath the gallows... Otherwise the spell won't work."

The young woman had nodded in acknowledgement that she had understood the crone's instructions. Then she snatched the cloth pouch from the old woman's skeletal fingers and dashed out into the night, relieved to be beyond the hag's probing eyes.

Little did she know...

And now, with the skull-faced moon almost directly overhead, the young woman stands before the gallows that is to be her beloved's reckoning, pouch in hand.

The young woman creeps under the gallows into the impenetrable blackness there. She thinks she hears whispered pleas and curses in this hallowed and haunted place.

The minutes drag on, and the young woman grows increasingly impatient waiting for the stubborn moon to ascend to its zenith. She is worried that her father will find her bed empty during his nightly pacing when his rheumatism keeps him awake and he haunts the halls of their humble home like a restless ghost.

She peers out from under the gallows up at the leering moon, the minutes slipping through her fingers like parched garden soil.

Old Man Moon must be close enough to its peak, she reasons, trying to convince herself that the crazy old hag's directions were merely the ravings of an addled mind. Magic was magic, wasn't it?

Besides, she doesn't know how much longer she can listen to the phantom lamentations echoing inside her head.

She loosens the drawstring of the cloth pouch and after recoiling from the rank reek within, sprinkles the ashen powder directly beneath the trapdoor of the gallows. Then she pockets the empty pouch and scurries out from under the gallows—grateful to be rid of the disembodied voices.

And she races for home beneath the ever-watchful gaze of the indifferent moon.

\*\*\*

The moon has long set when the young woman finds herself standing before the gallows again in the brightness of midday. A throng of villagers surrounds her.

Silhouetted against the cornflower blue sky, two figures stand atop the gallows platform—one is the village magistrate, a balding and mustachioed man bloated by self-importance, the other a taller and more imposing figure hooded in black.

The hangman.

The young woman shades her eyes with her hand from the merciless sun as she follows the progress of a horse-driven wagon approaching. The wagon is too far away to identify its passengers, but she already knows who's aboard.

It is her beloved.

The young man wrongly convicted, she believes, of assaulting the mayor's son in an effort to preserve her honor from the entitled young heir apparent's groping and insistent hands.

In a just world, such an infraction would not carry with it the penalty of death at the end of a hangman's noose. But in a small village on the outskirts of nowhere in a lawless and chaotic world fallen from grace, such injustices are woefully commonplace.

Which is why she resorted to calling upon the crazy old crone to restore her version of justice and save her beloved from an unjust and premature death.

The wagon is closer now, and she can see the young man, his hands bound, as he is flanked on either side by the mayor's sheriff and a deputy. Her beloved's straw-colored hair is a radiant halo in the midday summer sun.

A morbid chorus of both cheers and booing erupts from the macabre crowd gathered around the gallows to witness the theft of a young man's life.

The young woman endures the cacophony with her head held high, the barest hint of a knowing smile curling the corners of her lips.

Before she realizes it, the wagon has stopped within a few feet of the gallows, and with the unceremonious assistance of the mayor's sheriff and his deputy, her beloved is escorted down from the wagon and up the thirteen steps to his impending demise, his hands still bound behind him.

The blowhard magistrate makes his customary proclamation, his words lost to the young woman's ears—for her attention is solely upon her beloved as their gazes lock.

She offers him a reassuring smile.

Then a silken black hood eclipses the young man's face, and the hangman loops the noose around his victim's neck.

The impatient crowd utters a collective gasp, punctuated by a few eager cheers.

The magistrate then issues his official condemnation and nods toward the hangman.

The young woman's heart is a trapped bird fluttering in her chest. She resists the urge to cover her eyes.

The hangman pauses as if for dramatic effect to tease the bloodthirsty crowd.

Then he pulls the lever with a menacing wooden creak, and the trapdoor slams downward.

The crowd is silent. Dozens of pairs of eyes widen in disbelief, their jaws slack. The young woman covers her incredulous smile with her hands.

The young man has not dropped through the trapdoor's opening with a whip-crack of his neck snapping, as expected.

Rather, he is instead standing in exactly the same place, his feet hovering in the air where the trapdoor had been only seconds ago before it dropped.

An awed hush lingers as the magistrate and the hangman regard each other accusingly, as if each expects the other to know what to do about this bizarre development.

The young woman is scanning the crowd expectantly. She is counting on the collective uncertainty to provide her with a window of opportunity to rescue her beloved. She can see everyone is still spellbound by the unbelievable sight of the young man somehow hovering in empty air, the slack noose still around his neck, his hooded head swiveling back and forth in confusion, no doubt wondering why he still draws breath in this world.

The young woman reaches behind her to withdraw the long thin-bladed knife tucked in her belt, mustering up the courage to race up the gallows steps and cut the rope from her beloved's neck.

And, if necessary, plunge the blade into the belly of anyone who tries to stop her.

She has taken her first step, tightening her grip around the knife's handle when a voice from the crowd cries out.

"By the gods!"

The young woman raises her eyes to find her beloved has begun to convulse violently, his legs kicking wide arcs over empty air.

Slicing through the expectant silence, she can hear the young man's choked gasps for air, though the noose still hangs limply upon his right shoulder.

The young woman's feet are frozen in place as she struggles to comprehend what is happening, how he can be strangling at the end of a slack noose.

Then, out of the corner of her eye, she spots the withered old crone glancing at her sideways from among the crowd of gaping onlookers.

"I told ye," the hag giggles. "I told ye to wait until the moon was fully at its peak!"

Then the old woman begins to cackle wildly as the young man's flailing kicks become more feeble as his life ebbs away.

Instead of a quick and relatively painless death by a broken neck, her beloved has suffered a slow and agonizing strangulation dangling at the end of a slack noose.

All because the young woman had been too impatient to follow the old woman's precise instructions regarding the contents of the cloth pouch.

The crone's laughter now fills the young woman's ears, and she can feel herself slipping toward the black yawning chasm of madness.

She still holds the long-bladed knife in her hand, and she now knows what to do with it.

Her eyes never leaving the face of the withered old hag still cackling with malevolence, the young woman turns the blade around in her hands toward her own belly.