

Choices

Gianna Binder

"I don't need to repeat myself, do I, child?"

Her voice crashes against the obsidian walls, flooding the hall in her chilling indifference. The steel outsoles of her boots hammer against the floor as she stalks closer, but the layers of leather she barricades herself in don't anchor her down like I wish they would. Instead, they keep us prisoner from a sun-kissed past which I desperately claw at. I don't have fingertips anymore. I do not have an identity.

My concentration breaks as shadows scamper at her feet, unveiling my mother. Through a wall of tears, I see mom's face transform with the slightest curl of her lip as dad made a joke to distract me from my gashed knee. Although she tried to hide it, her cheeks ballooned under the pressure and burst in a steam of contagious laughter. I will never forget that night. I will never forget my dad's gentle movements as he ran his hand over the wound to heal it. Or how, even through their narrow slits, her laughing eyes reflected the late summer's Sun and held me paralyzed in a cloud of warmth. It was as if I had never been kissed by the sunset's golden lips. She reassured me with her kind blue eyes. They showed me there was nothing to be afraid of. There was so much blood, and I was terrified. But she told me it only showed the strength of my body, its resilience and determination. "The warm blood that runs down your leg," she said as my dad calmly washed it away, "reflects the warmth and endurance of your heart. Only one drop depicts the magic in your veins..."

But as the dam begins to tumble and a tear carves down my face, the illusion washes away. The ghost of my happiness is replaced with a gaunt face and Glasgow smile. Dank air fills my lungs instead of the fresh evening flowers.

The tear dives.

It ravages on impact.

The remnants of my childhood splay on the stone. They are defenceless to her hardened stare.

I am defenceless.

Nothing reflects from her eyes.

The dam collapses, and with it, my control. A symphony of voices rushes into my head and crescendos in a flurry, drowning out my thoughts.

Don't be selfish.

This is on you.

You've already done too much. It's never going to stop.

I dig my nails into my palms, reopening the floodgates-

She is innocent.

-to glove my hands in blood,

Do it for the greater good.

I lavish in the protection it provides against her cold-

This is all your fault.

-and its sweet, metallic smell. It reminds me of our night.

Don't hurt us anymore,

please.

But I am numb to pain which only seems to echo my heart's more.

You are a monster.

I concentrate hard, trying to fish out my own as voices roar in my head. I try to focus on the sound of my blood dripping on the floor.

Drip

I indulge in its rich colour, deep and full of life. How I wish to see colour again.

Drip

I marvel at the ocean it creates, as its rivers flow and conquer more land. I imagine a sea of buoyant families living in it.

Drip

I salivate at the idea of territory I own, a game I dominate, a place where I am in control, unlike my mind. Unlike anything I have ever known.

Her footsteps stop, but the torment doesn't.

Drop.

How long will you let this happen?

I wonder when my civilization will fall.

Mother towers over two kneeling figures, one smaller and more skittish than the other. The second is still, solid, and smug. I've become familiar with this tableau. I have yet to see its beauty.

A whimper escapes from the locked lips of the unassuming figure, and I have a primitive instinct to protect the trembling girl to Mother's right. I don't know her name, but she must be about my age. Older? Maybe sixteen? No point in asking. I'll know soon enough.

It's as if the girl is trying to furrow herself in the empty air, slumped forward and keeping her head down. Yet, despite her matted hair hanging wildly about her face, her large, shimmering eyes plea endlessly with me. In them is an uncontrolled fear; she was hunted and snared. But also, a tint of defeat, submission. She knows she cannot hide anymore.

As a placeholder, until she tells me, I will call her Bunny.

I look at the mass of a man to Mother's left, sitting upright, shoulders back and confident. There is a haughty and savage look to Father's bottomless eyes which

frightens me: I am afraid I will fall into their disorienting depths and be trapped for eternity. I've fallen before, and I am still struggling to stand.

Father is staring at me, unbothered by the severity of the situation. I shudder as his gaze snakes up my body, lazily, carelessly. How is he so calm? It's infuriating. Nonetheless, I know his outline is deceiving: the bundles of thin rags he cages himself in account for his size but, beneath, he is emancipated. Like me, he's been here for months. Unlike him, my starvation is not physical.

"Not choosing," she lets the smooth pitch of her words trickle and dance into our ears, but just long enough for her to snatch it up again. "Is a choice."

The silence she gives us is not uncomfortable. It's unbearable.

I glare at her with a clenched jaw attempting to look defiant, but the reflection in my soiled memories dampens my confidence; I look like I am trying to birth a watermelon.

There's an element to his eyes I've never noticed before. Something hard, impenetrable. Like glass, but opaque and black. They don't have the iciness Mother's does. Otherwise, I'd still have hope of thawing them. No, I'd have to break him.

"You betrayed me," he once said.

Apparently, I betrayed you. I know what I did. I just, I don't understand why I couldn't. It was nothing big. I just talked with the neighbours, "Thank you." Sure, you ~~resented~~ resent them, but that was years ago. They never even did anything to you. It was just an opinion. I guess I can't have neighbours like I can't have friends unless you choose them. I also cannot have an opinion.

Mother or father, neither gives me a choice.

I walk towards him, carefully sidestepping my aquatic civilization. I can't destroy that as well. I picture cupping his head in my hands, forcing him to look up at me. Daring him to look past our blood staining his hair. Daring him to really see; to see me as a separate human being, not an attachment of his hip. I imagine unwrapping the rags layer by layer, exposing his ego to the anger that flows through my veins, *the magic*, my power. I would stare into his eyes, piercing them with my own hardened heart and breathe in as his life flows through my veins. It wouldn't hurt like it normally does. He is already in my head, after all.

Instead, it does hurt.

Bunny lets out a sharp squeal and slumps to the floor. I stumble backwards and cup my own head in my own hands, letting my own blood stain my own hair. And I scream. *Our* pain echoes through the hall in harmony, and it rings in *our* ears. My head explodes in agony as my mind splits for the millionth time, letting in a new conscious, a new voice to fight for my thoughts. And I crumble to my knees, kneeling in front of Mother. 'Surrender,' my body begs. Another pitiful sight, I am well aware, but I've learnt to give up on stifling the pain. It only makes the voices scream louder, and each time, they are louder, and louder, and louder. Until I pass out.

At least I can stand back up once the screaming stops and walk, instead of being carried, to my room where I am being kept, prisoner. There are no more tiles left for me to count, no more bricks left for me to count, not even a single window in my prison to soak in the summer's Sun. At least I can count them on my way back and imagine warmth when I see the night's stars.

I tilt my head up, locking my eyes with hers. I want Mother to see me as I scream. I want Mother to see the pain frozen on my face, the pain in my voice, the pain carved into my

eyes. I am not crying anymore. I want her to see an icy clear path into my *warm* heart. I want to test her *endurance* as she runs it. Can she survive?

But I am grossly disappointed, while all the *Endarkened* warriors standing guard are hunched, covering their ears, both of my parents are unbothered. A slight smile teetering on the edge of laughter stretches Father's leathery skin taut across his jagged face. Mother looks down at me, unblinking and unimpressed, her hands carefully held behind her rigid back, feet shoulder-width apart. Somehow satisfaction is written on both of their faces, and side-by-side, I can see how they were once in love. Father bursts out laughing.

Slowly, I feel the march of my blood come to a halt. I peel my hands away from my soaked hair, holding them as far from me as possible. Trying to make it harder for Bunny to crawl up my arm and nestle into my existence. Of course, I am being silly. Even cutting my hands off doesn't make a difference. Her essence will heal it anyways. Instead, all I can do is watch in horror as my skin stitches itself back up. Good as new, some might say. If you were to ask me, my hands have done far from good. However, despite being stained red from the blood of others, I am only watching the life drain out of me.

In one step, Mother seems to float towards me. Though the hammering of her boots is drowned by Father's laughter and the dying echoes of *our* screaming, its thundering reverberates through the floor, and her iciness seeps up my bruised knees. She scoops my chin in a porcelain hand and gently lifts my face towards hers, only to slap my cheek with the other. Copper floods my mouth and creates a thick dam at the base of my throat. "I am disappointed," she coos. I spit in her face, finally able to breathe. "But don't worry," she continues, unbothered. "I believe in you. One day, you will make the right choice."

She smiles, caresses my face,
lovingly wipes the blood off my lips,
kisses my forehead, and strides out of
the hall. My forehead blisters and
burns from the lingering chill of her
kiss. Tomorrow it will be raw.

An army of *Endarkened* warriors
swarm us, and like bees, they obey
the queen's orders: two grab Father,
two grab Bunny, the rest surround
me, and they drag us out, each back
to our respective prisons.

His laughter continues to
follow me down the
hallway.
28... 52... 93...
"Same time tomorrow," he
asks.
125... 167... 208...
"It's a date," he responds.
249... 291... 337...
He always was broken,
never whole.

I see Bunny ahead, unconscious, her
body tired from the split and bare
feet scraping against the stone. But,
with no surprise, her mind is very
much awake.

You are just as bad as them, the new
voice says.
*"I had no choice! She would've
killed you,"* but my reasoning doesn't
appease *them*.
*Like Father, like Mother, it runs in
the family, I suppose.*

"... and the strength of your
ancestry," she concluded that night. I
am going to spill it all.

My name is Heather.