

The Treehouse
by Elizabeth Keller

It was in the Thunder bunker, the nicest of the bunch. There was no system to the assignments, of course. That would take too much of their energy. Foot-stomping and elbows came into play. Her corner of the underground room was covered in newspaper clippings, the words held together and onto the dirt wall with dry sticks and torn-off fingernails. The girl coughed, splattering blood onto her chapped lips. She darted out her tongue, lapped it up.

She woke up suddenly, eyes wild and taking in the sprawled forms around her. Her lips twitched as if she was about to speak, but she stopped herself. Water was too precious to be wasted on that in this new world. She crept over to the opening and stuck her head through, looking around at the desolate landscape and then back at her bed, some sort of heated internal debate taking place. The outside won, and now she was scrambling out, dust was clinging to her knotted hair, a tangle of arms and legs and nails gripping the dirt and dead grass, desperate, drowning in the thick dead air. Then she was running, past the cracked fields dotted with the mounds of dust signifying bunker entrances, past the boarded-up general store and peeling parking lot, the billboard still legible in faded letters, the dry lakebed, and the dry riverbed, past the mines and the well, and the ditches, and the dead trees and plants, and out through the fields, kicking up clouds of dust and crumbling leaves. And further. Her legs and throat burned and she couldn't remember the last time she'd drunk but now it didn't matter, she couldn't turn back, so she kept going.

It used to be a forest there, and she stumbled and tripped on a root. Her face hit the ground and she tasted blood again as she tried to cough, her head spinning and the world going gray, then green, then flickering back to life briefly, and with a last burst of energy she opened her mouth and a croak came out, the first sound she remembered making for a long, long time. Then the world flickered again, this time to black, and her energy disappeared.

It must have felt like no time at all when she opened her eyes again, but that really wasn't the case. Time has a tendency to do that. Nonetheless, she woke up staring at the half-rotten planks of a wooden ceiling with something cool around her lips and dribbling down her cheeks. Some liquid had made its way into her mouth, so she swallowed. Her throat was painfully sore and swallowing took more work than she anticipated, but she managed and felt her energy slowly coming back.

"Took you long enough." The voice was warm and smooth, telling of water and use. "Who..." The girl stopped and swallowed again, willing her voice to come back. "They called me Gale."

"You ran?" Her voice was getting stronger.

"I ran. I found this place, I think it was built as a treehouse before." "Before the sky closed?"

"Before what else? There used to be a spring underneath. Of course it's dried up now, but I collected all that I could." Gale gestured to the row of miscellaneous jugs behind them. The girl sat up, slowly.

"I never knew how good it could feel to talk. Really talk. Not worrying about the Watchers or the rations or the water."

"Is that why you ran?"

“I didn’t think. I think so.”

“What’s it like there now?”

“It’s dry. And barely any water.” The girl sighed and swallowed again. “There won’t be enough here to last, you know.”

“It doesn’t matter. I can talk.” “That’s why I ran, too.”

“Look, there. Can’t you almost see the sky?”