

THE GALLOWES

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“E,” guessed Adrian. The strategy was simple, every word needs at least one vowel and “A” was a miss. He had already fallen behind and knew he had precious few guesses. Another vowel seemed the logical choice.

“E works,” said Sable, as she flipped her blonde hair and looked down at her notebook with no pity or remorse for the man sentenced to the Gallows.

Forty thousand unblinking eyes were glued to the two figures at the top of two, thirty foot pillars. On one pillar stood a hooded man armed with a dagger. On the pillar inches away from him stood Thad, naked and fearful. A thick rope hooked to a crossbeam ten yards above, hung down and twisted into a noose that wrapped tightly around Thad’s neck. Right after the first letter was deemed incorrect, the pillar he rested his feet on had dropped down a few feet and the slack in the rope tightened, while the other pillar remained the same height. Now, the endless rows of thousands and thousands of spectators crammed into the plaza watched, captivated, as the hooded guard skillfully carved two large *E*’s into Thad’s chest. The first right above his right breast and the second cut further toward the center, over his sternum.

Adrian knew the word had ten letters in it and with his recent success had learned that it contained two *E*’s, one in the second position and one in the fourth. He pondered his next move, knowing that every guess was crucial. He couldn’t identify the word yet so he decided to proceed with as common a letter as he could think of. “S,” he said, as he dragged the letter out, clearly unsure of himself.

“Nope, no S,” replied Sable with a thin smile spreading across her face. She knew all too well that every false letter brought her closer to victory.

With a horrible creaking sound the pillar that supported Thad’s feet, and kept the life saving slack in the rope, jerked down. The crowd gasped, the rope tightened and although his feet were still planted firmly on the flat surface of the pillar, he didn’t think they would remain there for long. He had watched the Gallows many times growing up, and knew that it only took a few incorrect letters before the victim was standing on their toes gasping for breath.

Thad had always hated The Gallows; he thought it was such a sadistic form of capital punishment. The lucky ones would escape with only one word carved deep into their chest and a scar to remind them of their crime. The others were left hanging in the plaza, in front of thousands of people. Their bodies would stay there for days, sometimes weeks. They were only cut down

once it was time for the next punishment. The king himself had designed The Gallows before Thad was born, so he had grown up watching men, women and children being tried for their crimes against the nation.

The king prided himself on being just. “Before The Gallows, there was no chance at redemption,” the king had said, “I could punish much more severely, but I like to give everyone a chance.” But Thad had never believed that The Gallows were just. The king assigned the words, and the person being hanged was never allowed to buy letters, only members of the audience were able to. On top of that, every letter cost so much, that only royalty and the really wealthy could afford them. Some of the accused were murderers or rapists and the rich would buy letters they knew were wrong, just to secure their demise. But most of the victims were poor and starving to death and had only been caught stealing something as small as a loaf of bread. Often times in cases like that, the wealthy would spend thousands of dollars buying letters and playing into the game the king made out of it. They took pride in their ability to put together words, and some rich men had even gone broke participating in the Gallows, but kept playing, either addicted to the rush, or desperately trying to win their money back. That was the beauty of it; there was always someone else to punish.

Damn it, Adrian thought to himself, but he was determined to succeed. *There must be more vowels, since the two E's are in the first half of the word. A...E...* “I,” Adrian finally asked, “is there an I?” Sable’s smile faded from her face, but she knew that a few correct guesses were inevitable.

Thad let out a shriek of pain as the hooded guard slashed a deep “I” into the left side of his chest. He knew that he had been assigned a long word, which is usually a blessing. The longer the word the more correct letters there could be, which gave him better odds of survival. However, the pain of the third correct letter made Thad feel queasy. The guard had cut the “I” especially deep and his mind shot back to a particularly gruesome Gallows he watched as a kid, when a woman had been assigned such a long word that she bled out before the entire word had been formed. The rumor was even the king was disturbed by it because, since then, the words have never been more than twelve letters. Thad prayed that the king remembered that particular Gallows as well he did.

“O,” Adrian continued down his list of vowels in the hope that he would be able to start seeing a word form. To his delight “O” was correct and fit in the ninth spot, right after the “I”. “Okay now N,” he said, this time with more confidence, banking on the common use of the suffix “-ion”. Five letters down, five to go.

The guard avoided Thad’s pleading eyes as he went to work with his curved blade. Thad had lost a lot of blood and although his feet were still safely on the pillar and the rope still had enough slack to allow breath to enter

his lungs, the addition of the “O” and “N” left him sputtering and drooling. Blood and defeat seemed to drip from every opening on his body.

Adrian finished the last, cold, drop of coffee and got up to refill his cup. The coffee machine at home was much better than the one he had at school, which made his visits all the more enjoyable. As he poured the thick steamy liquid into his mug he heard Sable yell from the other room to hurry up. He knew he better get back to the game. So he skipped the cream and sugar and carefully lifted his drink out of the kitchen.

There was still no obvious word forming from Adrian’s first few guesses. Adrian searched Sable’s electric blue eyes for any clue as to what the word might be, but she was clever and could hide her secret well. He decided to go with another random letter.

Another sickening noise and the pillar dropped a few more precious feet. The pain from the rope was almost as bad as the open wounds on his chest. It scratched and rubbed the skin on Thad’s neck and under his chin raw. The more he writhed in pain, the more agonizing it was. His feet were still in contact with the pillar, so he was alive, at least for now. As panic rushed over him, his heart pounded, causing fresh, dark blood to pump out of his mangled chest. He couldn’t die. There was so much left to do to, he had never seen the mermaids his dad used to tell him about. “Don’t believe everything you hear Thad,” He could almost hear his father’s deep hearty voice, “They are ladies on bottom and fish on top, and take it from me, they are *ug-a-ly*.” That joke always made Thad laugh. He knew his father wasn’t watching the Gallows, obviously too ashamed to have a son on trial. Thad himself had moved past shame and on to hatred. He could feel his insides boiling over how helpless he was and he let out as loud a scream as he could. But all he produced was a whimper and a string of bloody saliva. Not even the guard next to him heard it.

Thad looked around the plaza, out at the faces of the spectators. Some he knew well but others were strangers. He wondered if they pitied him. Could they see how brutal the punishment of the Gallows was? Or were they desensitized by all the violence? Were they so afraid to step out of line that they didn’t dare show compassion for a criminal? He thought about how many of them he had swindled. He had even become famous among the other criminals for his saying, “All that glitters is not gold, but I’ll sell it like it is.” He finally got caught when he tried to sell a fake gold necklace to a wealthy woman, who just happened to be the king’s daughter. Did all these people watching wish him dead? None of that mattered now; the only thing that could save him was the next few letters.

“C,D,P,T.” Three out of four correct. A big swing for Adrian but, but he still had two very crucial letters to guess. Adrian and Sable both knew it was coming to an end. _EDE_PTION. There was definitely a word forming, but Adrian was down to his last missed letter.

Thad was on his tip toes, barely holding himself up from being choked out by the rope. He had three more deep lacerations on his chest. The guard must have grown impatient because at first he carved the letters with the precision of a butcher, but now he just sawed absentmindedly at Thad's chest. The letters were barely legible. Blood poured down from his torso to his legs and onto the pillar. Mothers in the audience covered their children's eyes, afraid that there would be another gory, premature end to the Gallows. Thad's throat was so raw and chaffed that he tried to adjust his footing. When he did, he slipped on the puddle of his own blood and his feet were separated from the pillar. The rope tugged at his throat, suffocating him as he struggled to regain his footing on the smeared bloody surface.

Thad's eyes grew heavy and he could feel the warmth beginning to leave his body. It was almost peaceful. He could escape from the horrible world of the Gallows and float along in his own mind. There was no reality anymore, no Gallows, no guard, no crowd, no king, just peace. He had accepted it, no more than a few minutes and he could be free. But then, a horrible pain in his chest ripped him from his blissful daze and back into the plaza. He could hear the crowd roaring, one giant beast; growling, screaming, encouraging, warning, cheering. *Cheering, or were they? Why would they be cheering?* He wondered. *Could they be that happy that I'm dead? Could I be alive? Or am I just imagining it?* Thad's mind raced trying to make sense of what was going on. But before he could figure it out, he felt the rope snap and his legs crash down onto the flat surface of the pillar. There Thad lay, in a puddle of his own blood and sweat and vomit. Closer to death and yet more alive than he had ever been. He looked down at the word "REDEMPTION" written in blood and pus across his chest. He was free. Somehow he had gotten lucky; someone had guessed the word, some guardian, somewhere, had saved his life.

"Redemption!"

"Ah you got it," Sable smiled sheepishly across the table at Adrian, "I almost had you though."

"Yeah you're getting better with words Sable," said Adrian with a wink, "pretty soon I won't ever be able to win."

Sable blushed; proud of the compliment her big brother had given her. "Can we play again?" she asked excitedly.

"How about we play tomorrow, I'm all hang-manned out for the day," said Adrian

"Okay," Sable said, disappointedly, and ran off to go find some new words to play with.