

Can't go home

By Noelle Adams / pfangirl

PART 1 - SUFFOCATED

A caged lioness. That's what Lara reminded Sam of now. Every time she looked at her best friend, the American thought of the big cat she'd seen in a German zoo during her globe-trotting childhood. It wouldn't lie still. It was pure feral energy, striding back and forth in its enclosure, muscles rippling beneath its pelt. Lara was the same. Lithe grace and power in human form, always moving, always intensely focused on some task or thing. Almost permanently scowling.

Sam had always wondered which of her parents Lara inherited her effortless physicality from. Four years of knowing Lara, and Sam still wasn't sure. There were no photos for her to consult. The young archaeologist hardly spoke about her vanished mother and father. She avoided talking about them; evidently running from their memory like she ran from what had happened on Yamatai.

In the one and a half months since the shipwreck – well, at least since she was released from hospital – Lara had been seized by a frantic, feverish vigour. They had travelled from Osaka to the UK, where Lara had spent a single day at her family's estate, ransacking her father's study. From there they headed to New York. This put Lara closer to her next intended stop – Roanoke Island.

Although the city was a good base for Lara to work from while she planned her next expedition, there was a second, more distasteful reason for the archaeologist to be there: an exclusive television interview.

After dodging the press for as long as possible, Lara had finally bowed to Sam's insistence that she sit down on camera for the highest bidder. Swallowing her frustration, Lara had admitted to seeing Sam's reason: she could use the money, and her discussion of what happened on the island would hopefully quell the paparazzi frenzy. But the Englishwoman wasn't happy about it. Just as she wasn't happy to be in New York.

That she was struggling with surges of Post Traumatic Stress, Sam could see clearly. The City That Never Sleeps put Lara on edge. The noise. The traffic. The crowds. But the apartment they were staying in – owned by Sam's media conglomerate father – was largely soundproof and high enough in the block to distance them from the worst of the chaos.

It was a safe haven that Lara struggled to leave. Often Sam would find her standing stiff before the floor-to-ceiling windows of the living room. Rarely blinking, she would just stare at the urban landscape. She was a cornered predator, radiating animosity towards an unfamiliar environment where it was difficult to identify and track every threat.

When Lara wasn't brooding over maps and her father's journals, she was running down in the park, or ripping open her stitches at kickboxing and jiu-jitsu classes – against doctor's orders of course. She hardly ate. She often didn't sleep. A week ago Sam had stirred in the middle of the night to find a silhouette leaning against the doorway to her room.

"Lara? Is that you?" she croaked at the darkness.

Silence.

Eventually the figure stepped back into the passageway. But at least it spoke. With the smooth, soothing accent she knew so well. "Go back to sleep, Sam."

The next morning Sam was half-sure she had imagined the whole thing. That was until a few nights later when she rolled over and found Lara lying on the floor next to her bed. The young Englishwoman was curled up in foetal position, eyes closed and breathing heavily. Sam watched her friend for a while, desperate to reach out and touch her, but also terrified Lara would lash out in one of her newly acquired nightmare rages. Torn between her options, Sam had eventually dozed off again. And when she woke hours later, Lara was gone. It really was like living with an injured lioness. Or, more accurately, a monstrous, highly unpredictable house cat.

Still, Sam silently excused Lara's skittish behaviour. She didn't want to leave her friend's side for one moment. If she did, well, Lara would wander off and never return. "I'm not going home." Those words had terrified Sam – and that was something she knew she'd have to tackle with her therapist. Along, of course, with the persistent flashes of a decaying Japanese queen who glared eyelessly.

Sam kept thinking that if Lara hadn't finally succumbed to her wounds that first evening on the rescue ship, her words would have come true: Sam would've been on the first plane back to the States with a jubilant Reyes. Lara, meanwhile, would have stayed behind and backpacked off alone to God knows where, looking for the "answers" she'd become obsessed with.

Now Sam was terrified she was suffocating Lara. She didn't want to let go but she could sense how painfully tight her grip must feel. Leaving crescent nail marks on her friend's flesh. Lara hadn't asked Sam to accompany her; the American girl had just inserted herself into every plan Lara made. Often that meant slapping down Lara's mutterings that Sam didn't have to be there, and she certainly didn't need to be funding their movements. Fortunately Lara was always muted by the argument that she had saved Sam's life and there was nothing the Nishimuras could do to ever fully repay her for that.

Still, Sam wasn't sure how her continued presence sat with her stone-faced friend. On the one hand Lara seemed to enjoy having someone around to help pull her out of her head. On the other hand, more and more these days she seemed to prefer being on her own. She'd become emotionally distant. It started on the rescue ship. While Sam and Jonah and Reyes had jubilantly discussed everything from their families to favourite foods back home, Lara sat alone off to the side, watching the horizon and frowning at her notebook.

There were flashes of the old Lara – her shyness when Sam helped her dress for example – but she'd become a lot more temperamental. She kept her feelings bottled up. She'd even snapped at Sam. Followed immediately by a flame-cheeked apology, but still... The change was worrying.

Every time Sam looked at Lara, she was stung as to how much Yamatai had transformed her. Mentally and physically. Lara had always been pretty but now she was striking. Her freshly acquired scratches and scars gave her beauty an edge that hadn't been there before. No longer the soft-faced English Rose; if anything the thorns now defined her more than the petals. She'd become an apex predator – stunning but deadly. The way she stood, the way she moved; she radiated a kind of powerful self-reliance and confidence that was magnetic.

Even now Sam stood frozen in the entrance to the living room, watching Lara arched in the middle of a sun salutation. Barefoot, dressed simply in sweatpants and a white V-neck T-shirt, she was breathtaking. Breathtaking and badass.

Sam was relieved to discover that it wasn't just her who noticed. Other people reacted differently around Lara too. Which, naturally, Lara loathed.

It didn't help that in the aftermath of their island "adventure," Lara had come under the media spotlight. Although his star had faded, people still wanted to hear all about the death of celebrity adventurer James Whitman. That it was a gorgeous 21 year old brunette who staggered away from the bloody ordeal, and was credited with making the archaeological find of the century, made the story even tastier. Lara had clung so desperately to her privacy since the incident that it had been easy for the gossip machine to run her over and churn the truth into any shape they wanted.

Lara had learned to ignore the lies. She could soldier on silently. But it didn't mean the comments didn't hurt. Sam could see that no matter how hardened she had become, Lara was still vulnerable to new wounds; sometimes inflicting them on herself. For one thing, she spent far too much time reading what was being said about her online.

Chasing fairy tales just like her parents. A pretty little fool destroying her reputation right from the outset...

Richard Croft threw it all away and now his daughter is heading the same direction. Mark my words, she'll reveal herself to be a talentless attention whore, coasting on her looks – flipping her ponytail and getting her tits out more often than not...

Yeah, I'd raid her tomb any day!

Over a year before Yamatai, while they were backpacking through Eastern Europe, Lara had confessed her concerns to Sam about being compared to her parents. She rarely spoke about Richard and Amelia Croft but that evening – no, early morning – back at the hostel she was bleary-eyed and vodka-nostalgia. Even then Lara had accepted the inevitability of the comparisons... but it was never supposed to happen so soon. Right at the start of her career.

And right when she was already struggling to readjust her world view.

All those years Lara had spent embarrassed by her parents; resentful of their disappearance while off chasing myths and legends. Now it turned out they were right. She knew that now. Sam too. *I guess that's what getting up close and personal with an undead sorcerer queen will do to you.*

All along there had been truth there in the stories, and Sam could see that Lara was angry at herself; ashamed of her disbelief. Lara was suddenly defensive of her parents' memory but still wary of appearing in public as a laughing stock, discrediting herself professionally with rants about spirits and monsters.

This internal struggle set Lara scowling more often than not. And sadly, Sam's efforts at lightening the mood weren't nearly as effective as they'd once been.

A voice called her back to the present.

"This is a pleasant surprise, Sam."

Lara had turned her head and was looking up at her from downward-facing dog.

"What?"

"You not filming me for a change."

Sam shrugged in return, happy to play along with Lara's playful mood – all too rare these days.

"I thought I'd give you a break today."

"It's appreciated." Lara smiled gently.

Her disposition was in stark contrast to that weeks previously when Sam had convinced her to do the interview. Lara was lying in her hospital bed in Osaka. Health had finally trickled back into her limbs and she was alert, fever-free and anxious to be unhooked from her drip and various monitors. When Sam slipped into the private room she found Lara sitting upright with several Japanese and English language newspapers splayed out across the bed. All were open on stories about her and Yamatai.

Lara was looking out the window when Sam entered. Without turning, she held up her arm to shield herself from her friend's video camera.

"Sam, please!"

"You better get used to having these in your face, sweetie."

Lara stared directly in the lens then, clearly exasperated. She didn't have to say anything.

"Lara, you're a 100% real Indiana Jones. You're going to make archaeology sexy. Dusty old books and hiking boots will be the height of fashion. You watch. Kim Kardashian will be seen out and about in cargo pants tomorrow."

Lara muttered under her breath, "I don't want any of that."

Sam had advanced into the room while filming. She was close enough to the bed now that she could reach into the shot and brush one of Lara's bangs away from her face.

"Well, that's your angle whether you like it or not. You really thought you'd have a nice quiet life in academics looking the way you do?"

Lara pulled a face.

"Sorry, but you're taking archaeology mainstream, Lara Croft. And I'm going to be around to document it."

There it was; a serious sense of humour failure. Lara scowled at her.

Sam tried to redirect the discussion. She lowered her camera and closed her free hand over Lara's clenched fist on the bedspread. "Seriously, I still think you should agree to an interview. If you're not going to access your inheritance you need funding somehow. Especially if you won't accept rich benefactors like that Natla woman who keeps calling."

Lara dropped her gaze to her lap. Her temper had waned, but in many ways its replacement, the obvious muted melancholy, was worse. She and Sam had had this argument twice already and it normally ended when Lara shifted into this shielded mode.

Sam whispered, "How else are you going to get funding for your next expedition? Kickstarter? Pledge \$20 and get a plastic replica of your necklace."

The muscles in Lara's hand twitched.

Sam continued, "Pledge \$10 000 and receive a date with Thee Lara Croft."

A monotone "Alright."

"What's that?"

"Alright, fine? You're right. I'll do it." It was a sulky admission but Sam would take anything at that point.

"Thank God. Finally!"

The corner of Lara's lip curled. Her eyes returned to Sam's. "You should know by now you can talk me into anything, Nishimura."

"Likewise, Croft. *Sam you have to come with us on the search for the lost island of Yamatai. It's going to be an amazing adventure.*"

Sam realised immediately that her banter had bounded over the line. Lara's soft smile faltered and sank. Yamatai was nothing to joke about. Lara was pummeled by the responsibility she felt for everything that had happened since Roth insisted on following her course into the Dragon's Triangle. Grimm. Roth. Alex. The rest of the crew. Even Whitman. Instantly Lara's shoulders hunched, and Sam detected a tremor beneath her fingers. Lara was struggling to keep her head above the emotional deluge. And for the first time it struck the American girl that the accomplice of her wild child college days was gone forever.

They were in their second year of university, living in a third floor flat that was just a five-minute walk to campus. Sam had shocked her parents by sticking through her freshman year; proving that for the first time in her life she was actually committed to something academically. Her parents had bought the cosy two-bedroom apartment for her as a reward.

Naturally, Lara was her roommate; an arrangement that Sam's parents were delighted about. They loved Lara – polite, self-disciplined, of the landed British gentry. They were exceptionally happy that such a straight-laced, responsible young woman was keeping an eye on their daughter. Being a good influence... or so they thought.

Sam's biggest priority, meanwhile, was taking some of the financial strain off Lara, who for some bull-headed reason refused to accept her substantial inheritance. Instead, she

supplemented her small academic bursary with work as a tutor, a barmaid and a research assistant. All too often in First Year, Sam had found Lara in her dorm room, out cold on a nest of books and notes. She had been too exhausted to party, and Sam couldn't have that.

Still, after a particularly frantic term, even Lara was keen to let her hair down. She had happily agreed to go out with Sam in celebration of the impending Easter long weekend. Uncharacteristically, she hadn't complained once when Sam lined up a "snowboard" for them to share – a row of shooters sampling every alcohol they had in the flat.

Having downed five shots each, nicely buzzed, they staggered out into the street.

After gorging on shawarmas, they ended up at one of the pubs popular with the student crowd. Sam was busy playing the Exotic Asian American card, trying to explain the game of beer pong while she flung darts with three guys from the varsity swimming team. At some point in the evening she realised Lara was no longer standing at her elbow.

Sam scanned the pub. Eventually she spotted Lara through the crowd, leaning on the bar counter, talking to Dan Perkins.

Dan was in Sam's filmmaking class. He was working towards a career in wildlife documentary-making, and most weekends trekked off into the middle of nowhere with the campus hiking club. He was tall and rangy, and Sam had wanted to jump his bones for a while. However he had eyes only for Lara, and Sam was forced to admit that Miss Mountaineer made a much better match for him. Lara of course had kept her skittish distance for months, recognising Dan's interest but not wanting to lead him on. Tonight though, her guard was down. And she seemed to be very, very receptive to his attentions. She was nodding and laughing at everything he said, while, in typical endearing Lara-fashion, struggling to meet his gaze.

Five minutes later, when Sam looked back, Lara and Dan were making out against the wall. When she looked a third time, Lara was *really* into Dan, riding his thigh as she slid her hands up the back of his shirt. After that, they had vanished. Sam felt a prickle of worry for her friend, but then she thought about Roth and all the SAS training he'd given his ward, and she felt considerably better. Sam was sure Lara could look after herself. Even if she was completely smashed.

Sam chuckled to herself. It probably shouldn't have surprised her to see her best friend like that. Lara's energy seemed endless at times. It made sense that when she had appetites they were voracious. And just as she applied her signature focus to every interest or activity she tackled, she would satisfy her sexual desires with the same all-consuming intensity. Sam could imagine she would be incredible in bed. Long lean limbs, insane stamina, hardening from soft to steel as she took charge.

Rather amused that she was contemplating her best friend's sexual prowess, Sam slid into the lap of one of the swimmers, and immediately began complimenting him on his strong shoulders...

The next morning, Sam was lying on the couch watching Fashion TV when the familiar jangle of keys outside told her Lara was back. Her friend slipped into the apartment, closing the door silently like she usually did on a Sunday morning when she didn't want to disturb a partied-out, still sleeping Sam, but was ready to start her usual routine – an hour-long jog, followed by a visit to the corner shop for some muffins and the weekend paper.

After locking the door, Lara turned. She startled at the unusual sight of Sam wide awake and leering at her at the ungodly hour of... 8:30am. The two women looked at each other, sharing pretty much the exact same thought. *Busted, Lara Croft! You're not getting away so easily. I've waited a long time to tease you about this.*

Lara leaned back against the door with a resigned sigh. She rolled her eyes to the ceiling. That was her surrender.

Sam cleared her throat and smirked, "Why, Miss Croft, I don't think I've ever seen you like this before?"

"Like what?" Lara responded with a coy smile.

"Thoroughly fucked."

"Sam, Jesus!" Lara's cheeks instantly coloured. A second later though, the self-satisfied grin was back.

"Oh, don't be so shocked, sweetie. Even if your shirt wasn't on backwards and you didn't have A-grade sex hair, there's the two hickeys on your neck."

"What? Shit!" Lara dashed to the bathroom. Sam knew she'd be fingering the bruises while she examined herself in the mirror. There it was again. "Shit!"

She returned from the bathroom, rubbing her throat. "I'm working tonight." Still frowning, she plonked herself down on the seat next to Sam. Her friend moved aside her legs to make more space.

Sam could understand Lara's irritation with herself. It was an unusually warm April. Scarves and high collars were out. There was nothing she could do to inconspicuously cover the marks. Although it wouldn't be malice-driven, Lara would be ragged mercilessly by the regulars at the Nine Bells. It had taken her a long time to earn respect from the pub locals, who had initially dismissed her as just another pretty, ponytailed barmaid who looked good in a tank top. Their opinion had changed however when the same unassuming barmaid defused three football-related fights in quick succession. Thanks to Roth's teachings of course.

"Well," Sam slapped her palm down on Lara's knee, "At least the tips tonight should be good."

That finally made her friend smile again.

Sam cocked her head, "Soooo, what was it like?"

"What?"

"What do you think?"

Realisation hit the history nerd. Lara's eyes widened as her mouth formed a perfect circle. "Oh." Her cheeks flushed.

"Come on Lara, I always tell you."

"Yes, and I never *asked* for that, thank you. You really think I need to catch Tom Hewitt's eye in class and know he has a birthmark shaped like a star on his left testicle?"

"Shut up, bitch, you know love it. Your life would be so boring without me."

When Lara remained tight-lipped, the American girl triggered her signature pout-and-whine combo. "Pleeeaaasssseeee?"

As usual it took less than ten seconds for the corner of Lara's mouth to twitch into the special soft smile she reserved only for Sam.

"Come on, tell me."

Lara dropped her gaze.

"It was nice." She chuckled as she looked down at the calloused fingers and palms she was always so self-conscious about. "Really, really nice."

She swung her face back to Sam, flashing a big dumb grin.

"Post-coital suits you, Lara."

"I do feel good. It's been a *very* long time." She stretched out her legs and tousled her hair.

"God, you make it sound like you're thirty."

Lara batted Sam with a cushion. Then she leapt to her feet. "I need a hair of the dog. What can I get you?"

"Lara, it's what? Nine in the morning?"

"Yeah, yeah, I know. I just... Just let me enjoy this for a little longer, okay?"

"Lara Croft, have I finally brought you over to the dark side? And all it took was a couple of Jager Bombs and some consequence-free fucking."

"Sam!"

"Ah, you like it. Deep down you're a bad girl. It's a good thing you spend so much time in the library hunched over dusty old books and maps. Otherwise you would've had your wicked way with every man on campus by now."

Lara arched an eyebrow. "Just the men?"

Sam had burst out laughing at that. Sexually charged playfulness was so uncharacteristic of her bookish friend. "Oooh, Lara, you *are* a bad girl! You've been holding out on me for way too long."

Lara let her bottom lip slip into a seductive pout. She managed to sustain it for all of three seconds before she started giggling herself.

Sam watched her stumble into the kitchenette – Lara, practically glowing, partially hung-over, 100% goofy as she potted around behind the counter. She was humming as she

decided which alcohol would work best in her tea. She popped a jaffa cake between her teeth. With it jutting out from between her lips, she looked up and moaned suggestively, making Sam laugh again. Her hazel eyes met Sam's and they were so happy.

This carefree girl was gone forever, Sam was certain now. She'd fallen on Yamatai. Terrified and alone, she'd been beaten, cut, pierced and crushed. She'd died a hundred deaths, shattered into a thousand pieces that now had to be plucked one at a time from Lara's scarred flesh like shrapnel if that sweet girl was ever to be reassembled.

That was all Sam wanted – her old friend back. And she was damn well going to try put Lara together again, even if her own hands were sliced up by shards in the process.

PART 2 - SHATTERED

"Drink with me, bitch!"

From downward-facing dog, Lara straightened. So did her smile. "What are you talking about?"

"Tonight. Let's go out."

The Englishwoman's stony face cracked and collapsed into a frown. "Sam, I –"

Sam bounded forward and seized her friend by the biceps. This was the best idea she'd had and she was damn well going to make it work.

"Let's go out. This is your last chance for a meaningless shag before everyone knows your face."

Lara flinched.

Quickly Sam shifted gear. "Sweetie, your television interview airs tomorrow night. After that you won't be able to go out with me for girls' nights anymore. Guys will be trying to get into your cargo pants left, right and centre."

Lara had cocked her head and was looking at Sam's grip on her arms. Since Yamatai she shrugged away from any physical affection. All she permitted was hand holding. Sam was aware of it and Lara knew that... yet here they stood. The young archaeologist's eyes narrowed as she tried to pierce through Sam's screen of suspicious over-enthusiasm.

Sam intensified her grin. "You remember fun, don't you Lara?"

"I think so. Vaguely. Something to do with holding your hair back while you puke and then trying to carry your whiny arse to bed."

Sam couldn't argue with that. Lara had been her sober – and less than sober – wingman throughout college. When her friend hadn't been there, things had been disastrous more often than not. Sam remembered all the desperate phone calls.

Lara, uh, I can't find my purse...

Lara, I'm stuck in the ladies'; there's this freaky guy outside waiting for me and I don't know what to do...

Lara, hey, I think I've just been mugged...

Lara, ha, this is kind of funny but I don't know where I am....

No matter the time, a bleary-eyed Lara had always come to rescue her. Sam even remembered the night Lara arrived in her old flannel pyjamas, her long hair uncharacteristically down. Sam had flung herself into her friend's arms, yelling "Goose! Goose, I feel the need, the need for speed!" A horrified Lara had tried to gag Sam with her hand while half-dragging her out the pub to a waiting taxi.

All their ridiculous shared misadventures and misbehaviour; Sam jubilant and Lara red-faced but laughing.

Sam slid her hands down to Lara's palms and entwined their fingers. "Please, Lara?" she murmured. "It'll be just like old times. I need – I think we both need it."

Lara replied with a smile. It was a hesitant twitch to her lips, but a smile nonetheless. "Okay."

Sam hugged her. "My hero."

Lara responded with a sceptical chuckle, and hugged her back. Progress.

After dinner, where Sam had to endure the sight of Lara listlessly pushing chicken stir-fry around her plate, the two women retreated to their personal spaces to prepare for the night out.

As usual, Lara was ready first. She wandered into Sam's bedroom, where her friend was scurrying about in nothing but a bath towel, poking at designer wear of varying degrees of skimpiness draped across the exposed mattress. Sam caught sight of Lara in the dressing table mirror.

The Englishwoman wore jeans, her scuffed boots and a short-sleeved olive shirt unbuttoned over a black tank top. Her hair was up in a ponytail, with her bangs falling over her make-up free cheeks as usual. It was a look that Sam had come to dismissively refer to as "Adventure Chic". And tonight she was not going to let Lara get away with it.

"You're not going out like that, Croft."

Lara threw up her arms in frustration. "Like what?"

Sam turned and eyed her up and down. "Like a women's MMA fighter. A *butch* women's MMA fighter."

"Butch MMA fighter..." Lara repeated the words slowly, incredulously. But she couldn't hide a smirk.

"A featherweight of course. Point is I can see your cuts and bruises and there's no way we're going to pick up cute guys with you looking like that."

Lara sighed, "Sam, this is the only thing that's comfortable. It's not exactly easy for me to get dolled up at the moment."

"Oh." Sam had completely forgotten about that. The amount of pain Lara was in. It was easy for it to slip her mind when her friend was always so restless. And it was something she didn't like thinking about as much as Lara didn't want to discuss it. Time to deflect the subject.

"Right, I guess it's up to me then..."

Lara's eyes widened as Sam approached her. There were those finely tuned survival instincts. She sensed what was coming.

Sam seized Lara's shirt by the collar and tugged it back off her friend's shoulders.

"Sam, wait, that hurts. Fuck!"

"Really, Croft? You work out like a maniac but when I want you to come out suddenly it hurts. I'm calling *Bullshit*."

Lara snorted her disagreement but otherwise remained silent.

With a prod to Lara's back, Sam directed her friend across the room. The Englishwoman allowed herself to be deposited on the edge of the bed. Sam was pleased to note an amused sparkle in Lara's eyes as she looked up at her.

The archaeologist's gaze dropped from Sam's face to the cleavage peeking from the top of her towel. She arched an eyebrow, "Are you going to have your way with me, Miss Nishimura?"

Two could play that game.

"Yes..." Sam bent over suggestively, giving Lara more of a view. "In a manner of speaking."

There were few people who could out-bluff and out-flirt Sam. Lara especially. She didn't have the nerve for it. Her built-in British reserve was set to activate automatically in sexually charged situations. Even now her cheeks were flushing as she tried to latch her eyes onto anything but her friend's chest.

Sam's hand settled on the fabric she was groping for on the carpet. She arched upright, throwing a shirt in Lara's face.

"Put that on."

The pseudo-tension shattered, Lara actually managed a laugh. Sam grinned back. Playful, snarky Lara Croft was always more fun than her withdrawn, post-Yamatai twin.

Given her friend's struggle with dressing at the moment, Sam knew she wouldn't be able to completely overhaul Lara's appearance. She'd have to settle for a few choice upgrades. The shirt was a good start. Black sheen, fitted; actually quite sexy with the strappy top underneath.

It was a huge advantage that Sam and Lara were basically the same size. The American girl was just slightly taller and thinner, lacking Lara's lean outdoorsy muscle.

Not that wardrobe swapping happened often though. In Sam's mind, it was a good thing Lara was so effortlessly gorgeous because she had next to no dress sense. Practical over pretty; that was Lara's style mantra – which meant Sam would only ever venture into her bestie's drawers if they were going camping or attending a muddy music festival. Or, in absolute emergencies, when Sam had managed to wear her cupboard bare without doing a single load of washing. Lara used to lord it over her when that happened, before helping her trek an Everest of dirty clothing to the corner laundromat.

Sam accessorised Lara's jeans with a chunky belt, and helped her shrug into a tan leather jacket to cover the blemishes still speckling her arms. Then she moved onto her friend's make-up.

Sam suspected that deep down Lara actually enjoyed this kind of pampering, despite the distrust in her eyes as Sam drew near with a mascara wand. Not that she needed anything more, but still. Little Miss Five Minute Skincare had obviously missed out on a lot of the girly stuff that had saturated Sam's existence since birth.

It made sense though. Before all her years in boarding school, before her parents vanished, Lara had been too busy trailing after Lord and Lady Croft – and Roth of course – in the dirt and dust. And judging by the hideous inherited cardigan Lara liked to wear at home, her mother hadn't been much of a fashion mentor either.

Once Sam had achieved the smoky eye effect she wanted, she applied some gloss to Lara's lips. The Englishwoman had the most amazing full mouth. Pity it was drooped in a sullen pout at that moment.

Sam stepped back to admire her handwork.

Lara muttered, "Are we done?"

"Yup. Much better. Even I would totally do you now."

"Even you?"

"If I got desperate enough."

Of course, Lara had to wait another full hour before Sam was ready to leave. The brunette lay stretched out on Sam's bed skimming Native American Legends on her friend's iPad. And less than subtly consulting her watch. Just like old times.

Eventually the taxi dropped them off outside a bar several blocks from the Nishimuras' apartment. It was a trendy but unpretentious venue, serving cocktails and craft beers to the under-35 crowd. The idea was that Sam could get the Cosmopolitan she'd been craving, Lara could find an import ale from home, and both young women would leave with an ego-boosting, bed-warming distraction for the evening.

That was the plan at least, although the reality was already veering off course.

Sam opened the door. She didn't need to turn to know that Lara had immediately stiffened behind her. After the quiet of the apartment, the bar was a slap to the senses. Voices straining over the music from a small corner dance floor. Dozens of faceless bodies lumbering around the dark space. The general chill, and tang on the tongue, of the too-cold air-conditioning.

Even Sam, who at least was in therapy, found it overwhelming. To Lara, who had stubbornly refused all counselling and wouldn't even talk about what she went through alone on the island, it must have been an urban Hell – another Yamatai seething with dangers that could spring from anywhere.

If it was just Sam and Lara, like back at the apartment, they would have been fine. But this was an intrusion of the world, in the worst, most uncontrollable way. It set Lara on wide-eyed edge. The lioness forced bare-toothed back into a corner.

"Oh, Lara," Sam whispered, "This was a bad idea."

"No. I – " The anxiety on the Englishwoman's face was obvious, but she strained a smile. "I have to be able to handle this, Sam."

"Are you sure?"

"I have to."

Great, a fun evening together turned into a coping exercise. Sam should have expected it, just as she should have expected Lara's response. It was all part of her stubborn self-reliant streak, which had only become more prominent over the past two months. Lara insisted there was nothing wrong that she couldn't shoulder through on her own.

Seizing Lara's hand before she pulled that away too, Sam led her friend across the bar. She felt awful though, like a parent leaving a terrified toddler at daycare for the first time. She needed to blunt Lara's apprehension with some booze as quickly as possible.

Naturally, it was 22 year old Sam and not 21 year old Lara who was carded – the silly girl next to the self-assured woman. Eventually though they had their tray of eight caramel vodka shots and two Cosmos, and claimed a newly vacated table against the wall.

The graduates' attempts at small talk were stilted. Between deep coping breaths, Lara gave Sam nothing but monosyllabic responses to her banter and their evening quickly devolved into drinks-inhaling and people-watching. Despite a craving for the physical release it promised, there was no way Sam was going to lure Lara into the writhing mass of limbs that was the dance floor. But the American couldn't leave her traumatised friend sitting alone either.

After being ignored by a waitress for the third time, Lara got to her feet and elbowed her way to the bar. She was tired of the super-sweet, practically neon cocktails that Sam kept ordering, and craved something a bit heartier.

While she was gone, Sam rested her chin on her interlaced fingers, and watched the movement on the dance floor wistfully.

"Excuse me?"

Sam spun around and found herself facing a woman's bare midriff, the navel pierced, and accented all-round by delicate braided tribal tattoos.

She looked up at a striking blonde, in her early thirties, maybe. The woman smiled coyly, "Sorry, I just had to ask before I made a fool of myself. Are you two a couple?" She nodded in Lara's direction. *Of course she wouldn't be asking if Sam was available.*

"What? No!" Sam barked. The laugh came out more harshly than she meant, but then she blamed the shooters.

The woman was devouring Lara as the archaeologist leaned on the bar; effortlessly sexy as usual with an inch of toned stomach exposed.

"No, we're not a couple," Sam found herself repeating as the blonde purred her appreciation. "But Lara..." Sam couldn't resist. Hell, her friend completely looked the part. "...Lara's a total stud."

"Really?" The blonde's gaze shot to Sam's face and then back to her object of attraction.

"Lara?" The woman teased the name with her tongue. "God, she's hot. Do you think I have a chance?"

Sam shrugged and sipped her drink to stifle a giggle. To be honest, she didn't actually know. She had only ever seen Lara with guys – a grand total of three – and even then Sam suspected her friend hooked up with them chiefly to stop Sam ragging her about being a raging asexual, or mother-superior-in-training.

The reality was that Lara was left tongue-tied by male and female nudity alike. Four years of knowing her and Lara still averted her eyes whenever Sam strolled topless through the lounge. She was hopelessly shy when it came to all matters sex-related. There was even that one choice incident during their first year at university together.

Lara was taking a Classical Civilisation course and was at her desk, hunched over a book on Ancient Minoan art. With her back to the door, it was easy for Sam to ninja inside. She strained over Lara's shoulder, catching sight of the image her friend was examining – a bronze female figurine holding writhing snakes; her exposed breasts ballooning over the top of an underbust corset.

Sam took great delight in announcing as loudly as possible, "Wanking to topless statues again, Lara Croft? I'm sure we can find you better lesbian porn than that."

Lara spun around in her chair. She was so mortified that she couldn't even squeeze out a denial.

She turned bright pink... and then completely pale as her openly gay neighbour peered around the door. Callie cocked her head and grinned, "Hey, Lara, if you ever need a hand, you let me know."

Callie's girlfriend appeared in the doorway to smirk as well. "Me too, Lara."

Lara hadn't spoken to Sam for two days after that, until the American girl left a big box of Jaffa Cakes on her desk as an apology.

Eventually it became a running joke between the friends, at their student residence, and later when they shared a flat. Every time Lara shut herself in her room, Sam would yell "Stop touching yourself in there, Lara," or "Quit wanking, Lara Croft, I'm coming in."

Of course, Sam had no idea what Lara got up to during uni holidays, when she and Sam parted ways and the young archaeologist shouldered her duffel bag, grabbed her maroon passport and joined Roth's crew on his grimy expeditions.

Sam had always imagined Lara spent all her spare time lying on her bed, reading and listening to music, just like at college. But perhaps she did satisfy her secret urges when she was anonymous half a world away. There really was no way to find out. Lara was incredibly private. There were many things she didn't even tell Sam, probably because of the latter's tendency to bring them up in group situations when smashed.

One of the few romantic revelations that Sam had been able to whine out of Lara was an admission that she found Alex cute... until he opened his mouth. Then he ranted non-stop about conspiracy theories and unsolved mysteries – Lara's deal breaker in the aftermath of her parents' disappearance. "Mystical mumbo jumbo," the archaeology student grumbled at the time, rolling her eyes as she sat opposite Sam on the couch, fingering her mug of tea.

Lara was returning to their table, navigating across the room with a Cosmo clutched in one hand and two beer bottles and glass wedged between her fingers on the other. Clearly those skills honed at the Nine Bells hadn't yet blunted and rusted.

The blonde intercepted Lara three feet away from the table. It was just close enough that Sam could hear their exchange.

The blonde breathed, "Lara?"

"May I help you?" There were those impeccable public school manners despite the Englishwoman's obvious bewilderment.

"I love your accent."

"Thank you. Uh, do I know you?"

"Not yet. Let's change that."

The blonde slipped a business card into Lara's right front pocket, forcing it deep into the tight space with her index and middle fingers.

Jesus. Talk about forward.

By the look on Lara's face, Sam could assume her friend was thinking the same thing.

"Call me," the blonde smiled before gliding off.

Shaking her head, Lara slipped back into her seat opposite Sam. "What was that about?" she muttered as she decanted her beer.

Something must have given Sam away. Her uncharacteristic silence perhaps. Or a curl to her lip that she couldn't suppress before Lara looked up.

"Sam! What did you do?!"

"I'm sorry, Lara. It was just too funny."

"What did - ?"

"I, hah, may have said that you liked girls."

Sam unleashed her most loveable grin but it still felt too weak an attempt at placating her friend. Lara's face had completely hardened. Evidently so had her heart. "Sam, *Jesus Christ!*" she hissed, unblinking.

An apology was right on the American girl's lips but she swallowed it back. It felt safer not to say anything more, even as the colour flared on Lara's cheeks.

Almost immediately though Lara's scowl softened into a bashful smile. And Sam sat facing her old roommate again.

"You are such a cow sometimes... but very well played," Lara chuckled, and held up her glass. "Cheers."

Stunned, Sam raised and chinked her drink. "Moo."

Unfortunately, the composure that had snared the blonde's attention was a magnet for other eyes in the bar as well. Two guys had followed Lara back from the bar, like hyenas loping after a lioness with a kill draped from her jaws.

"Hi, ladies," they introduced themselves, smiling down at the two women.

"Hey," Sam grinned back. The evening's entertainment had arrived, and in a perfect two-for-one value pack.

"We were wondering if we could join you?"

Sam ignored Lara's hard stare. "Sure."

They were cute guys; a bit too cocky but amusing enough. They kept Sam tittering even as they plied her and Lara with more drinks. Long-haired Lukas was a final year law student, and member of his college running team. Stubbled Ryan was a junior account executive at an advertising agency.

It felt good to flirt again. So normal. A night out on the town. No shipwrecks. No fire-wielding cultists. No undead sun queens. No Lara being pounded into bloody submission because of her stupid, over-trusting best friend.

With the arrival of the boys, Lara had retreated into herself. She was too polite to ever express her disinterest explicitly, but she was a master at turning up the social awkwardness; stripping out all niceties. It was exactly what she'd done to Dan Perkins after she sobered up and found that he was still interested. Embarrassed by what had happened, Lara built her walls of social reserve even higher and avoided him until he lost interest in the unsurmountable climb.

Despite her victorious reserve, Lara had genuinely liked Dan, Sam knew. That wasn't true for Lukas or Ryan. Lara had gone silent. That indicated that she was angry; very angry. Holding in her fury. Sam was used to seeing Lara exasperated. Normally at something Sam

had done, but this was different – part of her Yamatai metamorphosis. These days almost anything could set her seething. Then her reaction was to withdraw. Initially Sam had suspected it was a defence mechanism; over time she had come to suspect it was more of an attempt by Lara to shield the world from her temper.

"So, what are your plans for later?" Lukas asked.

Sam crossed her arms and leaned forward. She whispered conspiratorially, "Oh, my evening is wide open."

Lukas grinned, "I could really do with some sushi."

Sam opened her mouth in mock embarrassment, and then chuckled.

Ryan glanced in Lara's direction. "Oh, I'm in the mood for fish and chips, *guvnor*."

Lara gave him a look that suggested she'd rather force him face first into a deep fryer.

"You want to get out of here?"

Sam swung her face from Lukas to Lara. "What do you say, sweetie?"

"I'd rather not, Sam," she frowned. "I'm quite tired."

Lukas dropped his arm heavily onto Sam's shoulder. "Aw, come on, Lara, *sweetie*. Pleeeeease?"

"No, not tonight. Thank you." Lara turned from Lukas to her old roommate. "Sam if you want to... carry on, go dancing, whatever, I'll just get a taxi."

God, the offer was tempting. But the less time she left Lara alone right now the better.

The American girl exaggerated a sad face. "Sorry, boys. Looks like I'm being cockblocked."

Lara rolled her eyes.

"Ladies, really? The evening's just getting started."

This could go on forever – the begging alternated with Lara's attempts at politely, and poorly, extricating herself.

Sam shrugged free of Lukas's arm. She shot upright, and immediately felt the effect of the evening's drinks surging into her limbs and skull.

"Well, guys," she grinned, dizzy, "It's been fun."

"What? Hey?" Lukas staggered upright. Sam didn't know how many beers he'd had before attaching himself to them remora-style, but between the four of them they'd managed to accumulate a pretty impressive expanse of drinking debris.

"Come on baby," Lukas slurred. "Don't go."

His palm came down on the table top, blocking her exit.

Sam sensed Lara tense to her left. She had to defuse this situation quickly...

Squeezing out a laugh, the American girl closed her hand over Lukas's and lifted it to her lips. His eyes glazed over as Sam sucked on the tip of his index finger. But as her hips slid past his, his other fist clamped around her bicep. "Stay."

"Don't touch her!"

Lara was on her feet. She seized an empty beer bottle by the neck and brought it down on the table's edge. Shards sprayed. In a heartbeat she had the jagged tip an inch from Lukas's throat.

He lunged backwards, releasing his grip on Sam.

"Crazy bitch!"

"Lara! No!" Sam grabbed at her best friend's elbow, clamping both hands around the joint and jerking down. Lara's arm folded and the bottle flew free.

Without the weapon, Lara's rage was instantly smothered. Wild fear flared instead. Sam could see it in her eyes as she scanned the club. Everyone had frozen. Staring. The unpredictable, the uncontrollable; that was Lara, not her surroundings, not anyone else. And the young Englishwoman knew it. She was taking deep, shuddering breaths. Her gaze met Sam's and it was pure undiluted shame.

She bolted.

Lara didn't move like a normal person. Muscle and coordination worked in warrior's union. A pair of bouncers from the entrance were pushing aside bar patrons to reach her. Instead of fleeing, she ran straight at them. She dropped into a crouch as one bouncer grasped at her, dipping under his arm, and then spun out of reach from the second. She was breath-taking to watch, as if performing a dance or kata.

For a moment Lara vanished in the crowd; then Sam caught sight of her profile and ponytail as she darted out the front door.

By the time Sam had elbowed her way outside, Lara was gone. Naturally. She was a born athlete.

Sam pulled her phone out of her clutch purse. She knew Lara had her Galaxy on her. Sam had forced it into her friend's jacket pocket before they left the apartment. Of course it just rang and rang. That was typical Lara, both before and after Yamatai. Enjoying being off the grid. Undisturbed.

The call went to voice mail.

"Lara, answer your phone, *Goddammit!*"

Realising she was yelling, Sam swallowed and started again at a lower octave. "Call me when you get this, okay? Please? I just need to know you're alright."

Completely and disappointingly sober, hands in her pockets, Sam walked the distance back to the apartment. She peered inside every diner and bar she passed. Squinted down every alley and intersecting street. All in the hope that she'd spot Lara. Nothing.

As expected, Sam arrived back at an empty apartment. No Lara. No messages on her phone.

Sam curled up on the couch. She felt numb, but that was preferable to tears. Everything had just gone so horribly, horribly wrong. She pressed a cushion over her face and exhaled into it.

Sam could sleep anywhere. It was one of her special skills. Lara, with a puncture clean through her side, could fight off dozens of men and monsters, not to mention carry her college buddy down a mountain. Sam, well, she could nap in any place, anytime. Hell, she'd even managed to fall asleep on Yamatai, lying on the hard ground with that creep Whitman watching her... waiting for Lara to head back into the hills and deprive Sam of her living, breathing, best friend talisman.

The front door slammed and Sam jolted upright. Lara stood in the entrance hall. Or was trying to anyway. She dropped her keys, then stooped to retrieve them. She teetered for a moment, her arm outstretched, before toppling over. She landed on her hands and knees. Laughing at herself.

Lara was drunk. Very, very drunk. Sam didn't think she'd ever seen her friend so intoxicated. Then again, Sam had never been the sober voice of reason before. In the past she would have been stumbling right at Lara's side, her arm around her friend's waist as she giggled against the Englishwoman's neck and jawline.

Upright again, Lara danced her fingers in front of her face, producing a snicker. She finally spotted Sam. She clumped heavily down the passage, her feet striking the floor in a clumsy rhythm of ball, heel, ball, heel. With a grin, Lara dropped onto the couch next to Sam.

The archaeologist was a mess. She was bleary-eyed, her cheeks flushed. She stank of booze. Below the knee her jeans and boots were mottled with dirt and splashes of God knows what. A dark stain spread down over her left hip where she had clearly ripped her stitches open again. She'd tried to wad the wound with napkins, but it hadn't stopped the haemorrhaging. Lara's left hand was bloody too but Sam couldn't tell if it was from clutching her side, or the result of the bottle shattering back at the bar. Or perhaps even something else.

"Where have you been?" Sam gasped. "What have you done?"

In her right fist, Lara clutched a brown paper bag. She pulled a bottle of Scotch Whisky from it, unscrewed the cap and swallowed a mouthful. She ran her thumb over the bottle's embossed label. Glenfiddich. She smiled softly at it, ignoring Sam completely.

"When I was 15, Roth arrived one Friday at boarding school to take me hiking in Snowdonia for the weekend. All I wanted to do was stay in bed reading. It was wet and cold, and my

nose ran constantly. Everything hurt. I was so bloody miserable. After we made camp for the night he took this out his bag. He said to me – " She switched to a spot-on imitation of Roth's guttural accent, "*Lara, girl, this here will put hair on your chest.*"

"I hope not."

Lara looked down at her cleavage, cross-eyed. "So far so good."

Sam didn't know what to say as her friend took another slug of whisky and stared off into space. Her mouth was trembling ever so slightly. Sam could see the tears teetering on her lower eyelids.

"Lara, hey?" Sam reached out tentatively.

Lara recoiled, but the action had succeeded in slapping her out of her melancholy.

"Tell me something, Sam," she smirked, swinging her face back to her friend. "Do you think I'm a nicer person when I'm drunk?"

Lara turned sideways in her seat. With her elbow propped on the headrest she leaned in to touch her forehead to her friend's. Her bangs tickled Sam's cheek.

"Lara...?"

The archaeologist dismissed her. Her index finger had found Sam's collar bone and was slowly tracing it back and forth. "Maybe I should stay like this, Sam?" she breathed. "Is drunk Lara more fun? Do you prefer her?"

It would have been so easy for the American girl to tilt her head and press her mouth to Lara's perfect, parted lips. The way Lara was looking at her; the way her touch was tailored to trigger one single unthinking response. This wasn't the faux flirting of their college days. Sam was open with her sexuality; Lara was almost as much of an anthropologist as an archaeologist, quietly observing and absorbing information about human social behaviour. Enough years of living and travelling together meant Lara knew Sam's erotic weaknesses as intimately as Sam knew them herself. And right now she was exploiting them.

Sam couldn't even claim that she was surprised by the voice in her head. *Just go with it, it insisted. It would feel so good. Put aside all the worries and lose yourself in her. Know that she's entirely yours, even if just for one night...*

Lust.

If that was all that was in Lara's eyes, Sam would have responded. But Lara's gaze was glazed with alcohol, and even under its murky surface coating Sam could recognise despair mingling with the desire.

In the end, the answer was easy.

"No, I don't prefer her."

The archaeologist's inviting pout clenched into a scowl. She withdrew her caress from Sam and straightened in her seat. "Well, you're no fun."

Looking ahead, she raised the bottle and gulped another mouthful. Her chest and throat were quivering as she strained against another avalanche of anguish.

Sam knelt in front of her best friend. She seized Lara's face in her hands so she couldn't avoid her stare. "Sweetie, you need help."

"No." Lara swatted Sam's arms away. She lumbered to her feet. She began pacing back and forth, rambling to herself as much as to her companion. "Stay away, Sam. If you help me, you get hurt. Worse. Grimm, Alex... Roth." Her voice cracked over the last name. "Reyes was right. Everyone caught with me... has a very low survival rate."

Sam remained on her knees, looking up. "Lara, you saved me. Twice! It's my turn to be there for you."

"You don't understand. I have to go."

"What? What are you talking about?"

Lara stumbled over to the full-length window. She glared at the city. "This world," she prodded the glass. "It's not real... The artifice, the gluttony, the inconsequentiality. We don't need any of this meaningless shit. There aren't any answers here. This is all a distraction, a diversion from the truth."

It all sounded so ridiculous; Lara in wide-eyed... what? The very conspiracy theory mode she used to sneer at? Sam wanted to loudly bark her incredulity but the way her friend stood – shoulders hunched, fingers cupping her downcast face – the wrong response would be equivalent to body charging her through the window.

"Lara, it's my world," she whispered, pushing herself upright.

The archaeologist looked back. "I – I know. That's part of the problem..."

Before Sam could respond, Lara was in front of her again. The Englishwoman threw her arms around her friend. It was a clumsy, hard embrace, so tight that Sam was sure it was as painful to give as it was to receive.

A drunken, tearful flurry of words against Sam's shoulder. "I just – I can't. I tried so hard, Sam. I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry... It's all my fault."

Sam's instinct was to berate her, but she clamped her lips over the "Stop it, Lara!"

Instead, uncharacteristically in silence, she just let her best friend sob and shudder.

Eventually Lara stilled in her arms.

A softer, calmer voice started, "Sam? I need –"

Lara's muscles tensed.

She shoved herself away from Sam and sprinted down the passageway, knocking into the entrance hall table as she veered away from the living area.

Sam followed at a slower pace.

She found Lara on her knees in the guest bathroom, clinging to the toilet bowl as her body purged itself. The sight of Lara hunched like that brought back horrible memories of their first night on the rescue ship. Everything the young woman had been holding at bay for Sam and the others finally sucked her under. Dragged her all the way down and drowned her in suffocating darkness. At that moment, looking desperately upwards, the English Rose had finally been crushed.

It started while they were cleaning and doctoring themselves. The ship's captain had given them access to the on-board medikit, a washroom and change of crewmen's clothing. The latter was more for Lara's benefit than anyone else. While the Englishwoman was in the shower, Sam binned her shredded, bloody, foul-smelling pants and tops.

Sam was still in the washroom, examining her arms to make sure that the last of Matthias's wretched white markings had been scrubbed off her skin. She was standing there when a dazed Lara stepped out of the shower.

Lara had insisted she could wash herself on her own, but the shock seemed to be finally setting in after the numbness. With the defensive layer of grime and gore removed, she suddenly looked soft, pink and alien, like a scorpion that had just shed its exoskeleton. It was strange how quickly, over simply a couple of days, "armoured" had become Lara's default state. She glared at her trembling hands as she tried to dry herself; the way they betrayed her vulnerability.

"Lara? Are you alright?"

The archaeologist clenched her fists guiltily. She grimaced, "I'm fine."

Frowning, Sam helped her friend clean her cuts and scratches. Some were easy to treat. Others... Sam was horrified by the wound on Lara's left side, just above her hip bone. No matter how much she dabbed it – as much as Lara could bear, anyway – it was impossible to remove all the dirt and slimy discharge. It was just an inflamed, raw and blistered mess where Lara had attempted to cauterise the puncture herself.

Eventually they lathered on the antiseptic ointment and applied a wound dressing, hoping that would be enough.

It wasn't.

Lara, Sam and Reyes were assigned a tiny four-sleeper cabin for the duration of their trip back to civilisation. After dinner, where Lara sat as silent and withdrawn as she had on deck, they settled in for the night. Reyes claimed a top bunk, leaving the girls the lower level. Sam wanted – no, needed – to be able to reach out and touch Lara.

Sleep didn't come immediately. Sam lay on her side, her head resting on her forearm, simply watching her best friend on the opposite bed. Even now the bookworm didn't stop. Lara was scowling at her father's notebook as she paged through it for the thirtieth time.

Without a word Sam held out her arm. The motion caught Lara's eye. She turned her head, reached out to squeeze Sam's hand in her own and gave a soft, sad smile.

The next thing Sam remembered was the sight of Lara's empty bunk. The sheets and blankets were an entwined mess, bunched to one side with half the mattress exposed.

Sam slipped out the cabin into the corridor. They were below deck with no portholes but given the absence of crew, and complete silence apart from the thrum of the engines, Sam guessed it was the middle of the night.

She padded down the passage, pausing when she spotted light coming from the communal head. Sam was at least a dozen feet away but with the door ajar she could see inside. Lara was braced over the sink, pawing running water at her face. She was breathing heavily; Sam could see that by the noticeable expansion and contraction of her ribcage.

The Englishwoman turned off the tap and took a step backwards. Her legs folded. There was a muffled thunk as she disappeared from view.

Sam darted forward.

She found Lara sprawled on the floor, partially in a puddle of vomit. She'd clearly been sick a handful of times. And she'd missed the toilet at least once. At that moment though, she was whimpering; trying to muster enough strength in her arms to push herself upright.

Lara had gone to bed in men's boxers and an oversize white T-shirt. The fabric of the latter was stained on the left side where her wound had already oozed through all the dressings.

"Oh God!"

Sam propped her friend up against the wall. Lara looked terrible under the harshness of the fluorescent light – the olive tint of her skin faded to bread-dough white. Her eyes were bloodshot, the vessels ruptured by her violent vomiting.

Her skin was sticky and hot. Too hot.

"Lara, Jesus, you're burning up."

Her saviour looked straight through her. "Sam. I promised. I have to – She needs me."

Sam was horrified. After everything she had endured for her companions, after everything she had willed herself through, it was Lara's body that had finally overwhelmed her.

"Sweetie, I'm here. It's me. Sam." She pressed her palm against Lara's clammy cheek. At the touch recognition sparked in Lara's eyes. She smiled at Sam. Then her pupils rolled back, her head lolled, and she went limp in her friend's arms.

Oh God, no.

"Lara! Stay with me, Lara! *Please!*" she yelled, and then tried to shake sense back into her friend. Eventually the Englishwoman moaned something incoherent, and her fingers flared over Sam's forearm. Her eyes remained closed but she was back in her body at least.

"Help! Someone, help!"

They came running at that; Jonah, Reyes and two crewmen.

After that, Sam had spent two days at Lara's bedside, trying to keep fluids in her rescuer as the latter retched, shivered and burned. At one point Lara had even had a seizure, arching back on the mattress, her hands clawed. Even worse though was the crying. Lara sobbed and sobbed, a mess of mucus, shudders and incomprehensible cries until her body was completely out of tears.

Once they reached Osaka, there was a flurry of red tape and paperwork before paramedics were allowed on board. Within minutes of being examined, Lara was on a drip, under an oxygen mask and loaded onto a stretcher. Sam had never been more relieved – that morning as they entered port, no matter how much she shook, yelled and pleaded, she hadn't even been able to rouse her friend.

Sam was a sympathy vomiter, but she swallowed her squeamishness and knelt down next to Lara.

"So, a Pom who can't outdrink a Yank...? You should be ashamed, Lara Croft."

The Englishwoman groaned, and puked again.

"Oh, sweetie." Sam winced. Ever so gently she brushed strands of hair away from her friend's face to tuck behind her ear.

Suddenly Lara was standing. Sam was knocked onto her buttocks at the speed of the motion. She stared up at her unsteady companion, who returned her gaze, groggy and pale.

"Lara, you need help. I'm here for you."

"No," she scowled. "Only I can do this."

"You don't have to get through all this alone. I keep telling you." Sam got to her feet. She reached for Lara's arm. "I know you think that's not true. I know you've lost everyone you've ever loved but that doesn't mean – "

That was the wrong thing to say.

Lara jerked her elbow away from Sam.

"Lara, I'm trying! Please!"

"I don't need your help."

The way her best friend was looking at her – with a glare of scalding incredulity – tipped Sam into her own pool of fury and frustration. She guzzled down mouthfuls of the bitter-tasting stuff. Then immediately spewed it back out.

"Jesus, Lara, you weren't the only one on that island you know? We all went through Hell. You need to stop pushing everyone away, cutting yourself off. You can talk to me. Stop acting like you're – "

Another poor choice of words.

"Acting?" Lara flinched at the words. She backed out of the bathroom, shaking her head. "Acting?" She repeated. "You really have no clue do you, Miss Skinny Jeans?"

Sam gaped, "That's not fair, Lara!"

"Fair?" Lara laughed bitterly. "What do you know about fair? You have everything. *EVERYTHING*. Money. Parents who actually gives a shit about you despite all your pathetic attempts at rebellion. Me. And what have you done to deserve any of it?"

"I – "

"I bet you haven't ever even thought about it? You're just so bloody self-absorbed." She took a breath and continued with a smirk, "God, I wish I could be as shallow and petty and spoiled as you are. So blissfully ignorant about everything and everyone."

Sam could feel the tears now. They burned in her eyes like acid, running down her throat and nasal passages. They seared and blistered as they accelerated to her heart.

Sam kept seeing the Lara of her college years standing before her in the passageway. Lara pre-Yamatai. That gentle, quiet, tender-hearted girl who had never said a hurtful thing in her life. All those times – whether it was from exam stress, a bad breakup or self-worth-crushing parental encounter – that Lara had been there for Sam, sitting on the foot of her bed. A mug of hot cocoa. A debauched evening out. Simply a hug and shy smile. She didn't necessarily find comforting words easy but the archaeologist's actions always showed how much she cared.

At that very moment though they were standing in the entrance hall, and Lara was sneering at Sam with a bad American accent. "*Oh sweetie, I must look soooo terrible.*"

Her words were consciously cruel, a barbed blade designed to do as much damage going in as coming out. Just like a climbing pick.

"I hate you," Sam hissed; a reflex reaction to her friend's metamorphosis.

Lara twirled her hand in the air and bowed with a flourish. "Another calm, understated response from Samantha Nishimura."

Sam pressed her palms to her temples. "Stop it, Lara! This isn't you."

That produced a self-satisfied grin.

"Good. I want you to say it, Sam."

"Say what?"

"That you wish I'd died on that island."

"No, Lara, I wish I'd died on Yamatai so I didn't have to see you like this. So that I didn't make you into this."

Lara cackled. "It's not always about you, Sam. Amazingly."

"And it's not just about you, Lara Croft," Sam shot back. "All of us suffered there."

"Horse shit. You have no idea what I went through. Alone. All that time. For you. For all of you."

"I would if you'd fucking talk about it."

"*I don't want to!* Stop telling me what to do."

Sam half expected Lara to ball her fists and stamp her feet. Her pout was ridiculous. The American laughed, "Stop being so childish!"

Lara's eyes narrowed. "What did you say?"

"You heard me."

"Repeat it again. To my face." Lara rounded on Sam.

"You, Lara Croft, are being fucking childish!"

"*YOU* are telling *ME* that?! Christ, you are so superficial. If it's not about clothes or cock –"

Sam slapped her.

Sam had a complicated relationship with her mother and father. She'd dated and been harassed by a lot of dicks. But she had never *ever* hit anyone before.

There was a moment where the two friends both stood frozen. Sam's gaze travelled between her stinging palm and Lara, whose face had been turned away by the force of the blow.

"Lara, oh my God! I'm so sorry."

Sam reached for her friend. But it wasn't Lara who turned back. It was Mathias.

PART 3 - SACRIFICE

At that moment, Sam knew exactly what all those Solarii cultists had seen; had felt at the sight of Lara. The weird dichotomy. A soft-faced, slender young woman, or, rather, the skin of a girl, stretched over battered, barbed iron. No mercy there. Just brutal purpose, rigid, waiting to be unleashed like the swing of a battle axe.

"Lara," Sam stumbled over the words, "I'm so sorry. I didn't mean – "

A hand around her throat.

Lara's forward surge was as impossible to withstand as a tsunami. Sam was driven backwards across the open space of the entrance hall. She collided with a wall. Lara was against her, teeth bared, eyes unblinking. Feral.

Sam clawed at the fingers digging into her flesh.

"Lara, Jesus, you're hurting me! La – " That was all Sam could squeeze out before Lara wedged her forearm against the American girl's throat, right under her jawline.

"This must be a first for you," Lara snarled. "Not getting your way."

She increased pressure against Sam's trachea.

"You want to know what I really went through? Everything I did to save your pathetic, spoiled arse?"

Sam spluttered, fighting her gag reflex. She grabbed hold of Lara's arm with both hands, tugging down to relieve as much force on her windpipe as possible. At that moment it was the only self-defence tip she could remember.

God, I should have kept going to Judo classes like Dad wanted.

Lara was fumbling at her own thigh – reaching with her free hand for the pistol or pick that wasn't there. The instant her scowl dropped to join the search, Sam cupped the archaeologist's elbow and heaved it across herself, off her neck.

The motion threw Lara off balance. Her shoulder connected with the wall as Sam darted aside. But the American wasn't fast enough. Lara lashed out with her leg. It connected with Sam's shin, doing its job. The documentary-maker stumbled and then sprawled. Falling from standing height, her chest connected hard with the marble flooring, winding her.

Lara was over her in a heartbeat. Grabbing hold of Sam's tricep, she flipped her friend onto her back. Sam looked up, horrified. Lara's fist was drawn back. The same muddle of fury and chilly disdain was still in her glare.

"No, Lara! *Pleeease!*"

Sam wasn't sure what did it. The terrified plea. The fact that she had started gulping hard on a fresh wave of tears. But Lara stopped. Or, rather, the Lara Sam knew was back behind her eyes. The archaeologist didn't say anything. Sam didn't think she could.

Lara just stood there, trembling. Her hand unclenched and she gawked at her fingers like they were blades peppered with flecks of flesh and blood. Her look of panic must have mirrored Sam's own, tarred with extra layer of dark, sticky shame.

Lara's arms fell to her sides. She let her gaze sink down to meet her best friend's. The Englishwoman's throat was quivering, but she couldn't squeeze out any words. She spun and sprinted for the front door. It slammed behind her.

Rage, run, regret and repeat. That was what Lara's life had become post-Yamatai. And Sam could see that every painful revolution, a little of the old Lara – the bookish girl Sam knew and loved, who would babble about museum exhibits but have to feign enthusiasm when Sam unboxed a pair of Jimmy Choo's – was ground up in the mill.

What was left was a mangled mess of jagged, exposed bones, bloody wounds and perpetual agony. And although her pain couldn't come close to rivalling her best friend's torment, it still hurt Sam to witness, knowing that no matter what she did, she couldn't find Lara's hand to help guide her out of the nightmare.

Still on the floor, Sam drew her knees up to her chest and cried.

Lara didn't come back. Unsurprisingly, she didn't answer her phone. Eventually Sam gave up on leaving messages. She was scared to leave the apartment though in case her former roommate did return.

Instead the documentary-maker sat in the lounge all day, editing footage on her Macbook. Or trying to, anyway. She had hoped the task of categorising all the clips from the previous year's Eastern European adventure would keep her occupied. However, Lara had been her travel buddy on that trip, and she was in half the shots, nose buried in her travel guide or griping at Sam to put her camera down.

So what was supposed to distract Sam from thinking about her friend only made her feel more anxious and upset. This was the old Lara on the screen, the shy, earnest girl who needed Sam's help in unleashing her inner party animal, but was a wonderfully wild partner in crime on those few occasions when she let herself be untethered.

The video clips showed both aspects of Lara's personality. In one scene, Sam had managed to capture the archaeologist in profile, her notebook open in her lap while she gazed out the train window at the lush passing countryside. Beautiful. Contemplative. Way too serious as far as Sam was concerned at the time. If she'd known then what her friend would morph into she would never have complained.

The next clip was of Lara, shot in medium close-up in a bar. She was wasted, slurring an explanation of Roman expansion in the region as she demonstrated settlement patterns with used shot glasses. Only Lara could be educational while smashed. Just as Sam was the only one able to help her cut loose. The Englishwoman ended her lecture by posing, squeezing her cleavage together and gifting a giggling Sam with a very impressive duckface.

I miss you, Lara. Please come back to me.

It didn't help that every time she opened the fridge Sam spotted a bottle of champagne she had bought to celebrate the screening of Lara's TV interview – which would no doubt raise

funds for the archaeologist's next expedition. The interview was on that evening, and the initial plan had been to watch it sitting side by side on the couch. Then afterwards they were going to get horribly drunk.

The day of the interview had been especially rough. Not that you would have thought anything was wrong looking at Lara. To a casual observer she appeared serene – perfectly poised in charcoal, fitted trousers, and a crisp white blouse; the top few buttons undone so her jade pendant was visible. Combined with her casually upswept hair, she looked every bit the English lady she was.

Stepping back for a more objective, all-in-one assessment, Sam was proud of her personal styling efforts. She could imagine Lara in a pair of riding boots, galloping across the lawn of her family's estate like a genderbent Austen hero or something. The image was so amusing that every time her mind wandered to it, Sam couldn't stop smiling.

She would have shared the anecdote with Lara but there were no smiles to be unearthed there. The archaeologist was very tense, which made her even more surly and withdrawn than usual. For the fifth time that morning already she was reading over a set of questions and her scripted responses. There would still be some surprises, but in writing up the interview agreement, Sam and her father's lawyers had pushed for Lara to receive most of the questions in advance.

Still, this was the first time Lara would be talking about what happened on Yamatai. Ever. Sam was nervous; she was sure the situation wouldn't be nearly as bad if Lara had spoken to her. Or even a therapist. But of course she had stubbornly refused to do either.

It was nice to feel needed for once, though. Since Yamatai, Sam had been walking a tightrope, wanting to be there for Lara but wary of forcing assistance on her best friend, who was increasingly sensitive about self-sufficiency. With the interview though, Lara was rigid with terror. And the world they were operating in was Sam's domain. With her media conglomerate father and her own choice of profession, the American girl was comfortable in studios and on sets. So it was her opportunity to step up and shield Lara. Reverse the roles.

Sam hadn't been able to suppress her self-satisfied smile when they reached the network's building and Lara actually sought out her hand. Or her body did anyway. Lara was looking up at the skyscraper as they stepped out of the taxi. Still, her forearm wove around the inside of Sam's and her fingers found those of her friend. The girls didn't make eye contact when it happened so the filmmaker was able to let her grin spread guilt-free. Superwoman Lara Croft needing hopeless Sam Nishimura? How could she not feel good about that?

It was the only thing she felt good about all day though. The experience was an ambivalent one for Sam. She was in her element; she wanted to ask questions, get her hands on the cameras, charm her way into the editing suite. But it wasn't fair to abandon Lara, who was out of her depth and flailing.

The greetings alone were anxiety-tinted.

On meeting Lara, the show's producer shook her hand heartily.

"Lady Croft, it's a pleasure to meet you."

"Please don't call me that" was the polite, winced response.

Even worse though was a moment once Lara was seated in front of the camera. Veteran newsman-turned-interviewer Brock Harrison was making small talk with her while set-up continued around them.

Sam was hovering at the director's side, arms crossed, peering at his monitor.

"Daniels, some more light on Miss Croft."

A crew member dragged a unit around and began fiddling with the adjustment knobs.

Distracted by his motion, Lara looked directly into the cluster of lamps. And froze.

Harrison leaned forward. "Miss Croft? Miss Croft, are you alright?"

Sam wasn't sure where Lara's consciousness had retreated. The only relief was that at that moment she was more quivering deer, petrified in the headlights, than snarling, cornered lioness.

The director joined in Harrison's calls. "Miss Croft?"

No response.

"Lara?" Sam pleaded. Then more stridently, "Lara, hey?!"

That tugged the archaeologist back. She swung her head from side to side, taking in all the worried faces. Her fingers dug into the armrests.

"I – Please – uh – " She shoved herself upright. "Excuse me for a moment."

Her hands were trembling as she detached her microphone. Dropping it in her seat, she bolted for the exit.

The director threw up his arms. "Oh, for fuck's sake!"

Sam could hear the mutterings begin to swell all around her.

It's up to you, Nishimura.

"Nerves. It's just nerves," she announced to the room. Then to the scowling director, she added, "I'll get her. Just give me five minutes."

The promise was a gamble. Out in the corridor, there was no sign of Lara. She could have already fled the building as far as Sam knew. The Englishwoman was that fast.

Sam chanced the fire escape.

Lara had climbed half a flight up before stopping. She was bent double, her forehead against the railing. Her eyes were clenched shut as she took deep shuddering breaths.

"Babe?" Sam started to approach with an embrace.

Lara simply held up a hand. "No, Sam. I can't be touched right now..."

"Lara?" Sam took a step forward.

"Please!" Lara's head shot up. "Please. Just stay back."

Her facial expression was so anguished. She was chest-deep in water, trying to plug the dam with her fingers even as the cracks spread. And what was worst was that it was Sam who had encouraged her to do the interview, when she clearly wasn't ready.

Lara started muttering, "I thought – " She inhaled deeply. "I thought I could... Shit!"

She spun and punched the wall behind her.

"Shit!"

A second strike.

And a third.

"Sod it!"

Sam was concerned her friend was going to fracture her fist. She was even contemplating the physical danger of disobeying Lara, running forward to intercept her arm so she couldn't hurt herself further. But then the archaeologist stopped on her own. She slumped against the wall and let her gaze climb to the ceiling. She closed her eyes. When she opened them again, the anguish was gone. Instead there stood Lara the cold apex predator. Too calm; capable of deadly response at any provocation. It had become her new defensive mode.

Like this she strode past Sam without acknowledging her, back into the studio and reclaimed her seat.

The interview went well enough from that point, all things considered.

Lara was typically modest about making the most newsworthy, imagination-capturing archaeological find since Tutankhamun's tomb or Machu Picchu. Although the experiences of the island had ground down her enthusiasm for finding it, Lara still spoke eloquently about Yamatai and some of the treasures that had crossed her path. It hadn't taken much convincing on Sam's part to play down the supernatural aspect of events with a shrugged, "I can't explain some of the things that happened on the island."

Although it clearly stung Lara to leave out chunks of the truth, she was still wary of sounding like a lunatic. Particularly when the inevitable comparison came up. It was one of the unscripted questions, and Sam immediately tensed.

Harrison began, "Your parents were controversial figures in the archaeology community..."

"Yes. Yes, they were."

"What do you say about comments that you're a chip off the old block?"

Lara continued to hold her head erect. "It's true I resented my father for years; thought the same of him as everyone else. But now, more than ever, I am *proud* to be his daughter."

"And what about claims that events on Yamatai will follow you around? Cloud your reputation for years to come?"

There was the spark then of something in Lara's eyes. Steel on flint. Even seasoned pro Harrison stumbled for a second under her gaze. "I intend to prove them wrong."

"There are reports that you killed many of the island's all-male cult." Harrison consulted his notes. "The Solarii? That you killed them in self-defence. What do you have to say about that?"

"I'm not allowed to comment. The investigation is ongoing. All I can say is that I'm in frequent contact with the Japanese authorities. And they have my full cooperation. I expect that my testimony, and that of my colleagues, will corroborate what the Solarii have to say."

Lara was even a lot more diplomatic about that prick Whitman than Sam would have been. The Englishwoman simply covered his part of the story with a resigned sigh. "Doctor Whitman was one of the last to fall. He tried to negotiate... and failed."

The interview ended with the expected question.

"So what's next for you, Lara Croft?"

"The line between our myths and truth is more fragile than we've been led to believe, Mr Harrison. That intersection is where you will find me, searching for answers."

After the interview, they caught a taxi back to the apartment, Lara scowling and silent the whole way. Sam was scared to say anything. At that moment she didn't think any attempts at levity would be appreciated.

No sooner had the Englishwoman stepped inside than she yanked off her blouse and trousers, stomping to her room. Sam was still in the living room, removing her phone and other gadgetry from her bag, when Lara returned maybe a minute later. She was wearing her running kit – sweat pants and a tank top. Her iPod earbuds were already in place and she strode past Sam and out the front door without a word.

It was raining outside but it was still three hours before a drenched Lara reappeared. In her state it was hard to tell if she'd been crying or not, which Sam guessed was kind of the point. The American girl wanted desperately to comfort her former roommate but she was still wary of forcing any demonstration of concern, verbal or physical, on her. Instead she shadowed Lara into the kitchen.

The archaeologist was still rasping from her run. She poured herself a glass of water, downed it and prepared a second. Her first step away from the sink, she swayed backwards. The glass shattered on the tiles. Lara just managed to catch the edge of the kitchen island, preventing her complete collapse.

She clung to it, staring at the mess on the floor. Tentatively she reached down to begin the process of cleaning up.

Sam slid under the archaeologist's arm as she did so, taking her friend's weight and helping her to stand upright again. Even supported, Lara was wobbly on her heels. She was ashen faced, shivering, utterly depleted.

Just like on the rescue ship, stillness had become her weakness. Whenever she stopped moving, her body betrayed her.

Lara's eyes moved apologetically between Sam's face and the broken glass. She didn't have the energy to say anything.

It devastated the documentary-maker to see Lara like this, but she camouflaged her concern with a gentle smile. "Come on, it's okay. Don't worry, I'll take care of that."

She led her friend to the guest bathroom. She sat Lara down on the toilet seat. "You've had a long day. Let's run you a bath and get you into bed, alright?"

A single nod was all the response she got.

While the tub filled, Sam helped Lara out of her clothes. The younger woman had so over-exhausted herself, she couldn't find the strength to either lift her arms or be embarrassed about her nakedness. Her flesh was worryingly hot to the touch.

"Sweetie, is your fever back?"

A whispered, "I – I'm not sure."

Jesus.

Sam helped lower Lara into the bath. She left her best friend alone to wash herself, if she did even that. At that point all Sam wanted was for Lara's body temperature to regulate itself.

Five minutes later, when she returned to the bathroom, she found Lara hadn't moved at all; she just sat there, her knees clutched to her chest.

Sam cupped handfuls of warm water over her friend's back and shoulders. She sponged her down and then helped her out onto the rim of the tub so Sam could dry her and rebandage the wound on her side. The dressing was waterproof but Lara's run had saturated it with sweat and a fresh blotch of blood. Sam had become an expert at doctoring Lara's wounds since the archaeologist's release from hospital. The running joke Sam told herself was that if filmmaking didn't work out for her, she should consider first aid instruction.

Sam helped Lara step into a pair of pyjamas and guided her to the bedroom. The Englishwoman had stopped trembling but she looked haggard and uncharacteristically unfocused. Usually so insistent about being self-reliant, her lack of protest was concerning as Sam sat her up in bed and placed items in both hands.

"I know you said you're not hungry, Lara, but I want you to try this meal replacement shake. And swallow this."

Lara rolled the white tablet around in her palm. "What's this?"

"A sleeping pill."

There was that familiar spark of defiance in Lara's expression and posture. Ever since her discharge she had refused painkillers, beta blockers and anything else she claimed made her slow to react; dulled her senses.

But Sam was also tired, and she wasn't up for that debate again. As her friend's lips parted, Sam muttered, "I'm not arguing with you, Lara. You want to fight with me about it, we can do it tomorrow. But you need rest, please... You – You can't keep this up. I can't watch you..." She couldn't say it. *Kill yourself.*

Lara seemed to get the message anyway.

Eying Sam the whole time, she tossed back the tablet with her drink. Then she let her companion lie her down and pull the covers up to her chest.

Just then, Lara's palm pressed over the back of her former roommate's hand.

"Sam."

"Yeah?"

Lara raised her friend's fingers to her lips. "Thank you."

She kissed Sam's knuckles.

It was such an uncharacteristically intimate gesture from Lara that the American girl found herself gaping. Which wasn't the best reaction to give her self-conscious best friend. A flush returned some colour to Lara's cheeks. "I – I feel like I haven't said it enough."

"You don't have to. There is nothing I can do to ever repay you. It's alright, I promise." Sam squeezed Lara's hand once more before detaching her grip. "You need anything, you call for me, okay?"

After a day spent at Lara's side, holding her hand, undressing and dressing her, bathing her, feeding her, supporting her figuratively and literally, it felt strange to Sam to be retreating to her room alone. A natural conclusion would have been to climb into bed with Lara; to succumb to unconsciousness holding each other. But if she slipped under the covers, Lara would probably freak, or feel so horribly uncomfortable that she wouldn't sleep at all. So Sam flopped down alone on her big, empty king-size mattress with a sigh.

The next morning Sam woke to find Lara's bed made, her friend out pounding the pavement and park pathways once more.

Through the apartment's floor-to-ceiling windows, the sun rose and sank. Still no Lara. At least twenty four hours had to pass before Sam could file a missing person's report. She wasn't sure how many times she'd have checked her phone for messages by then. A few hundred, perhaps?

Where are you, Lara? Please let me know you're alright.

Distracted and disinterested, Sam microwaved something from the freezer for dinner. She was settled in for the evening when *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* started.

Sam couldn't deny that it was a star-making interview. Lara would totally be in demand afterwards. She couldn't have given the show's makers anything more. She even teared up at the mention of Roth's name.

The Englishwoman offered an irresistible combination of little girl lost and sultry, confident badass. She could shift between the two with a tilt of her head. And at only 21, she had a long career ahead of her. Alone, Lara Croft was going to do for archaeology what all those celebrity chefs had done for cuisine. She'd hate it, and rile against the label, but she was going to become an icon. Not that Sam didn't already know it. At times it seemed like 80% of the footage she shot was of her best friend in her most candid moments.

Less than ten minutes after the credits rolled on the interview, there was a knock on the door. Sam opened it to find Lara on the threshold, in the same dishevelled state she'd been the night before. Except clearly sober this time.

The archaeologist immediately lowered her gaze. She wouldn't meet Sam's eyes.

"You have a key, Lara," the American girl said softly.

"I know, but it didn't feel right to just... After what happened... I thought..."

The Englishwoman raised her head. Sam could see from her too-wet, red-ringed eyes and blotched cheeks that she'd been crying.

"Are – Are you alright?" Lara croaked; the straining tendons in her neck in contrast to her muted facial expression. She half-heartedly lifted her hand, gesturing in the direction of Sam's throat.

It did hurt, actually. Like the early stages of a head cold. A permanent low-grade irritation; worse when Sam swallowed. But she couldn't tell Lara that. "Yeah, I'm fine," she muttered, while fingering the most painful spot.

Sam stepped aside then, motioning Lara inside the apartment.

The archaeologist entered sheepishly. "I won't be long. I just came to get my things."

"You're leaving?" Sam's worst fear kneed her in the gut. She was surprised that she didn't bend double at that moment.

Lara looked at her blankly. "I thought that would be for the best."

"Lara, are we even going to talk about what happened?"

"What's to talk about, Sam? What I did... it's unforgiveable."

"Shouldn't I be the judge of that?"

Lara shook her head. Sadly. "I – I didn't want to leave things before..." She stumbled over her words. "I had to apologise. I just – "

She started sobbing. Deep shameful heaves, her chin against her chest; her arms limp at her sides. "I'm so sorry, Sam, I am so sorry, for everything."

"Oh, babe." Sam rushed forward, elbowing aside the awkwardness of the situation. She wrapped her friend in a hug.

Lara resisted for a moment, trying to push herself away. But Sam's touch seemed to sap all strength from her struggle. The Englishwoman pressed her face into Sam's shoulder, clenching her friend to her as she shuddered. Locked in the embrace, Sam stroked Lara's hair; the small of her back.

"Hey, it's alright."

The archaeologist's legs buckled. The girls both sank to the floor, Sam controlling their descent as much as she could.

For the second time in 24 hours, they were back on their knees in the entrance hall. Nothing post-Yamatai was normal anymore. Nothing. Sam would have laughed at the ridiculous of the situation if she wasn't cradling her broken best friend.

"What's wrong with me, Sam?" Lara sniffed into the crook of her companion's neck. "I am so messed up. I can't even – " She murmured, "I'm a monster."

Sam kept running her fingers through her friend's hair. "You're not a monster, Lara. You're a hero."

"No, I'm not."

"Really? You study history, Croft. You *know* there are no real knights in shining armour. Heroes are the people who make the hard choices. They act when no one else will. They keep going. They make the sacrifices. And they live with their actions."

Sam took Lara by her shoulders and sat her upright so that they were looking into each other's eyes.

"You saved me, Lara. You got Reyes back to her daughter. Roth's daughter too, you said. Alisha could have lost both her parents."

Sam wanted to add *you of all people know what that loss feels like*, but she stopped herself. Instead she murmured, "But because of you, she got her mom back. You did what it took to get us all home."

Lara wiped the back of her hand across her nose. "When did you start talking sense?" A smile cracked through her teary dismay.

"Oh, you know. You hang out with way-too-serious library nerds for long enough and it starts to rub off on you." The American girl rolled her eyes for extra effect. "Being wise is *such* a buzzkill though."

Lara chuckled. Almost immediately though her face clouded over again. Her gaze slipped from her friend's. "I did things, Sam, on Yamatai. I killed dozens of men. Dozens."

"It was self-defence. Those bastards were trying to murder you."

Lara shook her head. "No, you – you don't understand. I didn't need to kill them. Not all of them." The archaeologist sneaked a glance at Sam's face, clearly expecting terror. When all she found was a worried frown – Sam's default facial expression around Lara these days – she tentatively intercepted the American girl's hands. She squeezed Sam's soft palms between her own rough fingers. It gave her something "safe" to focus on instead of her friend's reaction.

"I started to... enjoy it, Sam. After Roth, I was so angry. There were men I didn't need to kill. But I wanted to. I would sneak up on them, crush their windpipes, drive my climbing axe into the back of their skulls, plunge arrows into their necks with my hands. I wasn't panicking any more. It wasn't survival. There were moments where I stood there completely calm. The metal would pierce their flesh and for a second they would just look at me. The blood would well up in the delicate little indent I'd made. And then it would overflow, streaming down their skin in rivulets. In the end, they were scared of me. They ran, crying out for mercy and I hunted them. I wanted them to hurt. I wanted everyone to hurt like I did. I – I still do."

She looked up at Sam and a fresh tear spilled down onto her cheek. Her jaw quivered. "I can't be around people anymore. I'm completely fucked up."

She'd wanted to be the strong one for once, to be the rock Lara could cling to in the rapids but emotion was swelling in Sam's chest too. She tried to hold it back but as her vision misted over, a torrent poured from her lips, "It's my fault, Lara. I was too trusting. Mathias. Whitman. If I hadn't been so fucking stupid, you wouldn't have had to rescue me. You wouldn't have had to go through all that."

"I led us to the island, Sam. Roth followed *my* directions. If it wasn't for me we would never have reached Yamatai in the first place. The rest of the crew wouldn't have been executed, those rescue pilots wouldn't have died and I wouldn't have killed all those Solarii."

"If I hadn't been so naïve – "

"We were both naïve." Lara's lip twitched, "Foolish girls."

"Maybe the universe should have given us a break then," Sam grumbled.

Lara smiled weakly. She inhaled and closed her eyes, willing some kind of calm. Still gripping her friend's hands, she leaned in and pressed her forehead to Sam's.

Her voice had dropped to almost a whisper. "I'm so scared I'm going to hurt someone. What I almost did last night... I can't lose you, Sam. You're all I have left."

That was the agonising truth. Sam hadn't truly realised how alone Lara was in the world until the hospital in Japan. The sight of the young woman lying unconscious in intensive care, utterly isolated. Nobody coming to sit at her bedside. As much as Sam clashed with her parents, they were always there for her when she needed them. Her father was on his way at that very moment. He was a stoic man, but Sam actually recognised worry tinting his brusque questions over the phone.

"Next of kin?" a nurse asked Sam on arrival at the hospital. The American girl was the only one in a position to fill out paperwork on Lara's behalf.

"Uh – She... Lara doesn't have anyone."

In the past it would have been Roth. But now there was nobody. Lara was 21; of age. She wasn't a minor. She didn't need a guardian.

As a result it took plenty of big-smile pleading on Sam's part, as well as the influence of her media conglomerate father, for the Nishimuras to receive otherwise confidential reports on Lara's condition.

It was touch-and-go for the first three days. Lara was put on a powerful cocktail of antibiotics and antiretrovirals. Her septicaemia was advanced, and her body was fighting a host of secondary infections. Then there were her injuries. Seven fractured ribs. Torn abdominal muscles. A sprained left shoulder and three fingers. Severe bruising. Concussion. At least three deep gashes in addition to the festering side puncture that all required stitches.

And there was Sam with her tender ankle, but otherwise unhurt.

At least the always prepared, pedantic archaeologist was up to date with her vaccinations.

Still, the young woman in the hospital bed wasn't Lara as far as Sam was concerned. With her long hair down, draped over the pillow, she was a different person – a soft-faced girl, bruised and battered, all too vulnerable. A victim.

Although that was only at first glance... Lara was kept heavily sedated and, at least to begin with, buckled into her bed with restraints. For good reason.

Lara had come round while Sam was being checked out in one of the examination rooms. The American girl still wasn't sure where her friend found the strength, but Lara, completely disorientated, had ripped out her IV and slid from her bed. Wearing only her half-falling-off hospital gown, she staggered out into the corridor. Delirious, she dragged her drip stand behind her.

"Sam?"

It was the tail end of visiting hours, and the passages were clogged with moving, murmuring bodies. Everyone speaking Japanese. Everyone staring at Westerner Lara, feverish and panicked, dripping blood from her freshly torn flesh.

"Sam!" the Englishwoman yelled. "Sam!"

It was only then, on hearing her name called over and over in Lara's strident voice, that Sam leapt off the examination table. With her consulting doctor, they peered out into the corridor.

Lara was standing maybe forty feet away; struggling breathlessly against alternating waves of fury and fear. She had the drip stand in both fists, pointed at a middle-aged man who was attempting to approach her, mumbling in broken English.

Lara wasn't having any of it.

"Where is she, you bastards?"

As the man got close, he reached out, attempting to soothe her.

"Don't touch me!" Lara swung the stand at him.

Gasping and muttering, the crowd backed away.

At that point, three hospital orderlies appeared. They rounded on Lara, backing her into a corner.

"No!" she snarled. "Get away from me. Stay back! I'm warning you."

She had the stand raised in front of her, wielding it as a weapon. She jabbed it at the men as they drew near. All the while her eyes were darting around, seeking an escape route.

Lara got in a handful of swings, two connecting, before the orderlies managed to tackle her. She went down. Hard. The young Englishwoman collided with a trolley of medical supplies, upending it. Stainless steel clattered. A tide of boxes, tubing, bandages and plastic bags spilled across the floor.

One of the orderlies was on top of Lara in the midst of the debris; another had her right leg hugged to his chest.

Lara was shrieking as she clawed at the too slippery linoleum, unable to pull herself free.

"No! Let me go! I have to – Sam! Please, Sam!"

The archaeologist thrashed and kicked and tried to headbutt. But she was pinned. The first orderly straddled her, his knees on her biceps.

Lara's screams gave way to desperate sobs. "Sam! I have to save Sam! Sam! I promised! *Plleaasssee?*"

She was still crying, immobilised, when a doctor slipped a needle into her inner elbow.

Sam arrived at the scene for the tail end of the spectacle. She couldn't get to Lara's side through the crowd of onlookers to reassure her with touch, but she was close enough to be seen and heard.

"Lara, I'm here. It's alright. We're safe." She said it softly.

Lara's head shot up at the sound of Sam's voice. She smiled as a wave of relief washed over her. Then the sedative took hold and she went limp.

They kept her medicated after that while her fever raged. It was weird for Sam to see Lara so still, pale and completely unresponsive. Her friend just lay there, her breathing shallow as every so often tears squeezed out from between her eyelids. Sam didn't want to think about the pain she was in. Physically and mentally.

Meanwhile, the media frenzy around Lara and her Yamatai discovery was intensifying. Late one evening Sam entered Lara's room to find a paparazzo bent over her friend's unconscious form.

He had pulled back the sheets to take photos of Lara and her injuries – even going so far as to push aside her gown to expose the worst of the wounds. Her legs were completely bare, the skin of her hip visible, the fabric barely covering her pubic bone.

Sam lost it.

"What the *fuck* do you think you're doing?!"

She was a complete camera geek but at that moment all reverence she had for the technology was forgotten. Sam grabbed the man's Canon by the lens and jerked it down. It clattered on the floor, the macro attachment snapping off.

The man cursed and threatened her as he groped for his equipment. Sam scowled at him, "So sue me!"

She shoved him out of the room, swearing with every jerky strike. It wasn't close to being enough – it felt so inconsequential – but it was the only protection she could offer Lara as her saviour fought for her life. Again.

Once the reporter was gone, Sam returned to Lara's bedside. She straightened the Englishwoman's gown, restoring her modesty. Then she tucked the bedding back around her slender body.

Hugs and hand holding. That had been the extent of the friends' physical affection before Yamatai. Sam had never touched Lara's face before. Well, maybe when she had convinced her roommate to let her apply make-up, but that was different. A very different kind of touch.

Sam rested her palm on Lara's forehead, stroking her thumb back and forth.

"I am so sorry, Lara," the American girl stammered.

She kissed her friend's clammy skin. Wishing her back from near-death. Hoping her own tears would make a difference.

Four days later Sam was sitting at Lara's bedside, half-doing as she flipped through the latest issue of Cosmo. She kept one hand over Lara's on the bedspread. Still, it wasn't until her friend spoke that Sam realised she was conscious, her eyes just open.

A croaked "Sam?"

"Lara, oh my God!"

The American girl's instinctual response was a hug. She flung aside her magazine, bounced upright and squeezed Lara in her arms. Too enthusiastically as it turned out. The Englishwoman hissed at the embrace.

"Sorry, sorry." Sam lowered her friend back to the mattress. She helped the archaeologist take a sip of water between her cracked lips, still as colourless as the rest of her face.

Lara smiled weakly, "You're really here?"

Sam raised her friend's hand to her lips. "Yeah."

"I thought maybe I was imagining you. My head, it's all – I can't tell things... I'm not sure what's..."

"That's because they have you on some crazy strong sedatives and painkillers."

"So I'm not crazy? It all happened? The shipwreck? Yamatai?" Lara lowered her voice, "The Oni? Himiko?" She gulped, then grimaced, "Roth and the others?"

"Yeah, Lara, everything."

"Oh," She murmured. "I kind of hoped it had all been a horrible nightmare."

At that, alertness drained from her. A cloud passing in front of the sun. Her eyes closed again.

And here they were, two months later. Half a world away and still fighting the battles of Yamatai every single day.

"Sweetie." Sam reached up and brushed the bangs away from her friend's face. "I'm not going anywhere."

She kissed Lara on her forehead.

She touched her lips to the tip of Lara's nose.

And then her mouth.

It was a thoughtless peck but it startled both young women.

Lara drew back sharply. She was staring at Sam. Glaring? Her brow was creased, her lips shaped in the obvious wordless question.

Sam's heart was pounding. She wanted to pull a Lara and run, but the archaeologist still had one of her hands trapped. With escape impossible, Sam tried to make light of what had just happened. She flicked on her highest wattage smile. "I'm sorry, hee, I don't know why I did that. So silly, right?"

Lara's facial expression hadn't changed. At all.

"Uh, Lara?"

Pushing off her haunches, the Englishwoman shifted her weight forward. Her motion was incredibly slow and deliberate. The lioness back, approaching a skittish, suspicious impala. Sam could see it coming but she couldn't move. Or she didn't want to. She was in Lara's thrall.

The American girl closed her eyes as Lara's lips touched hers. It was a gentle kiss, featherlight like the first; simply longer.

She felt Lara's fingertips play across her cheek, and then withdraw. Along with her mouth.

Sam opened her eyes.

Lara had dropped her gaze again. She was concentrating on running her thumb back and forth over Sam's knuckles. "I, uh," she cleared her throat, "needed to do that. I – I apologise. Since Yamatai..." Her voice trailed off.

"Since Yamatai what?"

"My feelings have become really... complicated. In multiple areas." Lara winced, "Things I never thought about before, or would have never admitted to myself... God, it's embarrassing telling you this."

"You have feelings for me?" Sam exhaled slowly. Her heart was jack-hammering again.

Lara frowned. "I'm not sure." She released her friend's hand.

Sam felt like she had just failed an exam she had actually bothered to study for. She couldn't stop a whispered "Oh."

Lara cocked her head. "You're upset?"

"Well yeah, I've seen you more excited about shards of pottery."

That seemed to amuse the archaeologist. "Sam, you like boys."

"Yeah, I do. A lot. But maybe... what if I'm gay for you, Lara Croft?"

Lara chuckled, "That's ridiculous."

That was a slap to Sam's ego; Lara dismissing her emotions flat out. It sparked a familiar sensation of recklessness muddled with rebellion. *Oh, what the hell.*

Sam seized her friend's hand and pressed it to her breast. Instantly Lara jerked it away.

"Sam, Jesus! This isn't a game. I'm serious."

"So am I. We've both been through a lot. Maybe we're just finally seeing what's right."

"There's *nothing* right about this."

"I didn't take you for a homophobe, Lara."

"I'm not. It's just – I don't know what this is." The Englishwoman shook her head. "Feelings, urges that I was able to overrule before... Now they overwhelm me. All the time. Instinct takes over. And then I just react, unthinking."

"Is that such a bad thing?"

"Yes. You've seen what I'm like now. The bar. Here last night." Lara shuddered. "I try so hard to keep myself busy, to burn it out of me, but my control keeps slipping. And then I'm just... pure primal response."

Sam wiggled her eyebrows, "You know how sexy you make that sound in your accent?"

She was hoping that would make Lara smile but her friend seemed to be mired in melancholy again. Down she sank into that dark quicksand, her scowl settling on her hands again to avoid her friend's face.

"I can't lose you, Sam. What I want... I've been fighting it so hard because if I act on it, I could wreck everything. So much has changed and I can't even trust myself anymore." She rolled her still-wet eyes. "God, I'm so pathetic."

"That's the last thing you are. Hey..." Sam cupped Lara's chin. It forced her companion to look at her. "You're the strongest person I've ever known."

Sam hadn't realised she'd been leaning in until her nose bumped against Lara's.

Lara jolted at the intimate contact. She swallowed. "Sam, what are you doing?"

I'm not sure myself.

When she was able to form words though, the American girl was surprised at how in-control she sounded. "I sucked at chemistry. But even I know you can't run an experiment just once and base your findings on that."

"Sam, please." Lara clenched her eyes shut. She grimaced, "I can't – Don't you see how difficult this is for me?"

"I need to try this too, Lara."

This kiss was different. A shared touch of soft flesh. A parting of lips. Breath. The tips of tongues probing. Meeting in the no man's land between mouths, reduced to millimetres. Mutual reciprocation to every tentative exploration.

Sam came up for air first, her final caress running along Lara's top lip. "There," she gasped. And then grinned, "And may I say *wow?!*"

Lara looked as stunned as Sam felt. Dazed. Parted from Sam, she actually lost her balance and had to brace out her arm, noticeably trembling, to stop herself landing on her side.

"Bloody hell," she muttered.

"Lara?"

Sam slid an arm around her friend's back to help her sit back upright.

"Just, uh, give me a moment." Lara still hadn't blinked. She stared blindly into space. Eventually she shook herself out of her stupor, and steadied herself. Her fingers closed over Sam's palm on her ribs. In turn, the American girl pressed her hand over Lara's, sandwiching it with her warm skin.

In that position, with Lara caged inside Sam's arms, the faces of the former roommates were inches apart.

The look in Lara's eyes, her head inclined to one side. She was the lioness again, but for the first time in ages the creature wasn't snarling in her enclosure, savage, furious and straining to be free. There was appetite there, but also a predator's cool, controlled assessment.

A smile tugged the corner of Lara's mouth. "I'm struggling to think clearly right now."

"Me too." Sam had meant it to come out as a laugh, but instead she produced a bashful, highly uncharacteristic murmur.

Sam felt Lara's free palm cup her jaw, tilting her head. She closed her eyes as their lips met again. The archaeologist's knuckles stroked up Sam's cheek, tracing the length of the bone from front to back, before disappearing into her hair.

Lara inhaled deeply through her nose as her mouth began to move more insistently against Sam's.

God, this shouldn't feel so good.

Sam was clasping Lara's face between her hands. She wasn't entirely sure when that happened. She wasn't even sure how long she and Lara stayed like that, lost in the taste and touch of each other.

At some point though, Sam's legs began to cramp. The discomfort became impossible to ignore, intruding and overwhelming the other delicious sensations.

She broke from their clinch. "Shall we take this somewhere more comfortable?"

Lara blinked, her expression glazed with over-indulgence. Her brain evidently was still not using its full processing power. Then the request clicked.

"Hmmm, you're right."

Lara heaved Sam onto her lap and stood in a single fluid motion.

Draped over her friend's arms, Sam grinned, "My hero."

Lara grinned back, "Where to, milady?"

Sam interlaced her fingers behind Lara's neck. She breathed, "My room."

The faux-knight's response was a frown.

"Oh don't look at me like that."

"Sam, I'm –"

"Nervous? Scared?" The American girl planted a tender kiss on Lara's forehead. "It's okay. It really is. We don't have to rush things. We don't have to do anything if you don't want to."

That seemed to placate the Englishwoman. One shuddering stride at a time, she carried her friend down the passageway.

From the moment she met her, Sam had always admired Lara. On many occasions she'd actually been envious of her. Her beauty. Her brains. Her humility. Her determination. Her selfless compassion.

For everything that it had cost her, for all the pain it caused, Yamatai had sandblasted these qualities; burnished them. A baptism of blood and grit. There was a terrifying darkness in her transformation but also brilliance. Everything that was good about Lara had been illuminated. Enhanced to the point where even complete strangers noticed it.

Sam had been semi-conscious for the descent on Yamatai. Now she marvelled at Lara's strength – the literal and figurative. She was in awe of her. Sam must have been staring because Lara locked eyes with her and gave a self-conscious, lopsided smile. It shouldn't have but it set Sam's heart fluttering. She chuckled to herself. She was completely crushing on her best friend.

Of course, Lara the awkward British academic would always do something to undercut such an intimate moment. Once past the threshold of Sam's bedroom she placed the American girl back on her feet, muttering, "Christ, how did I carry you like this down a whole mountain?"

That earned her a mock punch to the shoulder. Followed immediately by another deep, exploratory kiss.

Sam's hands found the collar of Lara's jacket. She peeled it back, taking the shirt beneath with it too, so the archaeologist was down to her tank top. With Lara hungrily clutching Sam's face to hers, the American girl had to remove her companion's belt by touch. She tugged it free and then stepped back.

Lara stared, numb-mouthed and slack-limbed, as Sam shimmied out of her own jeans, and pulled her T-shirt over her head. She was wearing a matching bra and panties set, in lilac. She certainly hadn't thought anyone would be seeing them that morning when she dressed but she was glad that she had made the effort.

Lara wouldn't look at her though. The Englishwoman was studying her boots.

"Come on, Lara, it's nothing you haven't seen before. Many, many times. I show more skin in my bikini."

Lara blew out her cheeks. She made eye contact again as she stammered, "I just couldn't ever touch it before."

Sam beckoned.

Lara reached out tentatively.

She ran her fingertips across Sam's shoulder, her collar, down the centre of her chest bone. Sam was so busy concentrating on the digits stroking across her abdomen that she startled when Lara's mouth pressed down on her crook of her neck. The Englishwoman retraced her fingers' path with her lips, ending with a single planted kiss on the swell of Sam's left breast, just above the fabric of her bra.

"Oh, Lara."

The moan was too much.

Lara took a step away. The anxiety and shame was back in her pupils. "Sam, I've never..."

"Me neither."

Lara raised an eyebrow.

The American girl snorted. And then chuckled, "What the hell? You think I've shagged everyone and everything...?"

Lara opened her mouth and swiftly closed it again.

"God, Lara, sure, I've kissed a girl... and I liked it, ha." Sam closed the gap between them. "Amazingly though I've never slept with another woman before. Despite what you think."

She placed her hands on her friend's waist.

Lara smirked, "I was going to say you were a free-spirit, actually."

"Whatever. It doesn't matter. I'm sure we'll work it out."

Sam reached for Lara's jeans and plucked the top button free.

The archaeologist was frozen, holding her breath. Her arms were raised, bent, evidently ready to shove away from her friend.

Sam couldn't have that. With just enough extra space created, she slid her hands into the back of Lara's pants and clasped her buttocks. The motion forced their fronts together, their hip bones perfectly aligned.

Lara was blushing so furiously, her eyes darting everywhere but Sam's face, that the American girl couldn't stifle a chortle.

Sam sashayed backwards, leading Lara by the pelvis and forcing her friend to mirror her exaggerated motions. Grinning, she said, "You told me before that I can talk you into anything? Does that include my bed?"

Lara smiled in return, "This is strange."

"What is?"

"You flirting with me. I know all your moves, Sam. I've seen you pull them on unsuspecting guys a hundred times."

"Am I really that predictable?"

At that moment her calves struck the foot of the bed and she flopped onto the mattress, taking Lara with her.

Tangled together, Lara on top, the former roommates snickered and skimmed lips.

Lara laughed, "I feel like your dad is going to burst through the door any moment and catch us."

Sam ran her hands up the back of her friend's top. "That would be hilarious. He'd probably accuse me of corrupting you. His *darin Rara*."

"You have corrupted me."

"And would you have it any other way?"

"Never."

Their mouths touched again.

With Lara pressed completely against her, Sam got a very clear sense of her friend's physical power. Although the Englishwoman looked slender and soft, she was steel beneath her skin. Sam could feel the muscle bunches of her back; her stomach. Right there, right under the surface. She was ridiculously strong. Bluffed by her girlish looks – like most of the world, Sam included – the Solarii had severely underestimated her.

Sam really shouldn't have been surprised though. She remembered an incident in Slovakia where Lara had chased after a bus, shouldering both their backpacks. A hungover Sam, the reason they had missed their ride, staggered behind, whining and whimpering.

"Mmmmm." The American girl broke from the kiss. "Do you have protection?"

Lara's brow furrowed.

"It's a joke, Lara."

Sam realised immediately she shouldn't have said anything. Her comment had jolted their accelerating passion to a stop. Brakes slammed on, Lara had been thrown over the handlebars headfirst.

She poised over her friend on her elbows.

"This – This isn't a pity fuck is it, Sam?"

There was an element of truth to that. Regardless of what else she felt, she owed her best friend everything. And what guy would ever be able to compare after what Lara had done for her? Still, there was no way Sam was going to bring that up for discussion.

"Really, Lara? You think I'd really be doing this out of some warped sense of gratitude? What does this feel like to you?"

Sam seized the archaeologist's hand and glided it down between their bodies. Smoothing it over Sam's flat stomach. Into her panties.

She guided Lara's fingertips to her entrance. Her very wet entrance.

"Oh," Lara exhaled. "Sam, Jesus." Her cheeks flushed.

That got a naughty chuckle out of the American girl. "What? This?" Still holding Lara's hand, she slowly ground her pelvis against it in a circular motion. For extra saucy effect Sam teethed her bottom lip.

Lara's eyes couldn't be any wider. The Englishwoman murmured, "This is so... hot."

"We're hot, babe." Sam leaned in.

Lara's lips grazed hers. "Always so modest, Nishimura."

"Nnnngh, it's the truth, Croft," Sam panted, breaking free of the kiss. "Imagine us doing this at a club. We'd drive the guys wild."

"We'd be arrested."

"It would be so worth it. Just to see their faces."

"I wouldn't be concentrating on their faces."

"You know what? Neither would I."

Right then it didn't matter what had brought them to that moment. Grief. Guilt. Lust. It was entirely about the two best friends and they both needed it; they both needed each other.

The realisation was liberating.

And evidently Lara felt the exact same thing. She was galvanised.

Initially guided by Sam, the archaeologist took the lead, exploring with her hands as her mouth trailed down and up the American girl's throat, along the underside of her jawline, to the spot behind her ear... and then back again.

Like slipping into a hot tub, Sam let her body sink deep into unthinking bliss. Her hips continued to move reflexively against Lara's fingers, wanting as much of her touch as possible.

At some point she realised that Lara had slid a free hand into her own pants. Syncing her personal rhythm with Sam's motion. The sight of that, the realisation that she actually had such a powerful, irresistible effect on her companion, sent Sam to the edge.

"God, Lara, I'm – "

As she came, Lara seized her mouth with hers. Sam cried her climax into her, and Lara claimed it, feeding her own desire with the moans. She began to move more feverishly.

Sam felt limp-limbed in the aftermath of her orgasm but she refused to be left out. She swept Lara onto her back. With the roles reversed, Sam fed her fingers down into the younger woman's jeans. She nudged aside Lara's palm and took over.

Lara tensed at the touch, trembling.

Her eyes were closed, but she reached up and clenched a fist in Sam's hair, drawing the American girl's face down to kiss her fiercely.

At the last moment Lara disengaged her lips. She arched up, clinging to Sam as she reached her peak. She shuddered, silent, her face pressed into Sam's shoulder. Eventually she stilled.

"Lara, did you – ? You haven't... Have you?"

"Yes," she exhaled into Sam's skin before drawing back. Their noses were an inch apart. "Yes, I did. Sorry, I – er – all those years in boarding school, you learn to be quiet." Her lip twitched into a bashful smile.

It made Sam laugh out loud.

Lara murmured, "So, uh, what now?"

Sam flashed a naughty grin. "Round two?"

"Can't we just cuddle for a bit?"

"What? Have I really worn out thee Lara Croft?"

"Don't flatter yourself. I'm knackered. I haven't slept for two days."

The American girl straddled her companion.

"Sam, I'm not a bloody theme park ride."

"You could have fooled me. Surviving back-to-back shipwrecks, sacrifice attempts, helicopter crashes, rapids, mad cultists, sorcerer queens and their immortal soldiers..."

"Wolves."

"What?"

Lara sighed, "There were also wolves."

There was a look in her eyes then that suggested it would be all too easy for her to slip back into glum reminiscing. Sam had to steer her away from that lock before it filled with guilt and misery all over again.

The American girl slid down her companion's body so she was poised over her calves. Then she hooked her fingers over the waistband of Lara's pants and drew the denim over her lean thighs.

"You know, as good as you look in them, I want you out of these jeans."

Elevated on her elbows, Lara watched her. Her expression was stranded halfway between a smirk and a frown.

Just then, Sam encountered a more literal obstacle to the undressing.

"Lara, did you *seriously* just fuck me with your boots still on?"

"Uh... if we're calling it that?"

"How can you be such a nerd and such a top at the same time?"

Clearly embarrassed, Lara made a move to reach for her feet. Sam blocked her efforts, forcing Lara to recline back on the mattress, so she was stretched out flat.

"Stay there."

Sam undid Lara's laces. She slipped off her boots; her socks. Her jeans followed. The documentary-maker massaged her way up Lara's legs, enjoying the way muscles and tendons tensed under her hands before relaxing completely. At the top of Lara's thighs, Sam let her thumbs slide under the elastic sides of her companion's simple black panties. Just for a second. Just to tease her. It worked. Lara shuddered at the unexpected touch, gripping fistfuls of bedding in anticipation.

Then Sam had to spoil it by scraping clumsy fingers against the archaeologist's side as she lifted her shirt.

Lara grunted.

"Sorry, sorry."

As an extra apology, Sam pressed her mouth to Lara's toned, now-exposed stomach. "I've always been so envious of this."

"I've always said, get your arse in gym with me and you can –"

Sam sucked on the bottom lip of Lara's navel, then circled it with her tongue before plunging it into the centre."

That shut the archaeologist up. Open mouthed, her head lolled backwards.

"What was that you were saying about knowing all my tricks?"

"Hah," Lara gulped, a glazed grin on her face, "I guess I was wrong."

Sam licked and nipped up Lara's stomach, the crest of her rib cage, the centre of her chest bone. With her index finger, the American girl hooked the fabric of Lara's top and tugged it down an inch, exposing more of the curve of her breast. She kissed that soft, perfect flesh too, sucking ever so gently.

Lara was back to trembling at every touch.

On top of her companion, their bodies perfectly aligned once more, Sam's parted lips met Lara's.

"God, you have the most kissable mouth."

Lara didn't say anything. But Sam could see by her friend's pupils that the ravenous lioness had returned.

Warm, steel-strong arms around her. Smooth legs gliding and weaving. Sam suddenly on her back again.

"Say it again, Lara."

The archaeologist cocked her head.

Sam grinned, "Pure primal response."

A twitch in the corner of her lip, but Lara's eyes remained dark; focused. Leaning over her mate, she purred, "Pure. Primal. Response."

"Mmmm, I felt that in all the right places."

Then Lara's fingers found those places.

And it really was a different experience. Skin so soft, a meeting of chins and cheeks without a trace of grating stubble; curves where there shouldn't have been any; toned flat planes of flesh instead of prodding insistency against Sam's hip. So much more to do and touch to produce a response. And that response moaned in a woman's voice.

Some time later, Sam flopped down alongside Lara.

"Oh my God, why didn't we do this years ago?" The American girl playfully nibbled on her friend's bare shoulder. "Roth was right, Lara. You have *amazing* instincts!"

The archaeologist was lying on her back, staring at the ceiling. Her chest rose and fell rapidly as she tried to regain her breath.

Uncomfortable with being nude, she was back in her panties and tank top under the covers. Her friend felt no such discomfort.

"You know," Sam ran kisses along Lara's collar bone, "I always wondered what you'd be like in bed."

Her companion responded straight-faced, still looking blindly ahead. "After three years of living in the next room, I must confess I already had a pretty good idea about you."

There was that British wit, so dry it practically crackled.

Pouting, Sam pinched Lara's ear.

That finally earned a grin from the Englishwoman. She turned to face Sam. "Those walls were thin! And don't get me started about that time in Bulgaria."

"What?" The realisation slapped Sam hard, even as Lara continued to smile. "Oh, *God*..."

They had been sharing a room on the outskirts of Sofia. The hostel was tiny; crammed; the beds maybe two feet apart. That hadn't stopped Sam though. One drunken night she

brought a guy back from the nearby club. Uncoordinated, barely able to communicate, they tugged at each other's clothes. When they had yanked enough fabric out the way they landed on Sam's mattress, not once giving a thought to Lara face down on her cot. Sam had thought her travel buddy was passed out after too many vodkas. Clearly she had presumed wrong.

"Why didn't you say anything, Lara?!"

Her companion shrugged, smiling softly.

Sam muttered, "This is weird."

"Oh," Lara frowned. Arms at her sides, she pushed herself into a sitting position.

"No, it's not like that. It's just that you're my best friend. My saviour. And my, what—? Girlfriend? Lover?"

"Does it matter?"

"No, but don't you think it's strange it's all the same person?"

"My mother once told me it was like that with her and Dad. That that's how it was supposed to be."

Enthusiasm bubbled up in Sam's chest. She could feel the effervescence spreading through her whole body. She sprang into a crouch at Lara's side, seizing her friend's triceps. She found herself babbling.

"Then let's do that, Lara. Us. Together on expeditions. You doing all the archaeology stuff; me documenting it with my camera. Crazy adventure after crazy adventure. It's perfect."

Lara stiffened under Sam's palms.

"Look, if you're not comfortable with people knowing, you know, that we're together, that's cool too, Lara. We can keep it private. It doesn't matter as long as I'm with you." She held up a fist, and jabbed it in her companion's direction. "Hoes before bros."

"Sam..." The Englishwoman winced. She sighed deeply and shook her head.

Too much, too soon, Sam. Backpedal.

The American stumbled over an apology. "You're right, Lara. I'm sorry. It was a dumb idea. I'm getting ahead of myself."

"No, Sam, come here." Hands on her friend's waist, Lara drew her into an embrace.

"Please."

Lara simply held Sam against her in silence. Eventually she slid down into a lying position, taking her companion with her. Sam pressed herself into the crook of Lara's shoulder, so her arm was draped over her friend's form. It allowed her to trail her index finger over the last scrapes and scratches on Lara's left forearm. There were a few dark pink scars there; physical mementos she would have for the rest of her life. Along with the near-fatal wound

above her left hip, a jagged cut just below her right deltoid and a nick at her hairline. All souvenirs from Yamatai.

Sam felt a quiver run through Lara's body. She looked up and there were tears in the Englishwoman's eyes. She was swallowing continually, trying not to let them spill.

"Sweetie, what's wrong? Hey."

"I just – I never thought we'd –" Lara hiccupped. "It's everything I imagined. This. This moment."

Sam wanted desperately to reach for her friend's face but Lara's grip kept them pressed together, immobile.

The American girl felt Lara's lips brush her temple. "I love you, Sam."

"I – I love you too, Lara." The ease with which she said it triggered a fresh set of palpitations in Sam's chest. She tried to divert her thoughts only to watch them scuttle down a suspiciously dark alley. Maybe if she voiced them out loud it would provide some comforting light and noise to scare away the muggers and monsters?

Squeezing Lara tighter, she cleared her throat. "You know, the most frightened I've ever been was on the island, when I was tied up for Mathias's ceremony. Not because I thought I was going to be burned alive. That seemed so surreal; so ridiculous I couldn't take it seriously until the fire was lit, and I actually felt the heat. I was terrified, but when you arrived, it was so much worse."

It really was easier confessing into Lara's chest bone than looking her in the face. "Watching those men... The way they pounded you over and over on the ground; all that blood. I thought I was actually going to see you beaten to death in front of me. I thought I was going to be *forced* to watch you die. All because of me. It was the worst moment of my life."

"Likewise. The thought of losing you..." Lara murmured. "I tried to be strong for both of us. It wasn't enough."

"Of course it was. We're here now. We made it thanks to you."

"I can't sleep, Sam. When I do, I hear the screams at the monastery in the end... Yours... Or hers... I'm not sure whose." She shuddered. "I feel them in my bones. And they remind me of the agony I put you through."

Sam didn't want to remember either. She didn't have a particularly high pain threshold as it was, but Himiko's ritual had overloaded her senses. Well, from what she could recall of it. She had never thought that the cold could burn like that – a simultaneous scorching of ice and fire. It was worst in her chest but she felt in in her head as well. A whirlpool of weakness and darkness. She was dimly aware of Mathias's jubilant yells and Lara's cries, interspersed with the sound of gunshots and explosions. But mostly there was her – Himiko, eyeless and grinning, drawing ever nearer with her bared yellowed teeth and cracked, peeling face paint.

Her icy, probing touch... and then the next thing Sam remembered was the warmth of Lara's bare skin against hers. The archaeologist's touch was even more soothing than the rays of sunlight she felt then for the first time in days. Lara was filthy, bleeding and exhausted but in

her arms, Sam was safe. Courage. Goodness. Tenacity and unstifled, unsuppressed life. That was everything her best friend represented for Sam at that moment.

The American pulled herself upright so she was poised over her companion. She brushed the bangs away from Lara's face and cupped the back of her head so she couldn't look away.

"You know, you're the best thing that ever happened to me, Lara Croft."

She could see a denial already shaping on the Englishwoman's lips. No doubt the usual "*But Yamatai...*"

Sam stoppered her argument with a deep, breath-stealing kiss.

"Lara, if you hadn't entered my life, I'd probably be maxing out my father's credit cards on Fifth Avenue right now. Leading a soulless, directionless existence, filling it with useless things and useless people. You saved me *years* before Yamatai."

Lara frowned.

"When I decided I wanted to get into filmmaking, no one took me seriously. Except you. Everyone thought that it was just my latest phase and I was going to give up as soon as I got bored or it got too tough. But you believed in me. You were the only one who supported me."

There. There she was. The young woman looking up at her with the gentlest eyes, and the softest lips curved in an equally soft smile. That was Sam's Lara. Not the savage survivor she had been forced to become.

"Kiss me again, Croft. Please."

Seizing Sam's face, Lara did.

The action triggered a moan deep in the American girl's throat.

Oh, what the hell...

Sam peeled Lara's panties down her thighs. Lara started to attempt the same, breaking from the kiss with a grin when she remembered Sam wasn't wearing any. Desire tempered with sudden onset exhaustion, their movements were as uncoordinated as if they had been drinking all evening. Sam crashed her mouth back into Lara's, their teeth knocking together. Hands began to clumsily explore.

At some point in the night, Sam woke. Or at least she thought she woke. Her consciousness had been so completely saturated by Lara – her touch, her scent, her taste – that it had seeped through even into her sleep. She knew she had been dreaming about her best friend and saviour, over and over.

Lara standing at a crossroads. Loaded with all her backpacking kit, she was pursing her lips as she tried to decipher a map.

Lara running and jumping and doing forward rolls in a murky, flooded catacomb. A crocodile swaggering after her.

Lara lying Sam's sixteen year old self down on the bed in her poster-splattered bedroom. Giving her companion the naughtiest smile before kissing down her body.

So Sam couldn't be sure if this moment was a dream too.

She was lying on her back, with Lara pressed against her. Post-Yamatai Lara judging by the scars and scrapes on her bare flesh. The archaeologist was facing Sam, lying on her right side with an arm thrown over the American girl's ribs. She looked so peaceful in her sleep. If Sam didn't know how rare an occurrence it was, how desperately Lara needed the rest, she would have teased the Englishwoman awake. Lara's parted lips were just too irresistible.

Still, lone predators could never switch off their survival instincts. Even when asleep. Something must have alerted her that her mate was awake. Maybe some miniscule change in Sam's breathing.

Lara's eyes were half-open. Gaze unfocused, she was silently watching her companion. There was melancholy there. But before Sam could question or kiss away her sorrow, Lara pulled her friend tight against her.

Her voice was coarse with sleep. "I love you, Sam. You know that, right? I really love you."

"Mmmm, I do, sweetie."

The way Lara was nuzzling her neck, it was just so easy to relax in the embrace...

It was daylight when Sam opened her eyes again. The curtains were closed but it was still too bright. She thrust her face back into her pillow and groaned. Tentatively, she slipped the cushioning down past her cheeks, exposing one eye and then the other. Even before she had stopped squinting at her illuminated surroundings, she knew Lara wasn't there. The mattress felt devoid of her presence.

That wasn't a surprise. Unlike Sam, Lara had never been able to lie in. She was probably doing yoga in the lounge, or sitting straight-backed at the desk in her room with a cup of tea, her notebook and a laptop – muttering to herself as she worked.

Sam stretched and grinned. It was probably a good thing for Lara that she wasn't still in bed because her American companion would totally have seduced her again at that moment. And then clung on for the ride. Because that really been the biggest revelation of the previous evening – what the Englishwoman was like in bed. Normally, Lara was incredibly shy about in-your-face sexuality. Sam remembered the time she lured her friend to the edge of a nudist beach just to see the look on her bright red, panicked face. However, behind closed doors, Lara was entirely different. Self-consciousness evaporated and she was fully engaged in the moment. Anything went. Until last night, it was a mode that Sam didn't even know Lara possessed.

The American girl threw back the covers. She drew on a gown, admired her impressive bed-hair for a moment in the mirror and then walked out into the passageway. She could already

see herself straddling Lara at her desk, interlacing her fingers behind the brunette's ponytail and ending all attempts at work once she untied her robe.

Except Lara wasn't in her room.

Nothing was. Not her backpack, her clothes or her papers.

Sam felt her heart rate surge. Her calves automatically tensed, her body ready to bolt into the living area. Except she could also see Lara's face; that wry smile she gave whenever Sam overreacted, whether it be a freak out or a geek out.

Oh, sod it, as Lara would say. At that moment the American girl would happily have been pierced by some playful jibes if it meant extinguishing her anxiety. She darted for the lounge.

"Lara?!"

That room was empty too. As was the kitchen, except for a folded note on the countertop. A solitary tent erected on a plateau. Feeling as icy numb as if she'd been camping all night on a mountain herself, Sam picked up the piece of paper.

Dear Sam

Back on the island, Roth spoke to me about sacrifice. That sacrifice is a choice you make while loss is a choice made for you...

There was a lot of loss on Yamatai. There has been a lot of loss in my life. But Roth was right. I knew nothing about sacrifice. Even there on the island, it was easy. Time and again in my mind, the possibility of my own death didn't register as a sacrifice.

But I understand sacrifice now.

Because I've just made the greatest sacrifice of my life...

I can't go home. When I said it on the ship, I meant it. I was born to my life's purpose on Yamatai. I'm not going home because I can't. In accepting my mission to find answers, I forfeited all of that.

I just haven't been strong enough to walk away.

The past few months, since the island, I've been fighting my feelings, for a number of reasons. Leaving this life means walking away from everything I know and hold dear. I was terrified because I have to do it alone. Truly alone.

And that knowledge was made so much worse after I woke up in hospital to find you there. At my bedside. Holding my hand. Waiting for me.

I've been struggling a lot since that moment. I've been snappish towards you. Aloof. Hurtful. But there is a reason for that. You see, in the past few weeks it's not my parents I've been conflicted about – I've accepted my shameful naiveté in that regard, and have a lot of work to do rectifying it. No, I was conflicted about telling you how I feel. I've always loved you Sam. I think for a long time I was too scared to admit that I was IN love with you. Given everything that meant. The complications.

Because you are right. This is still your world. It's not fair to rip you from it, to have you always following behind... or waiting for me here instead of living a full, proper life.

You're magnificent, Sam. Talented (truly, no matter what you think!). Beautiful. Free-spirited. Effortlessly and irresistibly charismatic. So confident in any situation. These qualities are why I admire you – and love you with all my heart.

But a life with me... I almost got you killed once. I almost hurt you severely. And I can't let that happen again. I know I'm going to have to go to dark places and do even darker things. I don't want you blistered by that pitch like I've been. Two nights ago, I think you got a very good sense of how deep that taint has touched and transformed me. You are goodness, vitality and life. That has to be protected at all cost. Knowing that you are safe; that is how I'll be able to do whatever I must.

I am so sorry, Sam. I never planned this. I never wanted it. But Yamatai changed everything. Mathias was right. Survivors do what they have to. As painful and soul-destroying as that may be.

Last night, as much as I craved it, shouldn't have happened. It was cruel and unfair.

It was even crueller to leave you like this. Cowardly, duplicitous and callous, slipping out of your bed like you meant nothing more to me than a one-night stand. That couldn't be further from the truth. But I knew that if we discussed this, my resolve would fade in such close proximity to your brilliance. You would wrap me in your arms and I would never have the strength to leave.

You have my heart, Sam. You will ALWAYS have my heart. But my life belongs to finding the truth.

I hope that in time you can forgive me.

X

Lara

A letter. A fucking letter. Lara had walked out of her life and left her with a letter.

Sam was suffocating. She staggered two steps before dropping to her hands and knees, lightheaded. But as desperately as she wanted it, she couldn't draw in air. Her throat was constricted and utterly consumed as she expelled sob after sob. An endless, involuntary stream that slashed at her windpipe.

Agony.

Tears.

Darkness.

Exactly what Lara had promised to protect her from.

Sam paused.

This was probably going to be awkward.

So she was in no rush to insert the key into the front door and enter the apartment. It felt more appealing to just remain standing on the threshold, loaded with her camera, tripod and textbooks for the day's lectures.

She and Lara had been roommates for three weeks already, sharing an off-campus flat as they began their second year of studies. Of course, they shared the space with a third flatmate. The big-ass elephant in the room. The realisation that moving in together had probably been a mistake.

Neither of them had said as much. In fact they were probably too scared to admit it out loud. But they were both thinking it, particularly after the events of Saturday morning.

After a night out clubbing, Sam was lying on the couch, eating cereal from the box, when her flatmate shuffled out of her bedroom and into the kitchenette. It was a rare occasion when Lara Croft revealed herself to be a vulnerable human being, and not a serene, too-perfect goddess slumming it with the mortals. Right then was one of those blue moon moments.

Usually so effortlessly gorgeous, Lara looked terrible. She was hunched in her old plaid bathrobe, red nostrilled and clutching a tissue. Sam knew she had worked back-to-back shifts at the Nine Bells the night before, despite "feeling poorly" as she described it.

Sam should have known things would head rapidly south when Lara found the shelf empty of mugs, and was forced to salvage a used cup from a pile in the sink.

Once she'd rinsed it, Lara opened their pantry cupboard and began groping inside. After practically forcing her head in-between the shelves, she called, "Sam, where are the tea bags?"

"Oh, I haven't been to Tesco yet."

Silence. Ominous silence. Sam looked up. Lara was frozen, looking at her.

"What?" the American girl asked, her mouth full of Frosties.

Lara's voice was as empty of expression as her face. "I asked you to do one thing, Sam..."

"Jeez, Lara, relax, it's not the end of the world."

"One. *Thing!*" The Englishwoman slammed her fist down on the counter.

Sam stared at Lara, shocked.

They'd known each other for over a year, yet despite how often Sam's ditziness had provoked an exasperated sigh or eye roll from her best friend, Lara had never raised her voice before. Let alone lost her temper so dramatically.

The Englishwoman stood there, shivering and glowering simultaneously.

Eventually she threw up her hands. "Fuck! *Fine!*" She yanked off her robe, exposing her favourite oversize sleep shirt and boxers underneath. "I'll go then."

She stomped off into her bedroom.

When Lara emerged dressed, Sam tried to placate her.

"Come on, babe, it's really not a big deal."

"It is. To me." Lara's voice cracked over the last syllable and Sam thought she was about to burst into tears.

Never get between the English and their tea.

Lara shrugged on her jacket and glared one last time at Sam before slamming the door behind her.

The archaeology student had calmed down a bit by the time she returned, staggering with the weight of her shopping bags. She was still fuming, though, torn between her initial anger and embarrassment about her overreaction.

Sam was waiting with her biggest olive branch smile. "You didn't have to work a double shift last night, Lara. I've told you."

Two clipped syllables in response.

"Don't start."

That was the end of their conversation. After unpacking the groceries, Lara finally made her cup of tea and retreated to her room for the rest of the day.

Sam washed the dishes. She vacuumed the lounge. She folded the laundry. She even heated some soup and served it to Lara in bed. Still, her roommate refused to look up from her book and talk to her.

Eventually, tired of receiving the cold shoulder, the American girl decided to spite Lara. The young woman hated Sam's other crowd of friends. She thought they were a bad influence, spurring each other on to commit various acts of varying degrees of illegality.

She wasn't wrong. Sam always got drunk with them quickly so she could blame her actions on alcohol-saturated morals and a general lack of self-control. Excuses were better than having to continually think about what she was doing.

But this little exploit was all about pissing Lara off.

Or at least earning a disapproving acknowledgement of her presence. That should be easy enough – Sam had years of experience provoking her parents.

Before leaving, she stuck her head around her roommate's door.

"Yeah, I'm going out with Carlos, Em and Lou."

Lara didn't even lift her eyes from the page in front of her. "Have fun."

Three days later, and there was still a frosty over-politeness in their interactions. Maybe they had overestimated their friendship and really were too different to live together?

Sam sighed and unlocked the front door.

Music blaring from the iPod docking station.

Cushions strewn around the lounge.

Three empty beer bottles on the kitchen counter, surrounded by the debris of sandwich making – a deserted block of cheese, a half-sliced tomato, an open bottle of pickles and a loaf of bread left with slices spilling out onto the breadboard. It wasn't uncommon for Lara to geek out over a theory and wander absent-mindedly away from whatever she was doing, but she would never leave such a mess.

Jesus! Had they been broken into?

Sam dropped her books and equipment on the armchair. Her cry came out more strident than she intended. "Lara?!"

Her roommate bounded out of the bedroom. "Sam, hey, you're back!"

Like an excited puppy, Lara bounced up to her roommate, grinning madly the whole time. "I'm so happy you're home."

She flung her arms wide and then snared Sam in a bear hug. Chuckling the whole time, she lifted her American companion and spun a full 360 degrees.

Something was seriously, *seriously* wrong.

Her feet back on terra firma, Sam gently disengaged herself from the embrace. "Lara, are you al...?" A step away triggered a second, impossible to suppress question. "*What* are you wearing?"

Lara was in ridiculous shorts, skin-tight, cut off barely two inches below her crotch. Sam didn't think her friend possessed anything like that in her cupboard.

The American girl couldn't stop herself staring. God, her friend's legs went on for miles. You didn't normally see them. Lara wasn't self-conscious about her looks so much as she was modest and fearful about attracting attention for the wrong, superficial reasons. She ran in track pants and Sam had yet to coax her into a bikini. Showing off her body was out the question.

Right then, Lara was looking at her, open-mouthed, adoring. "You are so beautiful. You're glowing."

Then Sam spotted it. On the kitchen counter, half obscured by the pickle jar. A mangled piece of tinfoil, its sides torn back like petals to reveal the sweet chocolate nectar at its centre.

Carlos's special brownies. She'd been so out of it after her Saturday night exploits that she'd just shoved the "care package" in the fridge. Her roommate wouldn't have suspected anything.

Lara had tracked Sam's gaze. Her enthusiasm immediately bubbled over again.

"Oh my God, those brownies are soooo good, Sam. They are AMAZING! I think I had an orgasm in my mouth."

Straitlaced Lara Croft actually talking about sex? *Oh no.*

"Lara, how many of those have you had?"

"One or two... Four." She snorted.

Sam took hold of her friend's triceps.

"Lara, hey, you need to stop, okay?"

The Englishwoman ignored her. She seized her friend's hand, "Dance with me, Sam."

"Lara..."

"That's my name, don't wear it out."

Lara hauled Sam into the centre of the lounge.

Even with her incredibly physical prowess, the Englishwoman had next to no dance skills. Sober, she was too stiff; drunk, too limp and uncoordinated. High, her every gyration seemed to stem from a different musical genre – hip-hop, punk, adult contemporary.

It was hilarious. But also horrifying. Sam couldn't enjoy the sight of Lara Croft completely cut loose because her friend was oblivious of the unmooring. And Sam was the one who was responsible.

Lara cocked her head. "Why aren't you dancing?"

"How do you feel?"

"Really good. I haven't felt this happy in a long time." She threw back her head and laughed, euphoric. "God, and hungry. I'm fucking famished."

Before Sam could respond, Lara had closed the gap between them.

"Come here." Grabbing Sam by the hips, the Englishwoman pulled her companion's back against her front. Pressed together like that, Sam could feel Lara's breasts against her shoulder blades; the delicious rolling way her friend was grinding her pelvis against Sam's. Lara continued to guide the American's response, her fingers hooked over Sam's hip bones. Not that she needed to. Sam was shocked at how instinctually her body responded, matching its motion to Lara's.

"There we go," purred into Sam's ear.

It felt great.

Sam was tempted to reach behind her and cup the back of Lara's skull, drawing her face back within reach. As if sensing her friend's fantasy, Lara's palms began to slide across Sam's body. One climbed up over her stomach; the other slipped south...

"Whoa!"

Sam jerked away. At a distance of five feet, she turned back to her roommate.

Lara looked startled; confused; and finally ashamed. Her hands were still frozen where they'd been on Sam's body, embracing an invisible partner. She stammered, "I – I'm sorry."

There were a dozen things the American girl could have said, but the most prominent thought was that none of them was right. They'd only make the situation worse; embarrass each other more. This wasn't Lara Croft standing in front of her. She would never act like this normally. She wasn't herself. And that was entirely Sam's fault. She couldn't let Lara shoulder any guilt for her actions.

The filmmaker slowly approached her friend. She initiated a new embrace. "No, I'm sorry."

Placated, Lara rested her cheek against Sam's shoulder. Then she pulled back. Her face was earnest. The effervescence gone. "Please, let's not fight anymore."

"You're gonna hate my guts tomorrow, Lara."

The Englishwoman shook her head. "Never. I love you, Sam." The goofy grin returned. "You know that, right? I really love you."

Light-hearted Lara didn't emerge nearly often enough. Beautiful, exhilarated, she was impossible to resist. Sam returned the bashful smile even as she was pulled into a fresh hug.

"We're going to have so many awesome adventures together, Sam, I know it."

"BFFs, Croft."

"You know it, Nishimura."