

Katalene felt the water dissipate from her lungs, and, at first, she didn't even really comprehend what was happening as it happened. The commotion and contorts of her body, her eyelids felt too heavy to spread apart. It took her a moment to realize she was no longer in the water.

She regurgitated the black oily liquid, and like that, it came back down, gagging her again. She felt herself be adjusted, brought over to her side. She spat the water out from her mouth. The taste was foul, like nothing she ever tasted before. Strong and potent. And unrelenting. As it left her mouth, she could still feel its residual stains on her tongue.

When she was young, she had heard stories about cities and towns that had black ash-like sand. Maybe this was happened when it got watered down.

The shakiness inside of her soon started to exhaust, the moments where she'd never be the same again vanquished, as she gathered she'd in-fact be the same again. Her eyes once more able to open, she saw Roo on his knees, his body sprouted overhead like the branches of a tree.

His eyes were bloodshot. Kat knew not if it was on her behalf or from the water gouging at his eyes, but on his face, he wore a relieved smile.

She tried to lean forward, but found herself unable. The aching in her midsection was even worse than before, and not only that, but there was now an unrelenting pounding in her head. Roo's smile dimmed but didn't extinguish, "It'll take more than a little water to kill us off," Roo said, his hand pointed out like an arrow, "And look, our next obstacle."

Katalene turned her head over to the side. Their journey would continue with whatever ill-minded task the tomb had in mind for them. From where Katalene rested, beneath stony, rock-hard flooring, she could see the hole of where they had once been. On the ground, filled with the black water she hated so dearly.

A little ways from that, on the other-side of the room, she saw stairs, embroidered in the same esteem as the ones they had encountered when they were first entering the tomb.

The stairs went up. Could it have led to another hole within the desert? A way out from the tomb entirely? But then, the whole experience would have been pointless. Kat wasn't certain she cared at this time. Beside the stairs was a barrel of pine-sticks and a small vase with a wick at the top, lit like an enormous candle.

Her eyes went back up and over to her brother, “What's up there?”

Roo's smile still hadn't waned, “I don't know,” he said, sniffing some, “I waited for you to wake up. I knew you wouldn't ..., or I knew, ... I didn't want to do it without you,” he said at last, having trouble with his words.

Kat smiled at him, using her hands to push herself up. “Big softie,” she joked, and Roo began to help her up.

She wrapped her arms around him in an embrace, which he reciprocated. Kat could hear his soft, muffled whimpers, him trying to hide them, trying to be stronger, and Kat brushed her hand down the back of his head. This went on for several seconds, until, at last, both dispersed. Kat looked in his eyes, “I'm not going anywhere.”

Roo's emotions worsened by that remark, tears down his eyes, reassurances never helped, but he nodded anyways.

Stumbling, but only momentarily, Katalene regained her footing. She dusted herself off, even though there was no dust on her to see. Instead, she simply still felt the presence of the black water.

Together, they walked to the stairs, and Kat moved, with every step, she wondered whether Roo went ahead and broke the rest of her ribs while trying to resuscitate her.

Once she neared the stairs, she noticed the distinct visual of a turn in them. A spiral. The light of the burning vase didn't travel far up the staircase, and soon into it, a turn came, jarring left, and from then, the walls obscured everything else.

“You don't suppose it leads to a secret Whispey Desert Inn, offering the finest foods and warmest beds free of charge, do you?” Roo asked.

“If only,” Katalene replied. She yearned both of those things, but mostly the latter of the two.

They went up the stairs, hearing the disparate sounds of their footsteps slopping down atop the granite floor. They traveled as fast as they could, but their clothing and bodies, still drenched with water, caused them to have caution. The steps were steep, and as the stairs turned, first, once to the right for a few feet, then once to the left, not much of a spiral after all, they could already see a light where they ended.

The light was faint, but distinctive. A whisper in a silent room. The stairs took only a few minutes to meet an end, much shorter than the ones they first encountered. Wherever the end was, it wasn't back to the surface.

It was all well, if Katalene was honest with herself, suffering aside, she much preferred her troubles to be worth something. Certainly, she knew the tomb's worst was over.

“It looks like we're back where we started,” Katalene said, joking, at first, but, upon further inspection, it really looked as though that were the case.

“The cage isn't here though,” Roo pointed out.

That, it wasn't. But most of it seemed familiar. The simple quality of it all made for a feeling of repetition. If nothing else, it might have been a little warmer, however, Katalene couldn't say for sure.

They traveled further into the new, unexplored area. Roo stopped for a second and grabbed a pine-stick off to the side of the entrance-way, sitting in a barrel the same way as the ones downstairs.

The Tomb People were accommodating lads.

Though, they didn't really need them. In-front of them, the flame from the column she had lit from the room below took a lot of the blackness away. From the positioning of the pillar, it looked as though they were in a room directly above the one they'd started at.

Still, the visibility and lack there-of made Kat feel irascible, the fear of sudden nothingness gave her a maddening panic that alleviated itself in small breaths, prolonging itself like a burning candle.

She hid some pine-sticks in a pouch on her leggings and trudged forward. Something else she noticed about the room different from the one before was the flooring. Before too long, they became different. The floor went from a grayish black to a much lighter shade.

The abrupt change was obvious. It was meant to be seen. A clue to what was coming. Katalene halted her brother, putting her arm in-front of him. She was looking for an explanation, her eyes went up to the ceiling, expecting to see a heavy boulder that would drop the very second they walked onto the lighter-colored section of the floor.

“What are you doing?” Roo asked, his face looking scrunched up, burnt by the sun.

“They haven't done anything by accident, everything done in a particular way, where only the ones in the know understand how to precede. It's like a sick, twisted challenge to see if you're worthy for whatever is at the end of it.”

“You think the lighter spots mean something then? Foreshadowing something bad's about to happen? A pressure pad, maybe?”

“Maybe,” Katalene said, looking over to Roo.

Roo smiled, then threw a pine-stick over to the floor. It hit with a quiet thud, rolling until it hit the flaming pillar at the center of the room. Nothing happened.

“I don't think a twig weighs enough to trigger it, Roo,” Kat said.

Roo nodded back at once, Kat could see from the expression on his face he was mentally and physically depleted of almost all his energy. She took the reins out of sympathy and walked forward with one foot safely on a dark-tile. She readied herself to stomp on one of the light tiles, ready to squirm away fast.

Half of her was expecting it to be nothing, a mind-game captivating only the paranoid, but the other half of her was expecting swords to come out from the floor and leave her nothing more than a bloody heap.

At last, she did it, driving her foot against the lightly-colored flooring, and immediately, the fact revealed itself, and she felt herself sinking down.

The floor fell in from beneath her, or more accurately, a light-colored block went down, and she almost went down with it.

Her leg drove down, and as momentum would have it, she found herself tumbling, only holding on by a ledge. Roo's hand soon clutched hers, bringing her a sense of relief. The sound of the block falling to the floor never came.

She looked down and could see the brick levitating ten feet below her. A peculiar sight she watched while it hovered, making small movements like it was floating on water.

Roo pulled her back up to the other side of the room, where floor acted as floor should and remained intact. She let out a loud breath of air for theatrical effect. She was almost amused, really. The amount of effort that had to go into making such an elaborate contraption. Though, she was



beginning to find the line between reality and enchantment becoming blurred. The idea that a floor tile could simply levitate in mid-air without any explanation.

There had been stories; stories about creatures and men with mystical powers of all different sorts and arrangements. Wizards, such a wise-tale word, one couldn't even utter the phrase without drawing roaring laughter from just about any crowd, but they had been spoken of. Most of them supposedly existing in the Whispey Deserts. People looked at them like Gods, praying to them and asking for guidance. But not anymore.

They were mythical and fictitious, or at least, that was the gathered consensus. But some still believed. And, after all, the tombs weren't just built for the sake of it. The sand people must have found people worth worshiping.

*Uncle Morgis smiled big at the children, a smile that showed his large, yellow teeth, and really emphasized his crinkles and aging skin. He seemed too excited, and even the naivest of children knew his fables to be just that, it was contagious. The way his excitement rubbed off on those around him.*

*He swallowed a lump in his throat and continued: "I wiped the blood from off my face. Oh, yes, I was bleeding, from the forehead, or the back of*

*the skull, that's more like it. From the way I was positioned, with my chin down, the blood ran down my face. I left away from the tomb; afraid. I would go back, of course, with help, a real excavation. But when I turned around for a final look at the tomb, to implant the illustration of it in my head. It was gone."*

*Uncle Morgis stopped again, looking around at each one of the children, one-by-one, a sly smile on his face. He knew everybody was listening to him now. "No, I do not mean it misplaced or unfounded. The Tomb had disappeared in thin-air!"*

"I knew you were eating more than your fair share of supplies!" hollered Roo, as they looked down at the hole in the room Katalene made.

Kat didn't dignify him with a response. The pillar's light caught her eye, how did it work? *How was it possible?* She took the pine stick out from her pocket, feeling it in her hands with all its wooden splendor. By one of the walls, she scraped it against the granite, it ignited fast.

From there, she tossed the flaming pine stick down into the hole and watched it delve down to meet its end. But before it even landed, she angled

herself the right way to see the flame off where the pillar continued beneath them.

The pine stick was caught, and the flame spread some and extinguished. But, in that commotion, the formation broke, and Katalene saw what was making the floor-block levitate.

Locusts.