

BLUE EYES

Gianna Binder

Running away is harder than I thought. I had practiced for this, for an invasion, but leaving home was something I could never prepare for. The tunnels, with its thousand dancing colours and quartz stalagmites sparkling like blades normally engulfs me in nostalgia, but tonight, they didn't. The cave walls echo with screams, and the mica floor glistens crimson, choking me with the night's horrors; my father's urgent goodbye; the silver masked Endarkened; the unseeing eyes and slack faces of my neighbours. But I have to run. I have to hide the weapon.

Hot tears streak down my cheeks and thick, warm blood splashes up my ankles, making it impossible not to slip on the downwards slope of the tunnel. My legs fall from beneath me, and I reach out, trying to grasp the empty air. Powerless against gravity, I crash into the wall, hard. Searing pain shoots through my leg like fire. My head explodes with agony. I clamp down on my lower lip, stifling a scream; she cannot know where I am. The sting sinks beneath my skin and crescendos with each passing second, as if my leg had been bitten by a colony of bullet ants. Whimpering, I shift my weight onto my hands. A piece of quartz had broken off and pierced my thigh. With trembling hands and shallow breaths, I wrench the rock out, ignoring the jagged edges carving into my palms. I knew I shouldn't have pulled it out, but I have to keep running. Hastily, I push myself off the stark red ground and stumble through the passageway, pressing my cut hand against the mangled flesh that once resembled my thigh. My father once told me to put pressure on wounds, but there was no stopping the blood; it flows violently through my fingers, creating an impressive mosaic on my exposed skin.

Wisps of dense grey smoke slither and curl through the metallic air, tendrils of it burn through my lungs and wrap around my ankles, inviting me to stay in its nauseating clouds. I rudely decline, coughing, and straining for air; they must have set the village ablaze. They are coming, the Endarkened, they are desperate for the weapon.

Scarlet footprints crawl after me, mocking me, reminding me I am being followed. I could never lose them now; they have a fresh map written in my blood to guide them.

Blood loss is making me dizzy.

I am getting weaker.

They are getting closer.

The end is near.

I am deep underground now. I don't know where I am. I must have taken a wrong turn in my fear. I can't think straight. With every step, my terror grows. I will die from blood loss before ever feeling the strong winds and the rich song of freedom again. I am lost.

Beneath me, the earth rumbles, like a beast hungry for power. Bioluminescent fungi and spidery vines hanging like noose knots wrestle with fear, and shards of flowstone rain down as I struggle with my footing. They found me, and being found was not an option.

I stagger through the tunnels, travelling deeper into this labyrinth of glowing lichen and crystalline formations. She was right about one thing; these tunnels will consume me.

My leg is drenched and burns as if I am being marked with a branding iron, and like a slave, the

pain controls me. I can't think. I thought I was good at ignoring pain, but right now, it's impossible. Subconsciously, I continue, lurching as I go, leaning too far to my left. I take a right turn, another, then another.

I find myself in a large cavern. Beside me, water cascades down an overhang, splashing forty metres below into a lake. It sparkles like the bright blue eyes of my nightmares. The room is feathered with vibrant flowers and spongy moss of all colours. Massive mushrooms dot the crevices in the stone, and quartz grows along the walls reflecting the blue of the water. It was breathtaking. This must have been the place my parents talked about so often, the place they met. I forget about the writhing pain in my thigh and the danger I was in. I take a deep breath, taking it all in, the fresh smell of damp earth and the sweet aroma of blooming flowers, I am spellbound.

A clear, sharp laugh cuts through the air, snapping me out of my reverie. The sound of her voice vibrates through me and panic courses through my veins, replacing the little blood I have left with terror. I am rooted to the ground, frozen in her gaze. She hides behind the intricate mask of the Endarkened to conceal her identity, but I could recognize her eyes anywhere. My hands and lips quiver, shuddering like an aspen tree in a storm's harsh winds. Her cold eyes pierce through mine, making me shiver. Sweat rolls down my burning forehead. Her eyes, they are just as I remember. A tear streaks down my face. They are the most vibrant blue I have ever seen. My heart hammers in my chest. I get lost in her eyes, and the cavern dulls in comparison.

My breath is scarce.

My chest tightens.

They have found me.

Their leader dismounts her horse, as a hundred Endarkened warriors enter the cavern riding ink-black manes. I am surrounded. She approaches with slow, mocking strides, her black cape scrambling after her like a wounded animal. I limp back, nearing the edge of the cliff. In one slow movement of her gloved hands, she removes her mask. I inhale shakily, seeing how defined her features became. Her skin is pale as milk and shadows dance beneath protruding cheekbones. Like a cobra hunting for prey, she stares at me with sunken eyes and smiles, her whole face contorts brutishly as if she hasn't smiled since turning.

A sense of longing overcomes me, and I have the sudden urge to run into her arms. But one look at the silent Endarkened stops me.

"Miss me," she asks softly in a singsong voice, noticing my hesitation. Fear claws at my throat, muting me. I have so much to say, but so little time.

As my last act of heroism, I succumb to the inevitable. The air catches me as I surrender. Cold wind rushes past me as my perception of time slows, I am suspended in a world of distress. Beads of water shower down upon me, kissing my broken heart. Around me, everything is a mesh of colour. Still, the only thing I see is her: her eyes, the ones that would laugh at the setting Sun and reflect the clear sky on a bright summer morning. Her brilliant blue eyes that would blanket me in kindness and security. I trusted those eyes once, found my haven in her eyes once. I reach out, trying so hard to hold onto those memories, the feeling of happiness, but they evade me. Her eyes have now frozen over like a pond on a winter day, depriving them of the warmth they once possessed. I want to hold her the way she used to hold me, comfort her and thaw her pain, but she is

gone. She is trapped beneath the ice, too cold to touch.

My body twirls and jerks as I plummet through the air. I have no control over my limbs, like a rag doll, I have gone limp. With a bone-shattering impact, I hurl into the lake and drown. I am done fighting, done with hiding and running. I give up. I allow the darkness to swallow me, I am not scared anymore. Slowly the coldness fades to warmth, and I am enveloped in a turquoise heaven. Silence cocoons me, hugging me, reassuring me as I sink further down. Blood lazily seeps into the clear water, waltzing to my erratic heart. A string of bubbles trails after me and escapes to the surface, I watch with fascination. Water flows into my lungs, filling me with a sense of ease. The last thing I see is her diving into the water to save me as I slowly lose consciousness and slip into the welcoming hands of death.

The enemy is my mother.

I am the weapon.

The end is here.