

The Dark

The clouds gorge themselves on the day's heat. The cooling dark draws out the warning spark of their queasiness. The blade's refraction of that spark saves my life.

I skip into the shadow, hopscotching blows to its throat, chest, groin, and kneecap. The shadow evaporates, leaving a crumpled human in its wake. I tilt his face up, looking at his piercings. Selecting one, I remove it and add it to my sweatshirt.

Some make a big deal of their defeat, my wearing their badge, a trophy in itself.

From my experience, the line between luck, chance, and fate is hazy at best. You choose. Life happens. You choose again. Night is risky, but day is no sure thing either. A sure thing, anyone I come across in the dark poses a choice. I do not look for trouble. It clings to me, seeking me out.

One afternoon, a young boy approaches me, and hands me a small box. It holds a stainless steel *H* stud accompanied by a note consisting of one word. *Honor*.

I have no piercings, not even my ears. Wearing it on my sweatshirt does not seem right. Dissing it somehow. Choice made, I head to the free clinic.

On leaving the clinic, I stop on the verge of the street. The evening sun flashes on steel. I am aware they are watching, seeing them from the corners of my eyes. If I try to look directly at them, they fade into the scenery.

The shadows are getting longer. Time to go. Considering, I choose the shortest route home. Shorter is not always quickest. Depends.

This choice put me in this alley in the deep dark.

I hop onto the ledge.

The steel door presses into my back

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My body dissolves into the black fat line formed by the edge of the brick. Unsure of what triggered this choice, I wait. I close my eyes, putting out the moist gleam emanating from my eyes, severing the strongest link to my existence.

The first passes without recognition of my presence.

More come.

Gideon's voice slices across my taut nerves. "This is good enough."

I cut slits with my eyelids. Wrong choice.

A kid of a guy is bound around the waist by a rope. No doubt. The Philistines.

Gideon, their leader, holds the other end of the rope.

The Philistines are the monarchs of East Estonia. Any transgressor is paraded through the streets with a rope tied around his waist. A public warning. Releasing none alive sends a message to anyone contemplating crossing them.

I have always kept my distance. Being this close to primal evil makes my soul vomit.

I am sure Gideon knows my reputation. Those I dance with always ask me first. None wears the Philistine mark. I sometimes wonder if he does not send them against me as a test. If defeat at my hands keeps even one from Gideon's corruption, I am ok with it.

A Philistine steps up, drawing his blade. He grasps the kid by the hair, pulling his head sharply back.

"Crime: Defiance," says Gideon. "Punishment: Death."

The blade slices with excruciating slowness across the kid's throat. The wound is just deep enough to open his windpipe without severing the jugular.

The kid's life gurgles out with the same excruciating slowness.

The Philistine soldier wipes his blade on a square of white silk.

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I know that square will be flying high from the Philistine judgment pole across the street from the police station.

I seal my eyelid slits. Their work complete, I hope. A futile thought.

Cool breath blows across my cheek.

I expend every ounce of energy I have to keep my eyes closed. I feel the touch of light on my face.

He holds me there by the front of my sweatshirt. A single rough finger touches my chin, pushing my head to the left. A soft chuckle and he is gone.

I stand. No, not standing. My legs are not holding me up. Only the strength of the steel door behind me keeps me erect.

Daylight's early greyness arrives before I can make my body move. The fumes of Gideon's presence finally clear from my mind. I skirt the kid's body, and walk out of the alley. Swinging into the street, I suck in air, the first breath in an eternity.

Why? Why had he let me go? I am a witness. The realization of the trap springs on me. If I say nothing, do nothing, I am just as guilty as he is. If I come forward, I am dead.

Choice made. I change direction. Without hesitation, I walk into the police station, and ask for the chief officer on duty.

I make my statement.

They offer protection.

I laugh. "You are kidding, right?"

The sun is on high when I leave the police station. A sharp snap draws my attention across the street; a square of white with a rusty smear is pulled taut by the brisk breeze.

Another choice made, I walk across to the pole, and release the knot in the rope.

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The white square flutters down.

I catch it and unpin it from the rope. Folding it into a smaller square, I hold it between my knees to free up my hands. I remove the *H* from my ear. Positioning the square over my heart, I pierce it with the *H*, and attach it to my sweatshirt.

Picking up the length of rope, I tie it around my waist, draping the free end over my shoulder.

The Philistines' home base is the Estonian Hotel. Six blocks away.

I take to the middle of the street at my usual fast clip walk. No point in drawing this out.

The corners of my eyes fill with them until they spill out into the street, clogging it from gutter to gutter, no longer a part of the scenery. Reaching the hotel, I am held captive at their center.

The knife-wielding Philistine soldier steps out of the Estonian, and holds the door open.

Gideon follows. "To what do I owe this show of affection?"

"You cannot have her," calls a voice from the crowd.

"Have who?" says Gideon.

The crowd parts.

I walk forward, holding the end of the rope out to Gideon.

The false smile slips from his face.

"I gave my statement to the police," I say, "I am not good at waiting."

The soldier reaches for the rope.

Gideon strikes him. "She is mine, only mine."

I say, "I did not come here to give myself to you."

"Then why are you here?"

"I made a choice. This is where it landed me. I am ready for the next one."

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A voice near me sends a warning. “You may kill her, but we will all stand against you. To the last,”

“You are through. Leave,” calls another voice from the crowd.

The crowd takes up the chant, “Leave. Leave. Leave.”

Gideon feels the bite of his own trap. Looking into their faces, he still sees the fear, now blurred with courage and determination. No matter what, it will never be the same.

His choice. Stepping up to me, Gideon unties the rope from around my waist, and disappears back into the hotel.

The Philistine soldiers follow him.

I turn to them. Face after face, there they are, no longer hiding. I feel a tug on my sleeve.

The little boy that had delivered the *H* smiles up at me.

Realizing I am still holding the end of the rope, I drop it and offer my hand.

He grabs on and pulls me toward home.

Sirens grow from the distance.

By the time the squad cars rocket past, all have faded back into the scenery. The corners of my eyes, filled with them.