

Easier to run

By Noelle Adams / pfangirl

Chapter 1

This one was eager. She was still fumbling with a fistful of keys when she felt lips against the nape of her neck. Fingers slid inside the collar of her shirt, pushing the fabric off her shoulder, plucking at her bra strap.

She let herself be turned around. Instantly his mouth was on hers. She threw her arms around his neck as he drove them back against the door.

His hands slid up and down her sides, over the curve of her breasts, her ribs, her hip bones exposed over the top of her ridiculous skinny jeans

So much for the fake courtesy of inviting him back to her place for another drink. Even if his fingers weren't happily exploring, his probing tongue made his intentions perfectly clear.

She preferred it this way. No stupid societal-imposed courting games and layers of lies to veil their wants. It was straightforward, unlike so much in life. Needs identified and then satisfied. A simple two-step dance. One. Two. Repeat.

Somehow, working blind and backwards, she managed to insert the right key into the lock. She turned the door handle and they shuffled inside the flat, their kiss still unbroken.

The lamp in the living room had been left on so there was no need to grope for a switch. That was a good thing.

She was drunk.

Laughably, despite everything she had done over the past five years, it was the only way she could work up the courage to do what she was doing. For the most part it helped her to disengage her mind, and just let her body run with its desires.

Right then her hands were tugging at his belt as they continued their wobbled waltz across the room. His jacket already shed, he was peeling hers off her shoulders.

They collided with a side table, toppling a Satsuma vase.

She lunged and caught it five inches above the floor. Then replaced it on its pedestal.

"Good save," he laughed.

"That's not all I'm good at."

His smile practically glowed in the gloom. "Show me."

She grinned back. "With pleasure."

A rum-flavoured tongue forced her lips apart. She moaned into his mouth. Fumbling at his belt again, her fingertips skimmed the ridges of deliciously defined abs. It would be easy to respond to him. Already his touch had triggered a deep throbbing between her legs.

She guided him into her bedroom; letting him tug her shirt over her head as she unbuttoned his.

She ran her fingertips over his stomach again before sliding them down into his jeans. There was just enough space to stroke his length. While doing that she teathed her bottom lip and looked up at his face, making sure to make eye contact in order to convey her full appreciation. It felt horribly theatrical on her part but they always seemed to like it – that they could provoke such a girlish reaction from her.

He moved to throw her onto the mattress, but she side-stepped and spun, letting his momentum carry him forward. He landed first. He seemed amused by the role reversal, chuckling from where he lay on his back, arms outstretched.

She smiled down at him.

Then she yanked his pants and boxers down around his ankles.

There was a moment then where the colour crept up into her cheeks and she had to suppress a jolt of skittish energy in her limbs. She wanted to stammer and turn away at the sight of his shameless exposure. But the world knew her for her brashness. So did he, evidently. He was waiting.

She forced a look of heavily-lidded satisfaction; then groped in the back pocket of her jeans for the condom she had stowed there before going out.

She kicked off her shoes and pants. She shimmied out of her underwear. His grin widened. She knew that the light coming in from the living room camouflaged even the worst of her scars. Not that the marks had put off any of her lovers. She just hated it when they did spot the puckered, pale tissue and fixated on it. She didn't like the old wounds being stared at; let alone traced by curious fingers.

She approached the bed. Her hand closed around him and for a few moments she enjoyed teasing him, watching his reaction to her simple, slow motions. The way his lip twitched. How his breath caught in his chest. The muscles straining to keep his head raised so that he could watch her standing before him nude. A genuine celebrity having her way with him. He would have such bragging rights with his friends tomorrow. Hopefully the story would end with them. If The Sun or Daily Mail caught wind of it, it was guaranteed to be messy, and it would hasten her departure from the country when she wasn't quite ready to leave.

Better not disappoint then.

Without breaking their gaze, she ripped open the foil packet and rolled on the condom.

Everything in place, she straddled him. And immediately gasped at the sensation of fullness.

This. This was what she needed.

"God," he exhaled beneath her as she began to move.

He sat up then. She wasn't expecting that. If he hadn't clasped her in an embrace she probably would have fallen backwards. Too much alcohol had that effect on her. It threw her reflexes and concentration completely. It lowered her defences. All of them.

She couldn't stop herself moaning as his mouth left hers and began travelling along the sensitive skin of her throat.

The way his lips explored the channel between her breasts...

Her fists clenched in fine black hair. Feather-soft kisses across her chest bone that made her break out in goosebumps. The faint scent of vanilla. It was a preposterously named celebrity fragrance in an over-engineered bottle. One day archeologists would find an example and be left scratching their heads over humanity's – what? – Neo-Techno-Hedonistic Period of the early Twenty First Century.

The day she had been dragged on the shopping expedition to find the perfume. She had been sprayed, spritzed and dabbed with so many concoctions that she eventually had a sneezing fit. Right there in Harrods in front of a snooty saleswoman. She hadn't been able to stop laughing in the aftermath. Two giggling college girls who fled before security escorted them out. To avoid losing each other in the mad dash, they clasped hands. That first time, she felt...

No.

Not now. There was no place for those memories now.

She shoved her partner back against the mattress. Before he could sit up again, she clamped her palms over his wrists.

Leaning over, she growled, "I take what I want. You must have heard that about me?"

He nodded, eyes wide.

"Good."

She smirked. And then began to ride him with more vigour. But she had miscalculated. She was too drunk. Too numb. *Shit.*

She tried to focus on the physical sensations; to bring every shift in pressure and friction into high definition clarity. Drawing them out of the murkiness of her body. He had broken free of her hold. Gripping her hips, he was far closer to climax than she was.

"Oh no you don't," she muttered.

She seized a handful of his hair. As intended, it threw him out of his rhythm. He looked startled.

"Wha-?"

She kissed him roughly, biting down on his bottom lip. When he winced and tried to pull away, she hissed, "Wait for me."

Parting aroused, partly unnerved and predominantly intoxicated, he lay there, just gazing up at her. She tried to appreciate her position of power, but she'd been rattled. Her pure, uncomplicated lust had been muddled with longing. In the end she had to replay the memories she'd been trying so hard to dismiss.

Being pressed against her. How good that felt. How even better it was when their nipples brushed. It sent a jolt through her body, leaving her breathless, but it also made her laugh. She'd never realized how fun sex could be. It had always been so serious in the past, so convoluted, like she was auditioning for the cover of a romance novel. But this was completely different.

Even in charge, as she was then – responsible for another's pleasure – she felt liberated. She smiled and that smile was instantly returned by the face looking up at her. God, how she loved her. A life spent making her happy would be a life well spent.

Christ, now she sounded like a romance novel.

She was on the point of chuckling when hands cupped her cheeks.

Mouths pressed together.

And she forgot what was so comical.

Her taste.

Her touch.

She had just enough control not to cry it out, but a word was still on her lips as she climaxed.

Sam.

Chapter 2

She woke in darkness, face down on the mattress. Still nude. She must have simply collapsed after her climax. Or had she done something else? She couldn't remember. *Lara, could you be any more stupid?*

Her hook-up was unconscious next to her; also naked, lying flat on his back with his arms splayed out to either side of him.

As she pushed herself upright, two monstrous palms clamped over her skull. It felt like it anyway – clumsy swollen fingertips digging into either side of her head, making her cringe at the pressure.

She swung her legs over the side of the bed, and paused there for a few moments, hands clenching the edge of the mattress as she braced against the alternating waves of nausea and dizziness.

When the worst had passed, she pushed herself upright. Retrieving her silk kimono from behind the bedroom door, she draped it around herself and shuffled through to the kitchen. According to the wall clock it was just after 5am but it was still pitch black outside. One week into October the nights were getting considerably longer.

She downed a couple of aspirin and made some tea. Then she migrated through to her study.

Beneath her headache, the voice was still droning. *Now why exactly was last night a good idea?*

She had to admit it wasn't a good idea. It never was. But then again it was nothing she planned. Every few months or so, when she couldn't stand being alone in her head anymore; when the desire to be touched overpowered sense, she would go out, get drunk and find someone.

And it was always worse between expeditions. While out in the field she had the strenuous physical demands and mental exhilaration of discovery to flood her body with endorphins. Back in the UK, the distractions from self were less. And then the tendency to brood over her past actions would strike like a tsunami. She could sense it looming over her; the way her skin tingled in the menace of its shadow. When she worked, she could escape. In her downtime though, she grew restless. Writing journal articles, researching through the night, running for hours; none of it provided the complete absorption of senses that she craved.

She couldn't go home. Not really. Over the past five years it had become about more than a straightforward commitment to finding answers. Her body rejected the very idea of a time-out. She could never stop searching.

Even now, it was difficult to concentrate.

She could work on one of the papers she had agreed to write.

She could work on her doctorate. After all, she already had enough material for seven PhDs at least. But she had chosen the outsider's path. The renegade route of back alleys that would keep her far apart from her peers with their comfy tenures and "Professor" honorifics.

She settled on the mundane task of catching up on the email she'd been neglecting. She sat with her knees drawn up on her seat, circling the rim of her mug with a finger between sips. Irritated by her hair, she groped around for an elastic band and tied her locks back in a half-hearted ponytail.

Most of the correspondence she could ignore or politely extricate herself from. One though, she couldn't.

It had been fifteen years since the disappearance of her parents, and to commemorate their untimely loss, a new wing at the Delphi Archaeological Museum was being named after Richard and Amelia Croft. The Greek academic fraternity was up in arms over what they saw as arrogant British imperialism yet again. They couldn't dispute the fact though that continued annual donations from the Croft estate had made the museum expansion possible despite the rickety state of the Greek economy.

Then again, it could all have been a ploy to get Lara to show. Unwillingly, she had become an Archaeology megastar. Despite her general avoidance of interviews and refusal to appear in a reality TV show, she had developed a mass, mainstream fandom. People said a lot about her – most of it made up – but the truth was that her instincts paid off. Routinely the discoveries that she allowed to go public made world headlines.

Getting her to appear as the guest of honour at the wing opening was a coup for the museum. It was guaranteed to lure the press and generate free publicity.

Even now, reading over the following week's travel arrangements and event schedule, she was ambivalent about attending.

She'd agreed to it during a bout of nostalgia. She had been recalling her mother's amazingly vivid retelling of myths and legends at her bedside, and how safe she felt as a little girl in her father's arms – whether he was carrying her upstairs at Croft Manor, or to their tent in the middle of nowhere when they spent whole seasons on a single dig site. She distinctly remembered Roth sitting at the fireside and winking at her over his tin mug of whiskey. Half-asleep and clutching her scruffy teddy bear, she smiled back at him over her father's shoulder.

So many ghosts...

She sensed movement behind her, before he spoke. This was always the awkward part. It was better to just short-circuit the process, despite the risk of delivering a electrical burn that would cap the whole experience with a crusty blister.

She didn't bother to turn around. "May I call you a cab?"

"Uh-"

She glanced over her shoulder then. Her tonal coolness had frozen him halfway through the act of buttoning up his shirt. His god's stomach was partially exposed.

She arched an eyebrow, intensifying her look of disdain.

He blinked a few times, unsteady under her gaze. Eventually he found his footing. He smiled good-naturedly. "Nah, it's alright. The tube should be running by now."

He was Australian. She hadn't realized it last night over the noise of the club.

"I'll let you out."

Lara pushed back her chair and stood. She kept a physical and emotional distance. The last thing she wanted was his hands on her hips. Or even to make eye contact with him.

Once he retrieved all his clothes, they stood in the tiny entrance hall.

Lara stood with her arms crossed over her front.

He scratched the back of his neck. "Hey, if you ever want to – you know? – you have my number."

"I do."

That was a lie. She had pretended to add it to her address book. Feeling guilty, she initiated a clumsy hug.

"Thank you for last night."

She stepped back and looked him in the face. Evidently the embrace and similarly stiff expression of gratitude had been enough to placate him.

He grinned, "Cheers."

Then he was gone.

Just once she had brought home a woman. She'd been under the delusion that she could push Sam to the back of her mind if she crowded out the memory of her. Losing the documents when she stuffed more and more folders into the cabinet.

So while she was off the grid, spending a month in Massachusetts – chin-deep in Harvard's special libraries and collections – she acted on her theory.

She made herself up far darker than was normal for her. Thick eye liner, plum lipstick, leather bracelets, a low-cut black shirt that traced both her curves and layers of muscle. She supposed she looked fierce; though she felt foolish, like she was trying too hard. Miley Cyrus: The Archaeologist Edition.

At the gay club, her nerve failed her. It took three Jaeger Bombs at the bar before she could lift her head and begin hunting for what she wanted. The lioness too obvious in her intentions as stalked through the herd of wildebeest.

On the edge of the dance floor, a blonde was laughing with two other young women over alcopops. At first glance she had that immaculately made up beauty-queen-meets-spring-breaker appearance of so many WASPish American women. On closer inspection though

there was an edge that Lara wanted to cut herself on – most evident by the tattoo that trickled down the side of her neck from an earlobe pierced several times.

She was perfect.

Lara sidled up and introduced herself.

Almost immediately, she was mortified by her misconceptions. The girl, a student, ticked all of Lara's physical attraction boxes, and intellectually she was no bimbo. The Englishwoman was surprised how much she liked her on every level. Articulate. Naturally confident in a way that Lara could only ape. Very sexy.

Back at Lara's apartment, they stood on either side of the kitchen island while the Englishwoman poured them each another shooter in highball glasses – the only tumblers she could find in her rented accommodation.

As the blonde raised her glass, she grinned over the lip. "I know who you are."

"Oh." So much for going incognito.

The girl whispered, "I think you're amazing. I can't believe I'm here with you."

Fucking a young groupie, Lara? The realisation brought a flush to her cheeks.

She chuckled over her embarrassment. "Well, cheers."

Silence followed their tequila toast. Lara put down her glass and rounded the counter. She went in for the kiss, which was reciprocated by soft, willing lips. The novelty of being able to make out with someone without needing to stretch up and teeter on the balls of her feet. She'd missed the relaxed naturalness of it.

They had discarded their tops by the time they entered the bedroom.

Lara lay the girl down and followed suit, pressing her bare torso against her companion. They continued to kiss and caress and writhe. Lara was loving the softness of the girl's skin, especially once she unclasped her bra. So much to play with; so much to touch.

She was especially enamoured with the blonde's short skirt. The easy, covert access it granted was a massive turn-on.

So not straight, Lara Croft.

The archaeologist slipped down onto her knees at the foot of the bed. Gripping the blonde's thighs, she slid the girl down to the edge of the mattress so her hips were jutting over the edge. In that position it was easy to peel off the younger woman's panties.

The blonde elevated herself on her elbows to watch. She chuckled, "You've done this before."

Lara blushed. She was trying to think of a saucy comeback when her companion reached out and clasped her by the neck. The Englishwoman was drawn back onto the bed, and into a deep open-mouthed kiss.

Eventually she recalled her original intention. She slipped her fingers under the blonde's skirt and was rewarded with a shudder beneath her.

The young woman broke from the kiss to cry out. "That feels sooo good."

Moaning, she arched up into Lara's touch. "Oh my God, sweetie, that's it! Keep doing that."

Sweetie.

Lara froze.

The girl took the Englishwoman's inaction as an invitation to reverse roles. She sat up, pushing Lara onto her back on the bedspread.

The archaeologist didn't resist. At that moment she couldn't do anything. She heard another voice, sultry and adoring.

I love you, Lara.

She tried desperately to get back into it as the blonde kissed and licked down her stomach. But suddenly all she wanted to do was sob. She was vaguely aware that the button at the waist of her jeans had been plucked open, and the zip drawn down.

Lara raised her head. The girl was tracing her companion's unscarred hip bone with her tongue. She looked up then; her eyes meeting Lara's.

Thinking the Englishwoman's suddenly anxious gaze was one of anticipation, the blonde flashed a naughty grin. Then she slid her palm into Lara's knickers. Her fingers began to explore.

The archaeologist closed her eyes. Maybe, just maybe, she could find her lost arousal?

Sweetie, you're the best thing that ever happened to me.

Lara seized her companion's wrist, halting her circular strokes. "Please..."

The young woman was confused. Her lips parted, but Lara pre-empted her question. "I – I thought I could do this. But I can't."

Frowning, her companion withdrew her hand.

Lara sat up. She didn't know what to say or do. No apology seemed enough, but she stammered out one anyway. "I'm sorry."

She felt so ashamed.

She actually sat for a minute on the edge of the bed, with her head in her hands, trembling. She could hear the girl scuffling around behind her as she dressed.

"Christ." Lara balled her fists and drove her knuckles into her eyelids. Sam... She kept seeing Sam. Standing in front of her, nude, looking down at her. Smiling softly. Stroking her hair.

The Englishwoman must have looked pitiful; enough for the girl to initiate a reassuring touch when they stood clothed again before the front door.

She stroked Lara's cheek. "Hey, you don't have to worry, you know. I won't tell anyone."

That wasn't the issue at all but it was certainly easier if the younger woman believed it.

Lara forced a weak smile. "Thank you."

The blonde cupped the archaeologist's face and kissed her one final time.

As soon as the young woman was gone, Lara took several swigs from the bottle of tequila. It gave her something to do that wasn't breaking down in tears. Once she was confident that she would be unable to fight its effect, she staggered through to her bedroom. Her legs failed and she flopped face-down on the mattress, waiting to pass out. She could feel her frenetic, memory-triggered heartbeat begin to slow. Oblivion arrived soon after.

Since then, she had stuck to the thrusting of men. Straightforward. Emotionally void. It was better that way.

Chapter 3

It was better to power through her hangover than sit immobile, replaying her most melancholy memories. She had a lunch meeting; until then she could burn the skittish energy and emotion out of her body.

She pulled on her track pants, hoodie and running shoes. Headphones in place, and playlist selected, she headed out.

She'd got about a block when she heard a voice above the volume of her mp3s.

"Hey, Lara, have your tomb raided last night?"

Jogging behind her left elbow was her own personal dedicated paparazzo. Mo Masood. He chased after her with his smartphone held out as a recording device. He was grinning.

"What was this one's name, Lara? Did you even bother getting it this time?"

"Sod off, Mo."

"What's that? Calling me a *Paki*, Lara? That's not very nice. What will my readers think?"

She stopped dead and spun around so he practically collided with her. She tugged out her earbuds. "You *know* that's not what I said."

"It's not what I know; it's what the public will believe. And you have a reputation."

Lara could feel her temper uncoiling deep in her abdomen. That rattle tip beginning to quiver. She hissed through clenched teeth. "Thanks to you."

He shrugged in response; clearly jubilant that he'd got her to engage with him. The muscles in her jaw and forearms were clenching ever tighter.

Keep it together, Croft. He knows exactly what buttons to push.

She'd found that out all too late – that he had a psychology background – when he exploited her at her most vulnerable. He boosted his career while she took body shots from both the press and public.

She's been back in the UK only a few days, having just completed her first expedition post-Yamatai and post the events of New York. Her peers used the Common Era dating system; Lara preferred the AS designation – After Sam.

Terrified that her best friend would follow her to Roanoke Island, and confront her with panicked, pleading eyes, Lara had changed her plans at the last minute. She ended up in Peru instead; on the hunt for Atahualpa's long-lost ransom. And she had found the famed missing portion of the 16th Century treasure haul. Much to the disgust of rival plunderers.

She knew they'd be waiting for her after she led local authorities to the site, and handed it over to their gaping-mouthed archaeological experts.

But that was kind of the point. She wanted to be ambushed and beaten. She deserved it. And they did stop short of killing her. Probably they were bewildered when she didn't fight back at all.

Back in London, she had holed herself up in her flat until the stasis was even more suffocating than her fear of interacting with the outside world, filled as it was with unpredictable crowds and noises. Still badly bruised, aching and skittish, she decided to brave a jog around the neighbourhood.

When a figure leapt out at her from a dark alley, her fight instinct activated. Adrenalin-powered and unthinking, she sank into a crouch and sprung out of it straight into her attacker's chest. Her body charge put him on his back. She was immediately on top, pounding him with her fists.

The thug had something in his hand; a weapon. She couldn't let him act first. She wrenched it from his fingers and brought it down on his face with both hands. There was a crunch as his nose broke, and she felt the cartilage give way.

She got in half a dozen strikes before she realized that she was holding an SLR camera.

The realization sapped all strength from her limbs. "Oh my God!"

She staggered backwards into the opposite wall. She was breathless, horrified at what she'd done.

Mo smiled up at her through the blood. The same blood that had flecked her face, arms and front.

Trembling with emotion, she started to stammer, "I'm so sorry. Let me – "

As she pushed herself away from the brick to help him up, she heard a muffled click to her right. Of course Mo wasn't alone. His companion was still documenting the entire incident.

Lara stared at him, pale-faced and red-splattered, barely able to process the set-up.

But it was too late...

The next few days were her worst nightmare.

The papers screamed headlines like "*Loony Croft*," "*Cray-cray Croft!*" and "*Tomb Raider turned Raging Toff!*" Beneath were photos of her in close-up, completely feral to the casual observer. Teeth bared, eyes blind, the embodiment of viciousness she smashed the camera into Mo's face over and over.

A clip of the incident even popped up on YouTube. Suddenly everyone was debating what really happened on Yamatai. The incident called into question the results of the official Japanese report that had cleared Lara of all culpability. The original claims of desperate self-defence seemed to fade in relevance like water-soluble ink. They just didn't have much impact in comparison to the lurid images of Lara in deadly autopilot.

Sam would have known what to do to deflate the controversy; deflect attention and win the media to Lara's side. But alone, Lara was at a loss. The press set up camp in front of her

flat. Trapped inside, the archaeologist sat brooding. She was angry at Mo. Angrier at herself. And completely ashamed.

As a result she was sullen when she visited her family's long-time solicitor. Used to dealing with financial estate and property matters, he was clearly exasperated at his client's need for criminal law guidance.

They sat in his office, separated by his monstrous mahogany desk. He knitted his fingers together on the leather desk pad, and gave the young woman his sternest look. "Lara, it's possible to argue that your reaction was the result of post-traumatic stress. Given everything you've been through..." His gaze skittered along the bruises and cuts that marred her skin in a morbid join-the-dots motif. "Just looking at you, no judge would dispute that. If you would agree to an assessment by a court-assigned psychologist, we could –"

"No."

"Lara, be sensible."

The rage flickered behind her eyes. "I'm not going to be probed by a shrink."

He sighed, "Well what do you want to do then? If you get a criminal record, visas for your globe-trotting escapades could become a problem."

"Settle," she grumbled. "Out of court before this escalates any further."

She hated having to untangle her knotted-up trust fund to pay off a wanker like Mo. Especially when he was unlikely to press charges in the first place. He'd already made a pretty penny off the photos and exclusive retellings of his story. A victim of savage Lara Croft.

The smug bastard was standing before her right now, stroking his chin for extra dramatic effect. "*Lara Croft: Tomb Racist*. How does that sound as a headline?"

"Leave me alone, Mo. I'm warning you."

"You going to hit me again, Lara?"

Eyes narrowed, she took a step towards him. Evidently she was a credible enough threat that his self-satisfied smile wavered. He backed away.

Good.

Sensing her miniscule victory, he re-centred himself, and verbally countered her intimidation. "Don't you even want to know how I worked out you were back?"

"No."

She spun on her heel and took off in a sprint. But she could still hear him.

"My nose, it tingles whenever you're around..."

The encounter with Mo had sucked all pleasure from her run. Two kilometres in she gave up, scowling, and returned to her flat.

Once or twice, as a result of Mo's continual goading, she had actually considered moving back to her family estate. It would save her the expense of renting a two-bedroom flat in London when she hardly lived there. Then again, her flat was simple and cosy. Croft Manor was too big, too cold, too lonely. It was bad enough when she visited to browse the vast library assembled over the past three centuries.

She wasn't ignorant of the irony. She had crawled on her hands and knees deep underground, sometimes dragging her flattened body along using only her forearms. Yet the damp oppressiveness in the air – the very tangible sense of having hundreds of tons of rock and earth above her – was nothing on the suffocation she felt inside her family's sprawling mansion with its skylights and leaded glass windows towering two storeys high. It was the only time she suffered from claustrophobia.

These days calling it Croft Mausoleum felt like a more appropriate moniker.

The last time she returned home, events played out the same way they did every time she visited. She had hoped to sneak in, but she never managed to get past him. It didn't matter what time she arrived. She could slip under the noses of battle-hardened mercenaries but not a septuagenarian.

A voice behind her. "Lady Lara?"

She turned; the naughty child caught yet again.

Winston.

He stood there wearing an old twill cardigan over his butler's uniform, as grey and worn as he looked. If a human could be threadbare, that was Winston.

Lara had known him her whole life. As a child for a long time she believed that he actually lived in a cupboard off the entrance hall, waiting to spring out whenever anyone walked through the front door. Even now, years later, he was a living, breathing shadow who would attach himself to any visitor. Lara suspected he would follow her into the walk-in freezer if she went in there.

The elderly butler was the last servant who lived full-time at the Manor. Lara suspected that even if she had the heart to forcibly retire him, he would refuse to leave.

Instead, she strained a surprised smile.

"Oh, hi, Winston."

He stood stiff, clearly distressed at the informality of the meeting, despite the fact that Lara was the one who had broken protocol – creeping into the house on a gloomy Sunday afternoon, and looking about as unladylike as possible.

She was suddenly aware of her dishevelled appearance, having dashed in the rain from her car to the front door. Water dripped from her hair and military jacket. Her gaze dipped to her old leather boots, which had tracked a liberal serving of mud onto the checkered floor. *Oops.*

"Lady Lara, you should have called ahead. I could have prepared your room for you."

"Oh, that's really not necessary. I'm not staying long. I'm just here to," she shook the satchel slung over her shoulder, "get some books."

Winston gave her *that* look. She remembered being on the receiving end of it when she was a child. After being caught spying on her parents' meetings; sneaking into her father's study to examine artefacts unsupervised; or stealing freshly baked biscuits out of the kitchen. With a single raised eyebrow he could make her feel guilty even when she had done nothing wrong.

Now that look meant something else entirely – disapproval of Lara as the last of her line. The Final Croft: A complete disappointment.

Instead of providing an heir and bringing life back into the house, even if that meant becoming a Croft hyphenate, she was gallivanting around the globe. Although her truth-excavating ambitions and accomplishments were admirable, her methods were not. Making alliances with law breakers if needs be. Crawling around in the muck. Being shot at. Killing. Fucking indiscriminately. These were not the typical components of a lady's lifestyle. Well, not officially anyway.

Being alone in Croft Manor with Winston made her feel like Batman or something. And she hated it.

Her family home was full of painful reminders. Even if she could shut out her own memories, there was no ignoring the spray of photographs and painted portraits on every surface. They forced her to acknowledge her heritage; the love she would have curled up in like a blanket if it hadn't been stripped from her.

A little girl still in her school uniform, sitting alone on the edge of her bed, hiccupping as she tried not to cry. Not even knowing if she had any right to grieve for her missing parents.

The library used to double as her father's study, and a side table was crammed with framed photographs.

Richard Croft in his bachelor adventuring days, his arms around a much younger Roth and Grimm.

Amelia Croft prim and proper in her dressage attire.

Another one of her thigh deep in a river, standing in waders, and smiling as she prepared to cast her line.

Lara as a baby.

The family together in a wintery setting, with five year old Lara in a bright red coat and scarf, clutching the hands of both her parents.

Another irony: For someone whose profession required her to dig around in the past, Lara Croft detested excavating her own personal history.

Still, she couldn't deny that she carried her parents around with her. Every time she looked in a mirror she was forced to recognise that fact. She was lean, long-limbed and complexioned like her father. But there was no question she was her mother's daughter. Amelia Croft was shorter, raven-haired and more voluptuous, but in terms of facial features the resemblance was striking.

The last thing Lara felt at that moment was hunger – heartsore was more accurate – but she accepted Winston's offer of tea before she left; largely so that he could feel useful.

He served the Twinings with a couple of gingernut biscuits and a jam sandwich, the crusts cut off just like when she was a child. She sat on a stool in the kitchen, nibbling at her food. It was a chilly, sterile space, but still more cosy and comforting than the eerily silent dining room, half draped in white sheets. There her ancestors looked down on her from their portraits.

She agreed to appear at the Delphi Museum unveiling the next day.

After a morning spent reminiscing and reading, Lara pulled on a pair of jeans and a plain V-neck T-shirt, and headed to the Nine Bells.

The pub was one of the few places she felt relaxed. Its regulars were her people. She knew that given her aristocratic birth right she was supposed to be leading a very different life. Teetering around in inappropriate heels at the Royal Ascot, champagne in hand, discussing marriage proposals from under a monstrous hat. Alternatively, she should be gossiping about how quickly Kate got her pre-baby body back.

Lara loathed it.

The Nine Bells was dingy. It reeked of stale smoke, beer and bodies. And it could be dangerous as drunkenness took on a darker deviant shade, particularly late on Saturday nights. Still, Lara felt at home there. It was one of the few places she could go where she wasn't stared at. Despite everything she had done the past five years, she was still treated as part of the furniture; nothing more than a former barmaid who continued to hang around as one of the clientele.

People didn't even look up when she entered. Proprietor Charlie, her former boss, gave her a nod while he wiped pint glasses, but that was it.

She spotted Lynch at one of the tables in the middle of the pub. He hadn't been there long. His double whisky was untouched, as was the one he had ordered for her.

Grizzled and ten pounds overweight, the Irishman nonetheless reminded her of a Roth-Grimm hybrid. He used to be one of their rivals, but after their death, Lara felt herself drawn to the pilot. He wasn't as reliable or ethical as her original allies, but he was game for anything – and that she prized.

She slipped into the seat opposite him, and they slipped straight into business. This didn't mean of course that Lynch would pass up the opportunity to ogle Lara's chest. He smiled appreciatively. "So what can I do for you today, girlie?"

She tugged a map out of her pocket. "I need a drop-off in Tibet."

"Tibet? I thought the Chinese wanted your head after the whole Elixir of Life incident?"

"They do."

Lynch puffed out his cheeks. "If the authorities catch you – "

"I enjoy the challenge of a tight spot," Lara smirked. "Is it possible?"

"Sweetheart, you might as well ask me to fly straight up the India-Pakistan border."

"I'm not opposed to that either. You didn't answer my question. Is it possible?"

The beefy Irishman leaned back in his chair. "Of course it's possible. I'm questioning how *wise* it is."

"Let me worry about that."

The earnestness with which she said it seemed to amuse Lynch. Something sparkled in his eye, and the conversation instantly morphed from brusque to banter. She decided to play along.

Lynch chuckled in his thick accent, "You really need a boyfriend, Lara."

"Why? It's easy enough to satisfy my needs without one, and this way lovers don't cramp my style."

That earned her a grin. "You're a cold one, Croft. A real dark horse."

Lara took a sip of her drink. "Would you even be asking the question if I was a man?"

"Heh, probably not."

She lowered her glass. "So why do you persist?"

"It doesn't hurt to ask."

She sighed, "You know I'm never going to say yes, Lynch."

"Come on. What about some good Irish blood in your gene pool?"

She arched an eye brow. "I don't want any part of you in my gene pool, thank you."

He guffawed at that, and raised his whisky in salute.

Lara was startled out of her return smile by a clatter behind the bar, followed by Charlie's booming voice. "Bloody hell, girl!"

A panicked ponytailed redhead was scampering for a mop behind the counter. She gasped, "Mr Ansell, I'm so sorry."

Lara estimated the girl was nineteen. Pretty. Pleasing to look at in her uniform. And clearly still learning the ropes at the Nine Bells. Lara knew from her own experience that Charlie and the locals would give her a hard time, but if she stuck it out and proved her mettle, they would become her fiercest champions.

Since Yamatai, at least six tabloid journalists had been flung out of the pub. The paparazzi had learned quickly to stay clear of Lara's little haven if they valued their cameras.

Her former employer caught Lara watching.

"Croft!" he called. "You want your old job back? Even out of practice, I'm sure you could do better than this one." He cocked his head in the direction of the barmaid.

Lara smiled, "I'll think about it, Charlie."

Then she winked at the redhead. Star struck, the girl gaped and hurriedly refocused on her task.

Laughing to herself, Lara turned back to Lynch. She was jabbing at her intended destination on the map when it happened.

"Lara?"

That voice. She hadn't heard it for five years. Or, rather, she hadn't heard it in person for five years. For the first few weeks and months there had been pleading voice messages and phone calls almost every single day. She didn't have the courage to respond. Throat clogged with emotion, eyes blinded by tears, she always severed the connection as soon as she realized who was on the line.

But it couldn't be her. Not here, surely?

Lara looked up. It was her. Standing there in her tight jeans and biker jacket. Her weight on one hip, jutting away from her centre line of balance. Half a decade and she hadn't changed at all. Same perfectly groomed hair style. Same pristine skin and make-up.

"S-Sam?"

Chapter 4

"S-Sam?"

The American woman was striding across the pub towards her.

Lara was numb in her seat, incapable of doing anything but fixate on the face of her former best friend.

Sam's expression was unreadable. Soft and beautiful as always; her lips parted. She stopped in front of Lara. The archaeologist gazed up at her.

Her senses were so overloaded by Sam's presence that she didn't even feel the whisky until it seared her eyes.

It still wasn't as much of a shock to her system as Sam slamming the glass down on the table. It jolted Lara back into the physical present.

Sam was yelling at her. Screaming. "Is that all I was to you, Lara? Just another of your fuck-and-runs?!"

The Englishwoman desperately wanted to say something. But words bounced against her epiglottis and vanished back down her throat. All she could do was gape.

Sam waited a heartbeat. Under the suffocating intensity of her gaze, Lara just couldn't generate a response. She was vaguely aware of the liquid dripping off her nose and chin; the way it glued stray locks of hair to her cheeks.

Sam shook her head at the archaeologist's silence. Lara's lack of reaction gave her nothing to stoke her rage. At least that was one way of interpreting her look of disappointment. She clenched her eyes shut and grimaced, "Goddammit." Then she bolted for the door.

For a second, Lara wondered if she had hallucinated the whole thing. But there was no ignoring the sudden silence in the pub; how all eyes had settled on her.

Even Lynch was stiff in his seat. He was always the one with a dirty joke or saucy quip. She could rely on him for that. But even the Irishman didn't seem to know how to respond in the aftermath.

The Englishwoman could feel her face reddening. *Jesus Christ!*

Nothing had changed. Sam still acted on impulse. So self-assured; so immune to embarrassment after years of misbehaviour calculated to snare her parents' attention. Lara had learned to fake cockiness but it was all an act. Sam felt feathers about causing a scene.

And true to form, she had left Lara standing alone, naked and scriptless on the stage. It was impossible for her to pretend that nothing had happened.

All that anxious energy that had retreated to her core on spotting Sam surged back into Lara's limbs. Her final measured action was to pick up a serviette and dab her face. She pushed back her chair, and suddenly she was outside in a half crouch, ready to sprint in any direction. She spotted Sam a block to her left. Her back was to Lara, her head downcast as she trotted away.

"Hey!" Lara yelled, earning a few startled looks from passers-by; but nothing from her former best friend.

Suddenly furious, Lara broke into a run. "Hey!"

With her long strides, she caught up effortlessly. She grabbed Sam's elbow and spun her around. She snarled into the American's face, "What the hell was that?! You humiliated me back there."

Sam yanked free of her grip. In return she spat, "You broke my heart!"

"I broke both our hearts, Sam."

The documentary maker started at that admission. Her scowl slackened for a moment; then it was back. Her voice was softer though. "Then why did you do it, Lara?"

"I – I had to." It had become her mantra over the past five years.

Sam started laughing. The sound was so bitter that it stung Lara's eyes.

"I had – " The Englishwoman's tongue tangled in the words. She tried again. "I had to protect you."

"Protect me?" Sam rolled her eyes to the grey London sky. "From what exactly? Pain? Because that was a big fucking *FAIL* wasn't it?"

She laughed even louder. "God! You know, for someone so smart you can be really fucking stupid sometimes. You don't think that you could have had both? Your beloved *truth* and me?"

The volume of Sam's voice... The city was saturated with weirdness, but people on the street were looking at them. Lara wasn't supposed to care, but she did. And the fact that at that moment she was actually worried about Mo hearing the exchange enraged her.

"Lara!"

What could she say? She couldn't argue with her former best friend. This was the verbal equivalent of being pounded by those furious Peruvians. She deserved it. She deserved all of it. Sam rarely excelled academically – she just wasn't interested – but she was marvellously perceptive. And right then she was spot-on.

The archaeologist took a deep breath and murmured, "I never meant – "

Sam cut her off again. "What? Are you going to say that you didn't mean to hurt me?"

"That last night was never supposed to happen like that. You kissed me and – "

Sam barked, incredulous. "So it's *my* fault?"

"No. I just – "

"Actually, you know what? I think you intended to hurt me as much as you could. Because you're broken, Lara Croft."

The archaeologist had been in the process of reaching for Sam again. But she stumbled as the words struck her. Her arm dropped to her side.

"Five years is a long time. I had a really long time to think, so I worked it out, Lara." When the Englishwoman didn't respond, her companion continued, "The first time you feel something, you run. Run away to dusty tombs and dead bodies. Because it's easier. Anything living, you have no clue how to handle."

All the colour that had fled Lara's face seemed to have defected to Sam's cheeks. The American resumed her tirade. "Dead things! You've surrounded yourself with them, Lara. Christ, you make them! There must be a mountain of corpses you're responsible for by now. Because God forbid you talk to anyone about anything. Kill first and look for answers after. God, you're so emotionally stunted."

Lara felt her body and mind disengage. She'd come to recognise it as self defence mechanism. It had an instantly numbing effect; so welcomingly soothing. Even her words came out mechanically. Two syllables. "Right then." She turned and started to walk away.

But Sam didn't stop.

"You're screwed up, Lara. Familial love, platonic love, romantic love; they're all muddled in your head. If I had died on Yamatai and it had been Roth you'd saved, would you be fucking him right now?"

That was it. Pure, undiluted rage.

Lara spun around. "How dare you?" She was no longer concerned about causing a scene. Her hiss morphed into a full-bodied yell as she charged back towards her former friend. "*How fucking dare you?!*"

Sam's sneer instantly withered under Lara's glare.

In the second it took the archaeologist to close the gap between them, she was ready to shove Sam; punch her; she didn't care.

Sensing Lara's intention, Sam hopped backwards, trying to put distance between them. She was cringing; her arms raised to protect her face.

And just like that, Lara's temper guttered out. Shame smoked instead.

Jesus, she's terrified of you.

Then her eyes latched onto Sam's left hand.

Every so often the Englishwoman would feel a twinge in her left side, where the rebar puncture had almost killed her five years previously. Right then, though, it felt like someone had punched her above the hipbone with a sharp-tipped knuckleduster. That the intensity of the blow had ripped open her scar all over again.

Sam recognised what Lara was staring at. She turned the back of her hand to the archaeologist so that she could better appraise it.

Even with her jaw trembling, Sam still managed to blurt it out. "Yeah, Lara, I'm engaged."

Chapter 5

Lara's legs felt wobbly beneath her. She widened her stance to steady herself, but the action didn't extend to her voice. Her words sounded hollow.

"You're engaged?"

"Yeah." As soon as Sam said it, she dropped her eyes. She was quivering too.

Lara didn't want to know; not really. But the question came anyway.

"To a ...?"

The American girl's gaze shot up, setting instantly into a glare. "To a really great *guy!* Jesus, Lara, if you liked it so much, you should have put a ring on it."

"I – I'm happy for you, Sam."

"You're happy for me?" The echo was followed by her scrunching up her face.

"I only ever wanted you to be happy." The words were clunky in the archaeologist's mouth, like she was reading from a script. And if she wasn't buying it, Sam with her filmmaking certainly wouldn't.

The American snorted. "Of course. That was always high on your list of priorities."

"I never wanted to hurt you."

"Really? It seems that's all you do."

"Sam, please..." Lara's eyes had started to sting again. But she wouldn't gift her scowling companion with the sight of her breaking down on the street. Intent on ending the awkward silence, the Englishwoman eventually sighed, "What are you doing here anyway?"

The Nine Bells had never been Sam's regular. She was up for anything but she really didn't fit in at the rough establishment given her designer wear, standout accent and smartphone surgically attached to her palm.

In their uni days, she would pop in at the end of Lara's shift to walk home with her. Or, more typically, drag her exhausted, aching friend out clubbing.

Lara had come to recognise the ritual that started the latter. Sam would plonk a twenty quid note down on the bar and order two Jager Bombs – one for herself and one for her wage slave best friend. If it hadn't been Sam, Lara would have been able to turn down the "gift." Charlie didn't like his barmaids accepting drinks. However, even he began to look forward to the sight of the too-serious brunette putting them back. Although the locals only just tolerated Sam, they were happy to peer pressure "proper" Lara Croft into leglessness.

She would end her shift red cheeked and unsteady, desperately trying to conduct herself in a respectable manner; even though she was plastered and teetering on the brink of a giggling fit. Sam would never make it any easier; pulling faces, spouting innuendo, sometimes even

slipping over the bar to tickle Lara while she wiped down the counter and divvied up the tips. The two girls snickering together.

Now they both were serious.

Sam muttered, "I'm with my fiancé. Steven's in London for business. I wanted to show him where I went to college; my old hangouts."

"Ah." It was a stilted small talk response, but Lara didn't know how else to sound neutral as every piece of news kneed her in the kidneys.

Steven. Her fiancé's name is Steven.

Sam shifted from her weight from one leg to the other. She was looking down at the pavement again. "I didn't seriously think you'd be here, but I thought just maybe..." She paused to inhale deeply. "Lara, I really just need to know – "

"There you are!" Over Sam's shoulder, a man with wiry auburn hair and glasses was jogging towards them.

The American woman turned at the sound of his voice, although her eyes made a detour; meeting Lara's before settling on his. She was still looking at Lara when she said, "Hey, sweetie."

The man put his arm around the documentary maker's waist. "Sammy. Hey, babe, I was wondering where you were." He was American too. Or Canadian. Lara could never tell the difference. He was certainly tall and lean, and evidently in late twenties despite the fact that up close his hair was already flecked with silver.

"Sorry..." Sam beamed up at him. Her hand rested on his chest, the engagement ring right in Lara's face again. Sam nodded in the archaeologist's direction. "I got a bit side-tracked."

For a heartbeat the man gazed at Lara blankly. Then recognition kicked in. His free hand shot out towards her. "Oh my God! Lara Croft."

She returned his firm handshake with a polite "Hello" even as Sam droned out the obligatory introductions.

"Steven, this is Lara. Lara, this is Steven." Sam patted her fiancé's pectoral, laying on the admiration thick. "Steven is a *very* talented writer-producer."

He seemed to be embarrassed about the praise; deflecting the conversation immediately in Lara's direction.

"Sam said she went to school with you. That you two were best friends. The Tomb Raider!"

Lara winced at the term.

Steven was still babbling excitedly. "I can't believe it. Meeting you here like this. You're amazing."

Sam rolled her eyes, but she was smiling. "God, sweetie, could you fanboy any harder? Do you want to throw in some *squees*; ask for her autograph?"

Steven ignored her. He was still fixated on Lara. He cocked his head suddenly. "Hey, why don't you join us for dinner tomorrow night?"

Lara suspected her expression mirrored Sam's exactly at the moment. Face slack below the nose line, eyes and brow rigid.

Steven glanced between the two women, misinterpreting their shared shock as animosity.

"Look," he countered, "I know you and Sam had some kind of falling out."

The American woman started tittering uncomfortably. "Sweetie, I don't think Lara – "

Steven cut her off; his attention still entirely on the celebrity before him.

"I would love to pick your brain for a project I'm working on. And, more importantly, hear all about Sammy's varsity days. The embarrassing stories that she refuses to tell me."

He squeezed his squirming fiancé in a one-armed hug.

Lara was squirming too inside her skin. "The invite is very kind of you, Steven. But I don't think I can make it. Because..."

"Reasons!" Sam blurted, "*Reasons*."

Steven started laughing. "What are you so worried about me hearing?" His gaze swung from his fiancé to her ex-friend.

Lara attempted her excuse again. Her hangover combined with the day's emotional earthquake and its various aftershocks had knocked her completely out of equilibrium. She was clambering around on her hands and knees; unable to stand.

"I don't think dinner would be such a good idea. I'm busy and I've got things – "

"Come on. It'll be a chance to catch up; bury the hatchet."

Sam guffawed loudly. "Wrong choice of words, sweetie. Lara might actually take you literally and pitch up with her climbing axe."

She just couldn't resist a sly stab under the archaeologist's ribcage. Even right at the moment when Lara could have saved her. The scorpion riding on the frog's back.

Lara narrowed her eyes. *Fuck you, Sam*.

She felt a jolt of defiance in her muscles. Since Yamatai this kind of rage-triggered rebellion had become one of the few things that made her feel good. It was petulant, but it was also massively satisfying to disprove everyone who continued to disregard her capabilities – even with all her scars and steel expression.

I'll show you what this little rat can do...

She smiled, "I think I can clear up my schedule."

Steven clapped his hands together. "Great. Seven tomorrow night? I think you know the place; it's your and Sammy's old apartment."

He was completely ignorant of how pale his wife-to-be had grown.

Lara made sure her smile included as much teeth as possible. "Perfect."

As the couple walked off, Sam glared back over her shoulder at Lara.

Good.

But the longer she watched Sam and Steven side by side, their arms circling each other, the worse Lara began to feel. The self-satisfaction ebbed, along with her smirk. What was left was a horrible sense of hollowness.

She tried to reason with herself. *This is what you wanted Lara. What you always wanted for her.*

But in saying those words to herself, anguish surged up from the bottom of the emptiness, like a tidal pool fed from below.

She was back on that forest floor in Yamatai, having just shrugged out of her shredded parachute pack. She was still on all fours, shaking. Trying to regulate her breathing as she balanced on the point of passing out. All there was in the universe was white pain. It engulfed her like fog. Or, more accurately, mustard gas. Consuming all her senses. It was the only thing that was real. Everything else felt like a dream as she stumbled half-blind and burning from tree to tree. Repeatedly she tripped over roots and rocks as she staggered towards the stinking shantytown...

Somehow she was back inside the Nine Bells. She supposed her body had taken her there on autopilot. She didn't have anywhere else to go.

This time everyone was looking at her. Sam's outing of her had been too much of a spectacle to ignore.

But the Englishwoman wasn't going to cry. She hadn't cried in five years. She wouldn't let herself.

Ignoring the silence and the stares, she crossed the room and slipped into her seat opposite Lynch. He was hunched over her map, his palms clutching his elbows in a defensive frame.

He muttered without looking up, "Who was that?"

Still numb, the words came before she could put a snarky spin on them. "The one who got away."

To his credit the pilot didn't even raise his eyebrows at the revelation. He simply turned in his seat and called out to the barmaid, "Double Bells."

Even the girl looked pitying as she reached for the bottle of whisky.

Lynch glanced back at Lara. He shook his head. "Actually, better make it a triple."

Chapter 6

Lara Croft: Third Wheel.

She looked wistfully at her glass of wine, wishing she had downed the whole bottle during the taxi ride over. Here she was sitting having dinner in the flat she used to share with Sam; listening to her call someone else Sweetie and watching her continually caress him – his shoulders, his chest, his arms. Then there were his returned hand squeezes; neck nuzzles and affectionate pecks to the top of her head.

Frustratingly Lara couldn't figure out how much was a calculated act on Sam's part, designed to rile up the archaeologist, or a reflex action; an unconscious demonstration of her love for her fiancé.

Lara had felt her own spark of spiteful satisfaction at the start of the evening. When Steven opened the front door, she announced loudly, "I hope you don't mind that I brought someone?"

Immediately Sam's head popped into sight behind her husband-to-be. She was glaring, her jaw clenched... until Lara produced the 2008 Merlot she'd been hiding behind the doorframe.

Sam rolled her eyes and disappeared from view.

An hour later, sitting together at the dinner table, playing affluent twenty-something sophisticates, all Lara could think was *God, this was a bad idea.*

For one thing, since the whisky-soaked run-in at the Nine Bells, her side had started aching again. The low grade throb never let up, like someone grinding their knuckles into her old scar relentlessly. She avoided painkillers and the continual pulsing and twinging was affecting her concentration; her already poor quality of sleep. Mentally, she couldn't even raise her shield to shoulder height. She was emotionally exposed and, perilously, perched at the exact spot where she had first realised the extent of her feelings for Sam several years previously.

The flat looked nothing like it did when two college girls lived there. Sam's mother must have attacked it during one of her interior decorating frenzies. All their clutter was gone. Their chick-flick DVD collection. Lara's over-stuffed bookshelf. The array of alcohols lined up on the kitchen island. Their various *trophies*, like the "lucky" boxers they'd stolen from one of Sam's jock exes, and the *Danger: Men at Work* sign the American girl had hung above Lara's bedroom door.

Now the flat was photo shoot-ready, as meticulously made up as Isabella Nishamura every time Lara had met her. The effect was tastefully muted elegance, all smoothed corners, neutral colours, pot plants and generic oil landscapes.

Still, there was no escaping the memories.

"Lara, sweetie, could you zip me up?"

Sam stood peeking around her flatmate's bedroom door.

It was Friday night and Lara had the evening off for once. No straining to hear slurred drinks orders over the jukebox. She planned to indulge in a little of what she regarded as me-time – curled up under her duvet with a mug of tea, a notepad and a book on the ramifications of Japan's Sakoku Policy.

Sam was about as anti sakoku as you could get. She viewed Lara's plan for the evening as self-inflicted punishment. Earlier on she had pulled a face. "Sweetie, why don't you just cut yourself if you're that much of a masochist?"

The American never stayed in on a Friday night. Or a Saturday. Or a Thursday. Sometimes not even a Tuesday. That very evening she was attending a formal on the arm of one of the college's rugby stars.

Her hair was perfect, her make-up complete and she was standing there in a slinky, strapless cocktail dress. Lara didn't want to know where Sam got it. Or hazard a guess as to how much it cost. She looked stunning though.

Ever obedient where her best friend was concerned, Lara dropped her book and leapt up. The dress's zipper was stiff, and the Englishwoman was only half listening as Sam prattled on about who would be at the event, and debated aloud with herself whether she was going to put out for her date. She really seemed to like the fullback; she wouldn't have been second-guessing a shag otherwise.

While she struggled with the zipper, Lara kept her eyes focused on Sam's bare back. She was smiling to herself when the feeling struck... like a punch from her blind spot.

A desire to run her fingertips down between Sam's shoulder blades. She could imagine how soft the skin would feel. What it would be like to press her lips against that little knob of bone at the nape of her friend's neck.

The weirdness of the realisation brought a flush to her cheeks, just as she completed her task.

Lara stepped back. Immediately Sam turned to face her. The American girl was giddy with exhilaration; too lost in the moment to notice the shell-shock on her companion's face.

God, she was radiant.

Terrified that Sam would pick up on her discomfort, Lara stammered a compliment, "You – You look lovely."

Then her eyes dropped to her feet anyway. She was wearing a pair of Hello Kitty socks, boxers and an old stretched T-shirt with the Bintang beer logo. That's how she was standing before Sam – who could have passed for a red-carpet movie star at that moment.

Lara had never felt self-conscious around her best friend before.

What the Hell is wrong with you?

Sam pulled Lara into a hug. "Oh, sweetie, I'm so excited."

Even with her eyes clenched shut, the archaeology student was still hyper-aware of Sam's breasts pressing against her front. The way their pelvic bones slotted together perfectly. Lara

kept her arms rigid, her fingers splayed and stiff so that she wouldn't touch any part of her best friend. Despite the temptation.

It didn't help when Sam murmured into her ear. "It's not too late. We can still save you from tonight's self-imposed torture."

Lara disengaged from the embrace.

"No, no, it's alright. I have – I'll be – " She shook her head, trying to dispel some of the mental murkiness. It didn't work. Instead, she ended up squeaking, "Have fun."

Sam rolled her eyes. "Of course it'll be fun. I'm there."

Then she was gone with a cheeky grin, clattering down the stairs in her perilous heels, sounding just like a mountain goat.

After Sam departed, Lara retreated to her bedroom. She felt bewildered. She couldn't concentrate on her book. The sandwich she'd made for supper had no taste. She chewed mechanically. She couldn't go five minutes without checking her phone to make sure she hadn't missed a message from Sam. That she needed Lara for something. Like usual.

Eventually Lara gave up on her plans for the evening. She flopped back on the mattress, pressed her palms to her diaphragm and attempted some of the deep breaths she'd learnt in yoga class. She let her lungs expand as much as possible, encouraging her body to slip into a meditative state even as her mind frenzied with alternating fantasies and doubts.

She tried to reason with herself. *Don't be ridiculous, Lara. She likes boys. YOU like boys...*

And so it commenced: Weeks spent lying awake late at night, trying to rationalise her feelings; agonising over her psycho-analysis; her guilt.

What she felt wasn't *normal*. Hell, it was *wrong*; a massive threat to their relationship.

She could explain it though.

She'd never had the time or interest to date seriously. Her studies were always her priority. Then there was the fact that she had passed through her teenage years without her parents. That was unhealthy. What grasp did she have of romantic intimacy as an orphan confined to an all-girls boarding school throughout puberty? That could easily have damaged her.

That was it. She was damaged. Warped by her circumstances.

All these factors combined made her fixate on Sam. There was no other reason why she wanted to sleep with her best friend.

It was just an urge – a dark, dangerous compulsion that she could learn to control. That she had to control. All it required was a Twelve Step Programme. Plus a series of hard mental slaps.

So she swallowed her feelings back down. As deep as they could go. She did her best to keep them suppressed but every so often they would flow through her limbs like a delicious liqueur warming her entire body on a Winter's evening.

Their movie nights at home on the couch.

Almost every time Lara struggled to pay attention to the film, distracted as she was by the desire to put her arm around her friend or rest her hand on her leg. Often Sam got sleepy and would lie down with her head in Lara's lap, gripping her thighs like a pillow. For the remainder of the movie, and frequently beyond, the Englishwoman would sit there like St Francis of Assisi, immobile, not wanting to disturb Sam until she stirred herself. Not even daring to stroke her companion's hair, which was what she wanted most. Later, Sam would berate her for not nudging her awake and forcing her to go to bed.

Lara contemplated moving out. But that would bring down the Sam-ish Inquisition on her head. She would be forced to confess the truth – Sam always knew when she was lying – and she couldn't stomach the thought of a negative reaction from her flatmate. Sam's responses were rarely moderated, and Lara could imagine how the confession would shatter their friendship. A huge wall suddenly dropping between them, destroying the relaxed, unthinking intimacy of their bond.

It wasn't a difficult decision in the end. She would always be there for Sam. As her best friend. Nothing more. She would not jeopardise what they had because of some base urges.

So she plunged herself deeper into her studies and part-time jobs. Put up her own personal perimeter fence. She couldn't breach it.

Except, after Yamatai, she did. Despite the razor wire. Despite the high voltage running through it. Despite the armed guards taking pot shots at her. Cut up, bleeding and disorientated, she had scaled the fence and collapsed into Sam's arms. And while they finally kissed – while Lara got exactly what she wanted – she sunk her claws into her companion's chest.

Lara had saved Sam's soul from Himiko only to rip out her heart in yet another vile ritual. Regardless of what she told herself, in the end Lara had let her best friend be sacrificed.

And Sam was Lara's first and only real friend; there was no question. The Englishwoman had got on alright with the girls at her school, but she always felt like she was on the outskirts of the social ecosystem. Good at academics. Good at sport. Pretty. Certainly dedicated and disciplined enough to be popular with the teachers. But too serious. Too shy. She spent a lot of time alone. It didn't bother her but it did mean she completed her A-levels and progressed on to university with no friends in tow. She didn't let anyone in.

Sam, well she bulldozed through Lara's defences. She wouldn't take no for an answer. The number of times in first year the archaeology student had opened her door to find Sam there waiting for her, or grabbing her by the arm and physically dragging her out clubbing.

"You're far more fun than you think you are, Lara Croft. There's a party girl in there just waiting to get out; I've seen her. We are totally going to get you out of your shell."

Well, Sam had helped Lara out of her shell. Just not in the way she intended. And the creature that slithered out on Yamatai... it turned out nobody wanted *it* out of its shell. It was an abomination that thrived in its natural environment of blood and filth and smoke and death.

Her manners could mask its presence, but it never went away. It never rested. Even then she could feel it under her skin. *The real Lara Croft*. Her true self. It was on edge in unfamiliar surroundings, stalking back and forth. Every second it grew more agitated.

In between chuckles, Sam's mouth met Steven's, and the creature threw itself against the bars of its enclosure.

Lara clenched her eyes shut.

God, this was a bad idea.

Chapter 7

The longer Lara stayed in that apartment with Sam and Steven, the harder it became to force a smile. Realisation ate away at her core, leaving her empty inside.

Sam had changed. She'd evolved. She even made them dinner – an excellent Thai chicken curry. That churned up memories of the filmmaker attempting to cook on the same stove years previously. Usually her culinary creations were nothing more complex than a stir-fry... unless she was on one of her use-every-pot-and-pan-in-the-kitchen Nigella kicks. Either way the end result was typically blackened, limp or rubber. Mostly because she'd be distracted by her phone or something on TV.

Lara remembered these cooking attempts less because of the taste and more because of how badly she wanted to put her arms around Sam from behind and nuzzle her neck while she was busy playing domestic goddess. Sometimes the fantasy was so vivid that the archaeologist had to hide her smile behind her mug of tea whenever her flatmate looked up.

But Sam had moved on. It was Steven with her arms around her now while she cooked. Lara; her motion was backwards. She had devolved. She was a heavily browed humanoid shuffling back to a primeval state. She had no place here.

Yet still she managed to squeeze out the pleasantries over dinner.

Sam was all smiles and caresses for Steven, but she barely acknowledged Lara, even when the latter complimented her on the meal.

The documentary-maker may have sat sullen and silent for the most part, but her fiancé kept the conversation going. Steven was full of questions for Lara about her work, training, professional terminology; the evolution of archaeology itself over the past two centuries.

She learned that Steven had recently won critical acclaim and an instant fan following for a time travel series he spearheaded. The show was one of the hottest properties on TV at the moment, and the BBC was courting him for another project: some kind of pulpy supernatural show that muddled Lovecraft and old Hollywood serials. One of the proposed characters was an archaeologist. In fact, if it wasn't for the fact that she was American and born at the turn of the Twentieth Century, she sounded exactly like Lara. No doubt designed to cash in on the public's fascination with the privacy-obsessed Tomb Raider.

Still, Lara couldn't hate Steven. She wanted to loathe him like the vast majority of Sam's boyfriends and hook-ups – the type of guys who would take advantage of a ditsy, party-loving Japanese American girl whose morals could end up as short as her skirts when alcohol was added. All the glares Lara had expended over the years as hands slid up her friend's thighs or clasped her arse.

Steven though was just so nice; so well-mannered and well-adjusted. He reminded Lara of Alex without the conspiracy obsession. When he geeked out, excitement illuminated his face. It was like how she used to feel about archaeology before Yamatai – the innocent, overwhelming enthusiasm. His passion was infectious, and Lara found herself smiling at him even as her heart ached. The fact that Sam had chosen him as a life mate meant her best friend had grown up even more than she initially suspected.

When Steven excused himself to answer a phone call from the States, Lara and Sam were left alone at the dining table. The silence was agonising.

The archaeologist attempted a conciliatory smile but it kept guttering out like a candle in a draughty room. Then again, there wasn't much point in trying when her companion wouldn't even meet her gaze. Sam kept her eyes downcast.

Eventually though, the documentary-maker looked up from her plate as she sought out her wine glass. Just before it reached her lips, she sneered, "So nice that you could find a gap in your schedule of fucking and killing to join us tonight."

Lara dropped her fork loudly on her plate. She had vowed not to lose her temper but Sam had found her trigger. It also probably didn't help that the archaeologist was on her third glass of wine. "You actually believe that bollocks?"

"All those photos can't lie, Lara. You dragging God knows how many guys out of clubs. Attacking paparazzi..."

"Bloody hell, Sam! You're in the media; you know how everything is twisted."

"I know how every story grows from a seed of truth."

How could she argue against that? She had done all those things; just not to the extent that the paparazzi insisted.

Sam pouted, "Just so you know, I'm only doing this for Steven."

"Fine."

"Good." Then she proceeded to scowl at her plate until her fiancé returned to the room.

Lara pushed chicken and noodles around with her fork. She was a complete and utter masochist. What had she *really* hoped to achieve that evening? Forgiveness from Sam? A rekindling of the friendship that had once meant so much to them both? There was still no place for Sam in Lara's dangerous life. She had wanted her former flatmate to find happiness without her, and that had finally happened. Yet, just as she had feared five years previously, being in such close proximity to Sam completely tore down her resolve; her commitment to staying away. It was a relief when Steven returned as mediator and Sam was no longer the archaeologist's complete focus.

After dinner Lara and Steven were sitting in the lounge while Sam potted around in the kitchen, loading the dishwasher and making coffee for the three of them. In their former life, the Englishwoman would have had no qualms teasing her best friend about her Stepford Wives domesticity. But there was no possibility of that now. When Lara had volunteered to help clear the table, Sam practically spat "I don't need your help" and snatched the plate from her hands.

Instead Lara sat at the exact spot that she associated with one of her most conflicted memories.

That time she got back in the early hours of Saturday morning after working the late shift. Although the flat was normally empty, she was always as silent as possible, just in case. Keeping the keys clenched in her palm so that they didn't jangle. Slipping off her coat without a sound. Sliding the door shut on its hinges. She was so quiet in fact that she had taken a few steps into the living room before she deciphered the scene before her in the gloom.

Sam riding some guy on the couch. She was totally naked, facing Lara over the back of the couch. But her eyes were closed, her lips parted as she gasped and moaned.

Lara was horrified at the accidental invasion of her friend's privacy; but also mesmerised. She couldn't look away.

A deeper, devilish version of her own voice tickled the Englishwoman's ear. *You know you're going to touching yourself to this image, Lara. Imagining that it was you she was astride like that. The way her breasts bounce against her ribcage. Sharing her ecstasy. How hot would it be if she looked at you right now? Saw you watching her. Her lip curling into one of her delicious naughty smiles as she realises how turned on you are by her body.*

Lara almost hissed her response out loud. *You're disgusting. What is wrong with you?!*

It took all her willpower not to bolt for her bedroom. Instead, keeping her motions measured and controlled, she crossed the lounge and escaped unnoticed into her personal space.

It really hadn't been difficult to sound angry the next day when her companion recounted her evening's exploits in graphic detail.

"Sam, on our *couch*?!"

The American girl rolled her eyes. "Oh come on, sweetie, where's your sense of adventure?"

"Lara?"

"Hmm?"

She was shaken out of reminiscence by Steven's voice. Seated in the armchair next to her, he had leaned in. He glanced in the direction of the kitchen before murmuring, "May I ask what happened between you two?"

Lara responded at the same volume. "Shouldn't you ask your wife to be?"

"She won't tell me."

"Then I don't think it's my place to – "

He blurted it. "Was it over a guy?"

"No."

He immediately looked as relieved as Lara felt at being given a direction to steer the conversation. And it was a multi-lane freeway, completely devoid of traffic.

"It was nothing like that. After Yamatai, we had a... difference in opinion. I had to go on alone; Sam disagreed."

"Sammy stubborn? No way."

He laughed and she found herself smiling back effortlessly.

"You know, Lara, you're not at all what I expected."

She cocked her head. "And what exactly did you expect?"

"Honestly? An ice-cold badass. All sneers and snark. But you're, I dunno, a lot softer than I thought. A lot more like the girl in Sammy's old videos."

"You've seen those?" At times, during college and the girls' shared backpacking adventures, Lara had felt like a film project given how often she found a camera pointed at her.

Steven nodded. "Yeah. All part of Sammy's personal collection, which she revisits from time to time. The only thing she really doesn't like talking about is Yamatai. But I've done my own research..."

Suddenly he clasped the Englishwoman's hand. "I owe you everything, Lara."

"I'm sorry?"

"She's the love of my life. And you saved her. Thank you."

How do you respond to that? Silent, Lara closed her other hand over his.

Sam's voice. "Getting super cosy in here, I see."

Lara jerked back in her seat, breaking her contact with Steven. She felt irrationally guilty under Sam's glare. The American lowered herself onto her fiancé's armrest, positioning herself directly between her former and current lover. Steven immediately circled Sam's waist. In turn, she leaned back and draped her near arm over his shoulder. Again, her engagement ring was impossible to ignore at Lara's eye level.

A slap-in-the-face message to the archaeologist? Or a reminder for both women? The revelation that Sam was still watching her old clips of Lara, that meant –

The archaeologist couldn't stop herself. She addressed both Sam and Steven. "May I ask your professional opinion?"

Steven chuckled, "Of course. After how much you've helped me tonight, I'd feel bad if I couldn't return the favour somehow."

Sam didn't say anything but her brow was furrowed as she clearly tried to make sense of Lara's sudden apparent change in strategy.

The Englishwoman continued. "Do you think there would be interest in a documentary on my parents?"

"Not as much as in you, obviously," Steven smiled. "But there's a great story to be told there. Richard Croft was incredibly influential as I understand it. Plus, who can resist a great star-crossed romance spiced with adventure? Especially one with such a..." He paused, realising the emotional landmines he had stumbled among. Lara's nod encouraged him to complete his sentence. "...tragic, mysterious ending."

"Well, this would be official, involving full access to Croft Manor, the family archives and my complete cooperation."

Steven rubbed his chin. "That would be one helluva coup."

Sam piped up. Antagonism had disappeared from her voice and face. "Why, Lara? Why now?"

"Next week will be exactly fifteen years since they vanished."

She still remembered the phone call from the family solicitor eight years previously. It was her first year at university. She had her books for the day cradled in her arm, and was busy wrapping a scarf around her neck. Answering her phone meant some juggling as she rummaged one-handed in her bag for her old beat-up Nokia.

She recognised the lawyer's voice immediately, triggering the hope that he wouldn't take long. For once. Although her inheritance would only become available to her when she turned twenty one, since coming of legal age, Mr Dorchester had started involving her more in matters regarding the Croft estate. It tended to be tedious and migraine-inducing.

"Good morning, Lara."

"Mr Dorchester, hey, I'm about to leave for class..."

"This won't take long. It's just something that I think you should know."

That's what you always say.

Her smirk didn't stand a chance under the granite weight of his words. "Your parents have just been declared dead in absentia."

Her throat completely constricted.

The solicitor continued to drone on. "Do you understand, Lara? It's been seven years, and this legal declaration is to give everyone involved closure. Lara? Are you still there?"

One syllable she could manage. "Yes." And then a string of them. "Thank you for letting me know." She hung up.

Lara drifted through her day, mute. She felt disconnected from everyone and everything around her. All the lives carrying on untouched by her family's tragedy. Repeatedly the words cycled in her mind. *That's it then. It's over. They're never coming back.* In her lectures. In the library. In the Nine Bells behind the bar. Roth tried to call her several times, but she wouldn't answer.

When she got back to her tiny dorm room that evening, she dropped her bag, stripped down to her underwear and climbed into bed. She lay on her side, facing the wall. Her world shrunk down to that patch of brick, plaster and paint not even a foot from her face.

She wasn't sure if she closed her eyes; let alone slept.

They're never coming back.

Knocking. Sam's voice at the door. With no response from Lara, she went away.

More attempted calls from Roth. Then Sam. Even Charlie at the Nine Bells. Lara left them all unanswered. Eventually her battery died.

Silence.

Sam outside again, calling her friend's name. Insistent.

More silence and darkness.

They're never coming back.

"Lara?" Sam's voice right behind her. "Sweetie, hey? Are you okay?"

Warm fingers on Lara's bare shoulder. Then she felt herself being rolled onto her back. She didn't resist.

"Lara, oh my God!" Sam was looking down at her friend, horrified. Her palm pressed against Lara's forehead. "Are you sick?"

Hooking her hands under Lara's armpits, the American girl helped her companion sit up. Upright, Lara felt prickly faint and disorientated. She could barely concentrate on Sam's words. "...seen you for three days...worried sick..."

Lara looked over her friend's shoulder to the door. She was sure she had locked it.

Sam followed her gaze. In response she grinned, "Bitch, please! I've been picking locks to get places I'm not supposed to be since I was twelve. You think that would keep me out?"

Lara made a move to lie back down on her side but Sam grabbed her elbow. Suddenly the American girl was all serious. "I'm not going anywhere until you tell me what's wrong."

Lara tried to shrug out of her friend's grip, but failed. Putting up a fight made her feel dizzy.

"Tell me and I'll let you go."

The Englishwoman dropped her eyes.

Sam shook her. "Lara, hey!"

The archaeology student hadn't realised how dry her mouth and throat were until she tried to form words. "They're officially dead."

"Who? What?" Sam looked confused.

It was early days for the two girls. Their friendship was only a few months old. Although she was sure Sam knew the basics about the fate of her family, Lara hadn't spoken in depth about it. And when you didn't discuss the specifics, it was easy to forget; it was a story far removed from the normalcy of so many people's lives.

Lara felt her body start to tremble as she tried to explain. Forcing out every word was hard. "My. Parents. They're..."

Why was it so difficult to see at that moment; simply to breathe?

She tried again. "Legally. They've been..."

The impact of Sam's sudden, unexpected embrace, bashed straight through the dam. Lara clung to her friend in the deluge. She'd never cried like that in her life before. Loud, open-mouthed sobs that shook her entire body. Seven years, she'd been holding it in. Her diaphragm ached from the clenching of her muscles. Still, Sam didn't tell her to be quiet. Or try to soothe her. Not even when her sobs became incoherent, saliva-dripping howls. Sam just held her until she couldn't cry anymore. Then she lay her friend back down on the mattress. This time facing away from the wall.

Lara's body was still quivering with emotional tremors. Sam stayed at her side, stroking her hair, until the aftershocks subsided. When they finally stopped, the American girl announced, "I'm going to get you some tea."

Sam returned with her promised tea, a couple of bottled waters, a cheese sandwich and two Mars bars. She made Lara sit up and consume most of the "provisions," which the Englishwoman did, slowly.

While Lara ate, Sam disappeared again. She came back with her laptop. She hopped onto the bed alongside her friend and started up Bridesmaids. The unsaid message was that she wasn't going to leave Lara alone. And that was how the archaeology student eventually dozed off, with her head resting on Sam's shoulder as the wannabe filmmaker prattled on about the cast and crew, and various behind-the-scenes stories.

The next morning Sam was there with tea and donuts, and a set of notes from all the classes Lara had missed.

The Englishwoman was suddenly embarrassed by the lengths her friend had gone to. "Sam, you didn't have to do all this."

Sam simply grinned in response. "Oh, be quiet, Croft, and just let someone look after you for once." Then she started prattling on about a cute guy who had just joined her sociology class.

Almost a decade later, so much had changed. But mixed with the suspicion was that same old concern on Sam's face.

Lara played with the callouses on her palms as she spoke. "I want to do something to celebrate my parents' memory; restore the reputation that they lost with nobody to defend them over the years."

She had memorised the comments. For a long time she shamefully agreed with them. *The Crofts. Risk takers and dreamers. Naturally, their flights of fancy took them Icarus-style too close to the sun, with the same fatal results.*

She looked directly at Sam. "Would you be interested? Would you help me?"

Her former friend gaped at her.

Steven, though, was ecstatic. He clutched the waist of his future wife. "Sammy, you're perfect for this."

"I don't know, sweetie, I'm kind of busy at the moment."

"Really?"

"I'm *busy* deciding on my next project."

"So make it this one."

"Steven, it's not that simple."

"It seems pretty simple to me. Disregarding what happened between you two, you're in the best position to shoot this. The access. The insight. You'd do an amazing job."

The couple seemed to have forgotten Lara was there. She interrupted them. "I'll be in Greece next Thursday evening for a commemoration. I imagine it would make for a good starting point in terms of footage."

Sam opened her mouth; then shut it again. Lara knew that jaw-clenched look. It meant the filmmaker was in focused work mode. It was the only time all ditsy distraction faded. She mumbled, "I suppose I could use it for a pitch."

Steven squeezed his fiancé's shoulder. "Think about it, Sammy."

It wasn't long after that when Lara excused herself. As she shrugged on her coat in the entrance hall, she heard Sam clear her throat. The filmmaker had made no effort to embrace Lara, unlike her future husband. She stood cross-armed, surly and aloof. But her voice was soft when she said, "I'll do it, Lara."

"Thank you, Sam," the archaeologist murmured in response. "Good night."

Lara could have called a taxi, but she wanted the swift night time stroll home to clear her head; flush the dark jubilation from her pores. The beast inside her skin was strong and savage. But as it had just proved, it could also be cunning.

Chapter 8

Lara woke sharply. For an instant she was disorientated. A gloomy space packed with bodies. Stale air. A constant drone. Then she remembered where she was. A plane to Greece.

The flight from Heathrow to Athens was only three and a half hours, and it was still midmorning, but the day had started ridiculously early. At least she always slept better when she was outside the UK; going somewhere; doing something.

The cabin was dark for some reason, so she felt it before she saw it. Something pressing her left shoulder back into her seat. She turned her head and inhaled deliciously fresh aloe, just as her lips brushed fine hair.

Sam had snuggled into the crook of her shoulder, and was fast asleep. God, it was like old times. All those plane, train and bus rides where they became each other's pillow. Mashing their bodies together for mutual comfort in cramped spaces.

Lara could only assume that they had ended up together out of habit. Their forms, driven by fond memories, seeking each other out when their minds knew it was highly inappropriate. Sam would no doubt wake and jolt away from her former best friend. And then she would be embarrassed and unbearably standoffish for the rest of the trip.

Lara wanted to extricate herself. Except, if she did, she would fast-forward Sam's fury. Even worse, the archaeologist would lose the soothing physical contact she had craved for five years. She wouldn't even be able to study Sam's face as she slept.

Her parted, pouting lips as she breathed through her mouth; occasionally squeaking.

The soft, warm flesh of her cheeks; usually so even complexioned and pale unless she was several drinks into a bender.

Her open, observant filmmaker's eyes.

Shit.

So it was Lara who jolted away first. Or at least tried to. Sam clutched at her companion's wrist to keep her in place.

"Don't," the American woman murmured.

"Sam?"

"I've missed this, Lara." Her mouth curled into a smile.

Lara strained to keep her voice a whisper as she gasped, "What?"

"Ssshhhh." Sam was serious again. "This. Just this. The way you feel."

The filmmaker had released her grip on Lara's wrist. Instead she was stroking her companion's forearm, tracing the old white scars with her fingertips.

"Sam, I thought –" Lara couldn't keep her voice steady. "I thought you hated me?"

Fingers suddenly on the Englishwoman's cheek. Followed by lips. They kissed a trail to Lara's mouth. Then the lips pressed against hers.

Sam's whispered voice. "I do hate you. But that doesn't mean I don't want you."

Her mouth against Lara's again. The tip of her tongue parting the archaeologist's lips. What resistance Lara intended on uttering devolved into a moan as Sam's kiss deepened.

Eyes clenched, Lara let herself respond. She felt herself trembling as the kisses became more insistent; more open-mouthed.

Her hands clutched at Sam's waist, pulling as much of her companion against her as possible. She was an alcoholic, giving into the temptation of her first drink in several years. She'd started and she couldn't stop.

The hand cupping her cheek slipped down her neck. It slid down between her breasts, and finally disappeared under the blanket spread across their torsos.

There was illicit and then there was something far darker and dangerous.

Lara hissed, "No, we can't."

Sam grinned. Her eyes said it all. *Who's gonna know?* She leaned in for another kiss.

Lara's mouth returned it instantly. She had no willpower. None whatsoever.

Her eyes were open so in the gloom she could just make out the movement under the blanket. It distorted the shadows and shapes cast by the mound of fabric. It was oddly hypnotic to watch, even as she felt the top button of her cargo pants being plucked free.

Lara ripped herself free of the kiss. "Please," she begged.

The naughty grin meant no mercy.

Fingers inside her knickers. Discovering just how ready the archaeologist was.

"Oh, sweetie," purred against Lara's jawbone.

"Hngh."

The Tomb Raider sat bolt upright. She would have stood if her forgotten seatbelt hadn't jerked her back. Losing her balance, she kicked out, upending the contents of her tray table and viciously knocking the seat in front of her. The occupant, a shaven headed, thick-necked man in a suit, glared at her over his shoulder.

Breathless, heart palpitating, she blurted an apology.

Other passengers, and a nearby stewardess, were staring as well.

Lara took in their faces in the bright sunshine that illuminated the cabin. She was wild eyed and sweaty, and the looks she received reflected it. *Concern. Anger. Disgust. Vicarious embarrassment.*

Sam was there too, seated next to her. Except she was wide awake, earbuds in, working on her Macbook as she edited together the footage she had shot at Croft Manor earlier in the week.

There was a moment where it looked like she might ask her companion what was wrong. There was worry on her creased brow. But then she rolled her eyes and returned to her task.

It was all too much. Suddenly Lara was suffocating. She yanked off her seatbelt.

It meant tugging on the bald businessman's seat again, but she didn't care. She used the chairback to give herself enough momentum to hurdle Sam and her laptop.

Standing in the aisle, she felt better. But it wasn't enough. She bolted for the nearest lavatory.

She clasped the stainless steel sink to steady herself. In that cramped grey space, she was reminded of another time she stood staring at her reflection in a utilitarian, overly disinfected chamber. And cringing at the sight of what she'd become.

Roth's growl in her ears. *You can do this, Lara. You're a Croft!*

Out loud she repeated the words she had spoken five years previously. Despite everything that she had done, the question had never lost its relevance. It echoed in her head and heart almost every day. "What if I'm not that kind of Croft?"

Chapter 9

Lara stood staring at her reflection in the lavatory mirror until one of the stewardesses knocked on the door.

"Excuse me, Miss Croft, are you alright in there?"

Lara timidly opened the door. "Sorry, I wasn't feeling well."

Judging by the woman's expression, she believed the archaeologist.

Quizzical looks and murmurs followed Lara back to her seat. Forget the Curse of Tutankhamen. The Curse of Celebrity was far worse to carry around with you.

At least Sam wasn't flat out antagonistic when Lara returned. She looked minorly peeved by the interruption, but she still closed her tray table and flattened herself so the Englishwoman could pass. No words.

Still too shaken by her dream to do anything constructive like work on her museum speech, Lara turned her head and gazed out the window. She would happily have just watched Sam out the corner of her eye, but given the inappropriate, explicit nature of her dream, she felt guilty doing even that.

Especially since the relationship between the two women had become so complicated.

In a way it was easier when Sam was just scowling and sniping at her. But her spiked shell seemed to be softening with every encounter over the past fortnight, and there was a part of Lara that was profoundly pleased about that.

Earlier in the week, Sam had met her at Croft Manor to shoot some footage for the documentary pitch. The filmmaker had refused Lara's offer of a lift in her old Suzuki Jimny, and arrived in what was presumably a hire car.

It was a marked contrast to the first time Lara had exposed Sam her family home. They'd been roommates for six months, and were celebrating the end of the uni semester with ten days backpacking around Croatia. Lara needed to stop by her family home first for some documentation that the solicitor needed. So after weeks of pleading she had agreed to let Sam accompany her to the estate. It was a decision she immediately regretted.

Lara had always tried to downplay her heritage in front of Sam. The merciless teasing about being titled was bad enough, particularly when Sam got all the regulars at the Nine Bells to address the brunette barmaid as Lady Croft. Her family's fortune was even more embarrassing.

When they pulled up in front of the house, Lara shouldn't have been surprised that Sam's camera was instantly out, and on. The American practically fell out of the car she was so busy trying to capture the scale of the manor with an extreme low-angle shot.

"Holy shit, Lara! You work three jobs again... because?"

Lara was immediately flame-cheeked and uncomfortable at the prospect of inviting her friend inside, where the manor looked even grander thanks to its polished wood finishes and towering windows of leaded glass.

She folded her arms. "It's my parents' place, Sam. Their money. Not mine."

"But... I mean..." Sam lowered her camera. She muttered, "That's what parents are for... Funding their daughter's dreams."

There was a cynical tang to her words, but Lara could understand their source. It was an easy statement to accept as truth when you grew up with parents who handed over their credit cards, transferred funds and signed for bills without a blink. Whatever Sam wanted, she got. Her mother and father were so wrapped up in themselves that funding had become a substitute for family in their minds.

In a way, both girls were orphans.

Lara sighed. She had given the speech enough times. "I wanted to find my own way, Sam; do it on my terms. I never wanted anyone to accuse me of getting ahead simply because of who my father is." She added swiftly, "Was."

Sam pulled a face. "It always has to be the hard way with you, sweetie." Then she laughed and squeezed her friend in a side-hug.

Lara smiled even as the nonchalance of the embrace stung. *You have no idea.*

Several years later, Sam was all business. She examined the façade of the Croft Manor with professional detachment. She even carried a light meter.

For once Lara had called ahead to warn Winston of her arrival. And although the butler was a master at suppressing "inappropriate public displays of emotion", his delight at the visit was impossible to smother.

There he stood at the front door in his full uniform, all stiff and freshly ironed. Lara arched an eyebrow at the sight of him, but he ignored her. His best manners were reserved for Sam, the first person to visit Croft Manor in the past five years who wasn't Lara, looking like a dishevelled, battered mess.

How times had changed. Winston actually seemed to be pleased to see Lady Lara's obnoxious yank friend – the same young woman who had once slapped him on the back. He didn't even wince at the camera pointed at him.

Winston kept the interior of Croft Manor in respectable condition, as if at any point he expected his master and mistress to fling open the front door. Today, he had ensured the manor was House & Garden photo shoot ready. Well, at least in the rooms Lara had asked him to prepare. He'd even laid out photo albums in the study for Sam to peruse.

While Sam worked, Lara decided to give her privacy. The archaeologist headed outside and trudged a circuit around the house. Hands in her bomber jacket pockets, she scuffed her boots through the build-up of autumn foliage. *Home.*

Around the back of the manor she stopped and gazed up at the building. If she ever returned to live on the estate she would definitely put up a climbing wall. She scanned across the courtyard. Maybe some kind of outdoor gymnasium and a shooting range as well. And buy a couple of horses for the stables, which were so depressing in their empty, bolted up state.

God, Lara, you're Batman-ing again. Setting yourself up to brood alone in a mansion with just an elderly butler for company.

After flicking several pebbles into the old, slimy fountain, Lara returned inside; wondering if Winston had lit the hearth in the lounge. That would be welcome.

Except the house was silent. No lurking Winston. No Sam in the study with her beloved camera. Presumably she was shooting elsewhere.

Lara found herself standing before the side table of family photographs again. She picked up the one of her parents on their wedding day. The only time they looked happier together was on the day that their daughter was born.

The photo reminded Lara of the last private conversation she remembered them having. In the same room.

Lara wasn't supposed to be in the study. But she wanted to sketch the designs on a ceremonial kukri kept in the display case, and the glass always got in the way. It felt like she could never get close enough to appreciate it properly, even if she pressed her face right up against the protective barrier. Her parents didn't want her handling artefacts, especially weapons, unsupervised so she had to sneak the spare key out of Winston's office.

Mission accomplished, she was lying on the floor under a desk, pencil in hand, happily drawing the blade and hilt laid out in front of her. She'd been careful. She knew its value, so the knife was lying on a thick, sheep's wool cloth.

At the sound of her parents' voices, she had just enough time to scamper behind a curtain, and flatten herself as much as possible.

Richard and Amelia Croft were arguing. That was unusual.

"I don't want to do this," Lara's mother muttered.

Her father sounded exasperated, like the conversation was cycling over the same already-covered points. "I can't be in two places at once, Ami. I need you. You're the only one I trust with this."

"Roth?"

"It has to be you."

"What about Lara?"

"What about her?"

"Things are different now. When she was always with us, it was one thing. Now, leaving her at school, I just can't face... What if –?"

"She's safe there. She'd want us to do this."

"Richard, she's *eleven* years old. She's a child."

"She's more than that."

"Yes. She's the best of both of us. And she adores you; believes everything you tell her. Of course she'd want us to go. But that doesn't mean it's right."

"What do you want then?"

"We wait. Until Lara is older. When she can come with us again. We'll be a family –"

"But we can't wait, Ami. Someone will beat us to it."

Lara's mother burst out laughing. It was a bitter laugh; incredulous. "No, Richard, they won't. Because you're the only one who's chasing it. Everyone else, they're laughing at you right now. Chasing fortune and glory and fairy tales. No one else is in the race. Because it's pure myth."

"You don't believe me either?" He sounded hurt.

"I'm with you, Richard. I always have been. That won't ever change. But we have a daughter to worry about. Lara... I know every parent thinks this of their child, but Lara's going to be a remarkable woman. Looking at her, I have no doubt. She's going to do something exceptional. I just..." Her voice cracked. "I just want to be around to meet her."

"Of course you'll be."

Then there was a moment of silence, presumably as the archaeologist took his wife in his arms. Lara could barely hear his murmur. "Please, Ami, just this. Trust me. You'll see. And then I won't ask anything else."

"That's a great shot. I could probably sell the documentary on it alone"

Lara's head popped up.

Sam was peeking in the doorway with her camera out. Lara shouldn't have been surprised. She'd always been her roommate's favourite reality TV subject. But that was before Yamatai, or, more precisely, that night in New York which put thousands of miles in emotional distance between them. Now they interacted with over-polite frigidity or uncontrolled fire. Middle ground was rarely found.

Sam would never have apologised in the past. But her words seemed sincere as she advanced into the room. "I'm sorry. But it's really powerful." Evidently working diluted her animosity. At Lara's side she held out the camera. "Here, check it out."

Lara stared at herself in the display panel. Clutching the photo of her parents. Head downcast. Mostly silhouetted by the afternoon light coming in through the monstrous window behind her, but with enough light to capture her facial expression. Part frown; part melancholy. It was a great shot, but her former friend had always had a knack for finding them in any situation.

Sam blew out her cheeks. Whatever she wanted to say wasn't coming easy. Eventually she got it out. "Are you really okay with all this, Lara? It just seems really out of character for you; you were always so private."

The archaeologist murmured, "I'm not the same person I was."

Evidently it was the wrong response. Scowling, Sam took back her camera. "Hmmp, you can say that again."

Lara stood powerless, despairing as the wall between the women was re-erected brick by brick in real-time before her.

"Sam?" she pleaded. *What could she do? What could she say? Every sentence had become a booby trap.*

The American was flicking through one of the photo albums. Her facial expression was blank. "Wow, you really were an adorable baby." Then she looked up, straight into Lara's eyes. "Pity you grew up to be such an asshole."

Lara had been trying to reach out, but at that she exploded. Her fists came down on the table.

"Jesus, Sam, how long are you going to do this?!"

"I dunno. Five years? That sounds about right, don't you think?" Her voice was ice, but there were tears teetering on her lower eyelids.

A part of Lara wanted to grab Sam by the collar and chuck her out the Manor; maybe triumphantly stomp on her camera in front of her for good measure.

The Englishwoman gritted her teeth. She could suppress that urge but not her overwhelming frustration, and anger at herself. *How she had fucked everything up forever with her cowardice.*

"I'm sorry, alright, Sam?! I'm sorry. I missed you so much. Every single day. I just couldn't..." Her voice had started quivering; her vision swimming. She inhaled deeply, until she knew she'd be able to speak steadily again. "I'm trying, please. Like with my parents. I'm trying to rectify all the mistakes I made a long time ago. Do the things I should have done then."

Sam was glaring at her grip on a chairback. "So what do you want with me? How are you going to make things right by me now, given the circumstances?"

"I – I'm not sure yet."

No response.

Lara should have kept her mouth shut, but she just couldn't. Instead she blurted, "Do you have any idea how much it hurts to stand here, looking at you right now?"

Sam looked her straight in the face. "Yes."

Under her companion's anguished, intense gaze, the archaeologist felt herself go rigid. Sam closed the gap between the two women, standing directly in front of Lara. The filmmaker continued, "You weren't just some shag, Lara; a one night stand I couldn't have cared less if I never saw again. You were my best friend. More than that. I –"

The chorus of PonPonPon blared from Sam's backside.

"*Shit!*"

She fumbled for her phone.

And then Lara was forgotten in the flurry of faux cheerfulness.

"Hey, sweetie... It's going really well. I got some amazing footage. This time of year the lighting is so dramatic, it makes things a lot easier. And you? How's your day going?... Oh my God, really? He was so amazing in Dr Who. If you could get him, God, what a coup... Holding thumbs... Oh, I look forward to that... 'Kay, see you later... Good luck... Love you too, sweetie."

Sam continued to stare at the phone in her hand long after the call ended. Then she looked up at Lara, dejected. There was no restarting their exchange. The passion had gone out of both of them.

Instead, Sam sighed, "I think I've got everything that I need for now."

She started scuttling around, loading her equipment into bags, velcroing and zipping everything into place before shouldering it. Lara shadowed her, unable to even utter her name.

Sam's parting words that day found their mark. The archaeologist blinked back her tears as she felt the blood begin to flow from the deep thrust of her companion's dagger. "Goodbye, Lara. I'll see you at the airport on Thursday morning. I don't expect you'll be late. That only happens when it really matters."

Chapter 10

At the airport, Lara breezed through the dedicated EU lane at border control. Sam with her American passport was taking longer to process.

So Lara found herself hanging around in baggage claim, trying to look as inconspicuous as possible once she had hauled her and Sam's luggage off the carousel. Mostly it worked. She received plenty of looks but her reputation for explosive, unpredictable violence meant most people kept her distance. *Most* people.

"Oh my God! Lara!"

At that specific moment she was busy checking email on her phone, wishing she had worn a hoodie.

She turned to find two girls bouncing side by side. Barely two feet away from her. "Lara, we love you!" they squeaked in unison.

By their accents she was going to assume they were Australian. Given their plump jowled youth and monstrous, grubby backpacks, she was also going to assume they were slap-bang in the middle of a gap year adventure. Doing some tail-end of the season island hopping, no doubt.

The girls were very tanned. Both wearing shorts and low-cut vests that left little to the imagination. One girl – the one with auburn hair split in pigtails – was especially well-endowed. Her top forced her breasts together in a way that made her cleavage impossible to ignore.

Of course Sam would appear at Lara's side at the exact moment the archaeologist's appreciative gaze travelled down between those perfectly bronzed orbs. She couldn't help it, just as she couldn't help her slightly dazed, illicit smile.

Though that didn't last very long once her eyes met Sam's, and she took a full blast of her companion's scowl.

Sam wasn't the only one to catch Lara checking out the girl. So did the girl herself. She looked pleased, like a rumour had been confirmed.

"I'm a big fan," she breathed.

Engage Brazen Lara Croft mode.

"I can see that."

"Um," the girl bit her lip. "Could I have your autograph?"

"Of course."

The last thing the archaeologist wanted was an influx of admirers; more curious eyes. After they had been so loud on spotting her, giving the backpackers what they wanted seemed like the safest, most discreet course of action.

The girl handed the Englishwoman a marker and immediately tugged aside her own shirt strap. "Would you sign? It's kind of a dare." Then she glanced at her friend. Lara tried to look utterly unfazed as she scrawled her name across the girl's breast, even though every breath the girl took caused her bare skin to brush Lara's hand. A flush crept up her neck. Meanwhile, the girl's companion was filming with her phone the entire time.

The encounter ended with Sam being recruited to take a picture of the two friends flanking Lara. The archaeologist was sure that Cleavage Girl copped a feel of her arse while they posed. At the touch, she turned her head to the young woman, and was answered with a wink.

Sam sighed heavily, and thrust the phone back at the tourists. She shouldered in-between Lara and the girl on the way to retrieve her equipment.

"Right, let's do this."

Lara practically gaped as her former roommate shouldered her bag in one motion, and began hauling off the case filled with camera equipment. *When did she get so strong and self-reliant?*

Lara smiled one last time at the girls before jogging after her travel companion.

A driver was waiting for them in the arrivals hall, holding up Lara's name on a sign board. He was of the older generation of Greeks who spoke next to no English, and Sam was furious with her, so the couple of hours' drive to Delphi was silent. In fact the only thing her companion said to her during that stretch of the trip was an acidic "Wow, Lara, Just wow" when she tossed her bag in the boot.

So the archaeologist sat stressing over the prospect of her speech that evening. She had spent so much time alone the past five years that she was out of practice in crowds and social situations. More so than before.

Then there was the distraction of Sam, silently fuming next to her. It cracked open a deep, painful hollowness that manifested in the damaged nerves of the Englishwoman's side.

Back at college, Lara had always thought she was good at hiding her feelings for Sam. That was until a Friday night in second year. Sam had dragged her off to a society fundraiser at one of the local pubs, and, as usual, abandoned her roommate as soon as a cute guy smiled at her. Or guys, as was the case that particular evening. Sam was at that moment sandwiched between two members of the rowing team on a square of space that had been hastily designated the impromptu dance floor.

Lara snorted at the sight before her, and then sipped on her half pint. She was standing at the bar, busy debating with herself whether she could slip away unnoticed, when a woman's voice piped up next to her.

"Straight girls will always tie you in knots."

Startled, Lara turned to her left. She had been so caught up in her thoughts that she hadn't realised anyone had settled into the vacant space next to her.

She faced a young blonde woman, with a very familiar face.

There was nobody else that she could be talking to except Lara. But the conversation starter just didn't make sense. The Englishwoman frowned, "I'm sorry?"

At that, the blonde's smile broadened. Perfectly white straight teeth flashed. "You're wasted on Samantha Nishimura. She's completely wrapped up in herself. There are half a million women who would crawl over hot coals for you. Beauty, brains... your accent, Jesus."

Lara was vaguely aware that the woman had an American accent herself. More prominent in her mind though was the fact that the compliment had actually warmed her cheeks. Lara was used to men flirting with her. Well, used to it. Certainly never comfortable. Apart from her complete lack of skill at small talk, she always felt skittish and awkward and aloof as she tried to brush them off without hurting their feelings. This was different though.

As flustered as she felt, Lara couldn't look away. The woman was striking. She was the rare blonde who could actually pull off the goth look, combining dark clothing, dramatic make-up and an even more dramatic bob.

Breaking the archaeology student's wide-eyed silence, the woman held out her hand. "Lara, right? I'm Amanda. Amanda Evert. I'm in your Anthropology class."

That's where she knew her from – a brilliant exchange student over from the States for a semester.

Lara accepted the handshake tentatively. The way she did it made Amanda grin. "You seem new to this?"

"I don't know what you're talking about." She knew her cheeks were red. The way the girl was looking at her; so intense, so predatory.

Amanda flexed her torso away from the bar as she sipped on her vodka and Coke. It caused her top to ride up, exposing more of the cream skin above her belt. Jagged tattoos disappeared down into her low-rise jeans.

Amanda caught the Englishwoman looking, arched an eyebrow and chuckled.

Lara swallowed hard. She wasn't used to feeling this rattled. She cleared her throat and muttered, "I think you've received the wrong impression about me. I'm not –"

Amanda interrupted her with a hand wave. "Ah, still at that stage?" She cocked her head in Sam's direction. "Be honest. Are you worried about her? Or are you jealous it's not you she's grinding against right now?"

"What? No!" The Englishwoman felt a fresh surge of panic. She didn't know anxiety was so tidal. "You've made a mistake. I –"

"Trust me. It's a lot easier when you admit what you really are."

Lara attempted to dart away to her right.

Immediately Amanda's arm came down on the bar, blocking the archaeology student's escape. Caged, Lara turned back to her companion. Amanda ignored the scowl she received, and pressed her body solidly against hers.

"Just don't waste your time on her, Lara. You could do so much better."

Out of corner of her eye, Lara spotted a couple of guys nudge each other and look in their direction. Their leers gave dirty, drunken minds away.

The thought of putting on a show for them revolted her even as the proximity of Amanda's body excited her. *God, she had to admit that it excited her.*

The American's mouth not even an inch from her ear. Breath warm and delicious on her neck. The thigh that had slid up between her legs.

She had tried to suppress it, but Lara was sure her involuntary shudder at the touch gave her away.

"You have so much more to offer the world," Amanda purred. "She will hold you back from your true potential."

Heart hammering, Lara shoved her classmate away. "You don't know me!"

She gave Amanda her best *Don't Follow Me* glare but it felt like too little resistance, too late, especially since the blonde was laughing at her.

And if she didn't feel embarrassed enough, the girls' audience had started booing her for prematurely terminating their fun.

Sam was by this stage busy making out with one of the rowers in a booth. But Lara was too shaken to remember her manners.

She stood in front of the face-eating couple. "Sam!"

The American girl was drunk. She broke from the kiss, and slurred, "Huh? Hey, sweetie, what's wrong?"

"I'm going. I'm not feeling well."

She didn't even wait for a response. Practically hyperventilating, she bolted for the door.

The young Englishwoman was especially appreciative of the crisp Fall air during her brisk walk home. It cooled her face, if not her temper. She was upset; angry. With herself. With Amanda.

What was *wrong* with American girls? Insatiable sexual predators, all of them.

She kicked out at a lamppost.

And then felt stupid. And guilty.

What if it wasn't just Sam she was attracted to? What if Amanda was right and she was into women in general? What did that mean? Where had the feelings come from? And was she really so obvious?

After that, she had tried to avoid Amanda whenever possible. The anthropologist's perceptiveness unnerved Lara. The Englishwoman would look up in class and find the blonde staring at her. Smirking. It made her feel highly uncomfortable.

At least Amanda was very smart. That made camouflaging animosity easier for Lara. Sam simply put it down to jealousy on her roommate's part, even if the filmmaker was still curious about the uncharacteristic reaction. Although reserved, Lara was usually so amiable; quietly getting along with everyone. To see her bristle like she did at the sight or mention of Amanda, was very odd.

Things carried on like that until shortly before the Easter break. Lara had bowed under Sam's pressure to end the term with a wild night out. So the Englishwoman was already drunk when they ended up at the Flaming Flagon, and she spotted Amanda there, smirking at her over the lip of her drink.

The American's presence triggered a sobering shudder of doubt. To dispel it, to reclaim some confidence about herself, and *especially* to prove Amanda wrong, Lara hooked up with Dan Perkins that night.

And she made damn well sure to catch Amanda's eye while she snogged him shamelessly there in the pub.

It was easy with Dan. Her inhibitions were lowered to begin with. Plus she knew that he liked her. She could actually have a conversation with him. And he was a good looking, genuinely nice guy. Given their evenly matched energy reserves – the hiker and the mountaineer – there was little sleep that night.

Dan was the second man she'd ever slept with. The first had been a short fling after her first semester at uni. She'd been terrified Sam would find out she was a virgin, and attempt to force her into an odious one night stand, so she decided to take matters into her own hands the next time she was on Roth's ship.

As usual, as a deckhand, she fitted in where necessary, performing whatever duties needed filling. In the process she found herself working frequently side by side with a post-grad history student saving money for his PhD.

Looking back, the weird thing was that she couldn't recall his name. But she remembered that he made her laugh. That he had a great smile. And that he was an even better kisser.

One night she invited him into her cabin, and her bunk.

It was as sore as she expected, but he was gentle. Sweet. He was just what she needed.

She remembered their gasps in the dark as they tried to keep quiet; the awkwardness of not knowing what to do with her hands. Eventually she just clung to his broad shoulders as he moved inside her... that night, and every night for the remainder of their short shared time on the Endurance.

The look Alex gave her after that first evening; she was pretty sure he saw her lover leaving her room before dawn the next morning. She was even more certain that he ratted on her. There was no other reason why Roth would suddenly knock on her door, all uncomfortable and asking if she needed to have The Talk.

It was horrifyingly embarrassing for the both of them. Roth was the salt of the earth, but he was a man of action; not talk. Discussing birth control with an eighteen year old girl was beyond awkward. It was moments like that when Lara wondered what it would have been like to grow up with her mother around. The closest she came was Reyes, and the ex-cop had some weird grudge against Lara that the young woman didn't understand. Reyes was always so cold and dismissive towards her, despite clearly being a loving mother to her own daughter.

At that particular moment, Lara didn't want to think about her mother. Or Roth. Or Amanda. Or Sam. Or anyone else she had used or hurt or clashed with over the course of her own personal history. So many ghosts. So many regrets.

She gazed out the window.

The long hot Mediterranean Summer refused to end. So in-between the hillsides of olive groves, cypress trees and pine, there were expanses of sun-beached rock and dirt. Centuries and centuries of history ground down into that white earth. With the only intrusion of the recent past being the tiny, weather-battered roadside shrines erected here and there. On the other side of the road, the land slid into the sea. It was hypnotic the way the sunlight glinted on the water.

Sam was also in its thrall. However, she seemed to sense that Lara's gaze had shifted from the view to her, and her head swung in her companion's direction. Their eyes only locked for a moment but there was melancholy there; not temper. Then the filmmaker looked away again.

Lara looked away too. In another life, she would be sitting there holding hands with Sam; their fingers interlinked as they leaned casually into each other. In this life though, she had thrown that all away.

They arrived at their accommodation with refreshingly little fanfare. Greece was entering the tourist low season and although Delphi didn't hunker down and hibernate like many of the Greek islands, it was certainly quieter than she remembered.

The Meander was a four-star boutique hotel that had sprung up among the other guesthouses, restaurants and cheesy souvenir shops that lined the town's narrow streets. Lara wasn't sure where the developer had found the money during the recession, but the hotel was an upmarket take on the rustic but homely aesthetic of the buildings around it. So while the familiar stone-blocked façade, wood finishes and wrought iron balconies were all there, so was a liberal amount of glass and marble.

Mr Manolis, the young bespectacled assistant to the museum curator, was waiting in reception. He was who she'd been corresponding with, and he immediately leapt up on spotting the archaeologist.

"Lady Croft." He glanced at his watch before seizing her hand. "Kalimera. Welcome to Delphi."

The Englishwoman winced at the use of her title, as usual, but managed a polite "Thank you."

There was the expected small talk, sycophantism and hefty load of administrative matters before Lara was allowed to retreat to her room.

The bellboy escorted her and Sam together, as the two women were staying on the same floor. Lara would be travelling alone to the museum though, as her companion was leaving much earlier to scout the location and set up.

Sam was busy on her phone, presumably talking to Steven again, so the archaeologist didn't get to speak to her before the filmmaker vanished into her room.

Lara's room, well, clearly she had been given the best suite at the Meander. She wasn't used to such opulence. Normally when she travelled, accommodation with hot water and a decent mattress was her idea of comfort. This was pure luxury – a huge open plan living area with gas fireplace, flat screen TV and lounge suite on one side, and a monstrous bed on the other. In the adjoining bathroom there was even a spa bath that would comfortably accommodate a couple for some soapy shenanigans.

Lara sat down on the edge of the bed, plucking at a complimentary bowl of grapes on the side table while she brooded. She had been too physically passive that day, and nervous energy had pooled in her limbs and mind. She felt on edge; troubled by the unwanted memories, fantasies and an irrational sense that something awful was looming.

Please let my instincts be wrong. For once. Please.

"Ugh." She slapped her hands down on her thighs, and leapt up. She would drive herself mad if she stayed still any longer.

She unzipped her suitcase and began scrounging around inside. There were still a few hours before the commemoration – her driver was only scheduled to pick her up at 6:30 that evening. That was more than enough time to practice her speech and squeeze in a run.

The town of Delphi was relatively small, but given the way the buildings clambered over each other up the slopes of Mount Parnassus, there were plenty of stairs and inclines to wear her out.

On her way outside she paused before Sam's door. She thought about knocking – they really needed to talk – but even though she had gone so far as to raise her fist, ultimately she lowered it again. What difference would it really make?

Chapter 11

"Lara Croft, ladies and gentlemen."

Applause and smiles all around ushered her onto the small podium that had been set up in the museum's entrance hall. She clutched tighter to her cue cards. A running jump from a mountain ledge to an untested cliff face was preferable to this.

She probably shouldn't have, but she let herself scan the audience in front of her. Suits. A few tuxes. Ladies' evening gowns. Wine and champagne glasses all around. A few cameras and smart phones. *No guns, Lara. They're historians, academics and archaeology patrons, that's all. The bourgeoisie well-to-do. They don't want to hurt you.* Five years and she still needed to talk herself out of panic every time she faced a sea of faces.

She adjusted the microphone to her height and took a deep breath before starting.

"Good evening. Kalispera."

All the cheerful faces, some more inebriated than others.

"Many of you knew my parents. Many of you laughed at them behind their back."

She paused for the inevitable murmurs and disgruntled, confused glances.

"But that's alright. So did I. For years I doubted my father. More than that, I resented him. Richard Croft's obsession with myth and legend cost me my mother and my father in quick succession. His fixation on fairy tales meant that the great mystery I brooded over in my childhood and teens was what really happened to my parents. I lived my own lonely, dark fairy tale because my father eschewed solid research, logic and cold, plain fact to follow his gut.

"As a result, when I started down this career path, I refused to trade on my family name. I didn't want to be associated with my parents and their leanings towards pseudoarchaeology. I didn't even attend their alma mater. I was going to make my own finds the right way, and disprove the nonsense my father believed in.

"Except that all changed with the events on Yamatai. Suddenly the line between truth and myth was no longer as distinct as I thought it was. Since then more and more I have found that my father was right about so much.

"So I am deeply appreciative of this commemoration. It not only recognises my parents' contribution to a field that they loved as much as they loved each other, but more importantly it demonstrates an open-mindedness that I am ashamed I did not have for a very long time. In my life, only one other regret is as great..."

At that, she saw a face rise from behind one of the tripod-mounted cameras off to her left. So that's where Sam was. Her former friend's brow was creased, but her expression was otherwise unreadable.

Lara cleared her throat, using it as a delay so that she could stabilise her voice.

"You knew Richard and Amelia Croft as archaeologists. I knew them as a mother and father, and no child could have more loving, supportive parents..."

One of her earliest memories. Her father on his knees next to her as she tried to excavate a patch of dirt he'd seeded with trinkets. He shared in her excitement every time she found something – a coin, a button, a cork. She could barely hold the trowel and brush in her clumsy toddler's hands but the activity kept her amused for hours.

She hadn't realised she was still speaking; her body on autopilot. She straightened as she concluded her speech. "Richard and Amelia Croft cultivated in me a deep passion for our shared history as a human beings. This wing will honour their memory by acting as they did, exciting and encouraging other children to explore the past, and learn from it. I thank you for this honour on their behalf; just as my parents would have thanked you."

A moment of silence was followed by loud clapping. It got only louder when Mr Manolis joined her on the podium and encouraged more deafening applause. From that point the evening passed in a blur of handshakes, toasts and job offers. Sometimes Sam and her camera would cross her path, but she never received the opportunity to talk to her. Another suit and smile always got in the way.

Lara remembered cutting the ribbon strung across the new wing's entrance. She was shown around by the curator, cameras in her face the whole time. It ended with the unveiling of a plaque and framed photograph of her parents.

Even then though, she couldn't escape. It was all canapés and conversation. The only thing that drew her out of the surrealness of it all was a flash directly in her eyes, and a familiar voice.

"Hey, Lara. Decided yet who you're taking back to your room tonight?"

Mo. Suited too; respectable in appearance, but an A-grade wanker as always.

Rage surged through her body, giving crystal clarity to the moment that wasn't there before. She had to fight the temptation to grab Mo's camera and fling it on the floor. The gratification would be worth the lawsuit and inevitable scolding from her solicitor.

She resisted though, and eventually managed to slip away, out of the museum. A flute of champagne in each hand, she followed the Sacred Way up through the ancient sanctuary. It was quiet and cool outside. It could be stormy and miserable this time of year in Greece but the Summer had been a long one, and up in the mountains it was pleasantly chilled as opposed to shiver-inducing. Down in Athens, the heat was still heavy and energy-sapping.

Here though, Lara felt invigorated. She moderated her strides though, fearful of tripping in the gloom. It wasn't just the risk of soiling her expensive tailored slacks and blouse. A noisy fall could bring the attention of security guards. It didn't matter who she was; she really wasn't supposed to be exploring the World Heritage Site after dark. And Greek museum and archaeological site staff were notoriously grouchy, enforcing rules with the rigidity typical of government employees clinging to the lowest rungs of petty officialdom.

Then again, since Yamatai, she had never been one for obeying rules.

At the theatre she hopped the chain that kept tourists off the tiered seating every day. She bounded up the rows. Right near the top she plonked herself down. It was almost completely dark by now but she could still just make out the buildings that made up the sacred site below her, as well as the valley stretching away beyond it.

So, the navel of the earth? Not bad.

Too many toasts inside the museum meant she was already off-kilter, physically and emotionally. Champagne really wasn't her drink. Still, she took another sip of the Moët in her hand, and stared off into the distance.

It was her second term at boarding school. After lunch on a Tuesday she was in History class as usual. In her notebook she doodled knights and medieval weaponry while the teacher used the story of King Arthur to illustrate the difference between historical fact and legend.

Lara could imagine her father's eye-rolling response to the lecture. Arms crossed and long legs stretched out, he would lean over and mutter in her ear, "So insufferably close-minded. But we know better, don't we, Ladybird?" Then he would send his daughter giggling with a raspberry to her cheek.

She was still smiling at the thought when there was a knock on the classroom door. The French professor entered without waiting for an invite. He consulted in muted tones with the History teacher, who immediately turned towards the room full of girls. Her frown fixed on Lara.

"Lara Croft, to the headmistress's office." She added, "Immediately. Hurry."

Her classmates turned to look at her. It wasn't difficult to interpret their gaze. *Bookworm Lara Croft in trouble?*

Although she didn't mimic their gapes, she felt just as bewildered. Had she done something wrong? She slipped her textbooks into her satchel and timidly left the classroom.

With everyone in lessons, the corridors were eerily quiet; dead. It was a long walk to the headmistress's office and Lara's feet echoed the whole way.

In the reception area, the secretary seemed to be waiting for her. She immediately leapt up and opened the door to the headmistress's chambers. Lara was still hesitant to enter, however. She peeked around the frame.

"Miss?"

The headmistress sat at her desk. She was a willowy woman in her fifties, with her blonde hair styled in a shoulder-length cut favoured by the royals. She was known for being stern but fair. To Lara she had never been anything but amiable, and the girl was in awe of her. Her intellect. Her eloquence. Her immaculate grooming. Her incredibly well-defined cyclist's calves, which were impossible to ignore when she crossed the stage in assembly.

On spotting Lara, she stood. She didn't look happy.

"Miss Croft, please come in." She beckoned the girl into the office.

Lara approached tentatively. She wasn't invited to sit in one of the high-backed chairs positioned in front of the desk. From stories the other girls had told her, that wasn't a good sign.

Lara bunched her fists, bracing for a verbal lashing. Instead, the headmistress simply said, "There's a phone call for you."

Personal calls during the day? That was against procedure. Maybe that's why she was in trouble?

The headmistress lifted the receiver where it lay on her desk and held it out to the girl.

It was a glossy vintage design, complete with rotary dial. Lara accepted the receiver in both hands and was surprised by its heft. Immediately her heart began to pound. *Something was wrong; something was very wrong.* The way the headmistress was looking at her. Concern. Pity.

Lara swallowed, and then squeaked into the mouthpiece. "Hello?"

"Lara!"

Roth practically barked her name. He sounded breathless; desperate.

Why him? Why not her mother or father on the line? Her heartbeat accelerated even as her skin began to prickle with the release of adrenalin.

"Uncle Roth? What's – what's happened?"

"I don't have much time to explain, girl."

Gruff. To the point as usual.

Lara found herself foolishly nodding, unable to form words as her panic escalated.

Wherever Roth was, it was noisy. She could barely hear him over roaring noise. She couldn't identify the sound. Wind? A turbine engine?

"There's been an accident, Lara. Your mother was on a chartered flight in the Himalayas. The plane vanished in a storm. Your father insisted on leading a rescue mission. And he's – he's gone too."

"Gone?" she gulped.

"Missing."

Her eyes were stinging horribly. "Roth?"

"Do you understand, girl?"

What else could she say? She thought of her mother's parting words to her. Amelia Croft had dropped her daughter off at school herself that day, as she was heading to the airport. The Englishwoman was already wearing the fur-lined parka that Lara loved, and couldn't wait to wear herself one day when she was bigger. She stroked the trim even as her mother stroked her cheek. "Be a good girl and we'll see you soon."

Thinking their parting was done, Lara started to open the car door. Suddenly she was in her mother's arms again; hugged tight. "I love you, Lara. Your father and I are so very proud of you."

Be a good girl.

Lara swallowed back her tears; tried to steady her voice as she replied to Roth. "Yes."

"Shit, I have to go. I'll find them, Lara. I promise."

The line went dead. Lara lowered the receiver, placing it gently back in its cradle.

The headmistress was studying Lara's face. Realising the conversation was over, she put her hand on the girl's shoulder. "I'm so sorry, Lara. Would you like to speak to the counsellor?"

The girl shook her head.

"If you need anything, you come to me personally. Any time. I insist."

Lara didn't trust her voice. Mute and numbed, she just gazed at her headmistress. The woman frowned, "I'll let your teachers know you're excused from classes for the rest of the day."

Lara didn't know what to do. She didn't know what to feel. She let her feet carry her back to the dorm room that she shared with three other first years.

She sat on the edge of the bed, and fixated on her buckled school shoes.

Was she allowed to cry? Her parents weren't dead. They were just missing. Why did she feel so hollow; so sad?

"Be a good girl and we'll see you soon."

It wouldn't be long. They'd be back. Both of them.

Fifteen years later, that scared little girl was a scarred woman two thousand miles away.

Still staring at her shoes.

She tried to fight it at first, but she could feel it building inside of her. Half a decade of suppressed grief and guilt. She gritted her teeth against it. But still it spilled like champagne from a just uncorked bottle. The spasms in her chest set her shaking. Eventually she couldn't take it anymore. She let her lips part. If she could just release some of the pain. But her snivelling was too loud. Shuddering, she just managed to rein in it.

Fists clenched on the lip of the stone seat, she sobbed silently into the night instead.

Chapter 12

"I'd ask if you wanted to talk about it, but this is you after all."

Lara startled at the voice behind her. She was really off her game if she hadn't even noticed someone creeping up on her. If she hadn't instantly recognised the speaker on turning, she would have already launched herself at them. But she identified the form even in the growing darkness.

Sam.

With that realisation, fear morphed into irritation.

The archaeologist turned her back on her former friend. She knuckled away her tears. "Please, Sam, I'm not up for an argument right now."

"Me neither."

The filmmaker lowered herself down next to Lara. She didn't attempt to make eye contact either. She just gazed off into the valley instead.

The Englishwoman sighed, "Then what do you want?"

Silence.

Lara had just about given up on expecting a response when Sam murmured, "Your speech was beautiful. They would really be proud of you, you know. Your parents."

Lara snorted. *Richard and Amelia Croft's daughter: the mass murderer, thief and whore.*

Sensing that the archaeologist was glaring at her, Sam immediately changed the subject. "You drinking that?" She gestured at the second flute of champagne Lara had deposited by her foot. When the Englishwoman shook her head, Sam claimed the glass and took a deep mouthful.

"Not bad." Then she smiled, "Remember that time we got absolutely finished on this stuff in my mom's condo?"

Lara did. It was her first time meeting Isabelle Nishamura, and on shaking her hand the former model had given the girl the once over. Immediately a look passed between mother and daughter that Lara interpreted as *"Help the poor dear..."*

As self-conscious as the student felt after that, it didn't compare to Sam's disillusionment. With Lara present and squirming the whole time, Isabelle Nishamura expressed nothing but disapproval for her daughter – her hair style, her portion size at lunch, her choice of uni courses. Lara had felt so bad for her friend that she joined her in binge drinking away her self-loathing that evening with £80 bottles of champagne. They ended up sleeping side by side on the bathroom floor so that they could be close to the toilet. Lara had never been more hungover in her life.

Lost in the memory, the Englishwoman hadn't realised that the silence had resettled. Or that her lip had curled in a smile. The former friends sat with their eyes fixed forward.

Lara felt it was her turn to reach out through the awkwardness. "What do your parents think of Steven?"

Sam pulled a face. "Oh, you know. Dad is disappointed that he's not Japanese. Mom is disappointed that he's not rich." She sipped her drink, before smirking, "But I suppose it could be worse. I could have brought home a woman."

Such a bittersweet realisation. The sound that parted Lara's lips was an awful mangling of a sob and a chuckle.

It was a weird enough outburst that Sam actually turned to look at her. "Sorry."

Lara dismissed her companion's frown with a wave of her hand. She was smiling again, weakly, when she said, "It's alright. Steven's lovely. I think he's the first of your boyfriends that I actually like."

"Hmmp, not liking my boyfriends; I wonder why that was?"

Sam's words were prickly but there was no scowl contorting her features. Just the same frayed melancholy that the archaeologist felt. She sighed, "Can I ask you something, Lara?"

"Of course."

"Did you always love me?"

"Yes, pretty much." Funny how easy it was to admit now. To Sam. To herself. She didn't even hesitate before answering.

"Then why didn't you ever say anything?"

"How could I?"

"Uh, it's easy. *Hey, Sam, I have feelings for you.*"

Lara chuckled. *So simple in hindsight.*

She was bent over the sink, brushing her teeth. Having just climbed out the shower, she was nude, dripping all over the bathroom mat.

Just then, her roommate appeared in the mirror, stark naked, on her way to the vacated stall.

Lara almost choked on her mouthful of toothpaste.

"Sam!"

Panicked, the archaeology student tried to cover herself.

Sam was completely nonplussed. "Oh relax, sweetie, it's nothing you don't have."

Lara's cheeks blazed. She stammered, "You know how I feel about my personal space and—"

Sam yelled from behind the frosted door as she turned on the water. "Lara, shut up. You have a body to die for. There is *nothing* for you to be embarrassed about. You're hot."

And just like that Lara was aroused.

From flustered embarrassment she went to trembling with the effort it took not to join Sam in the shower, pin her against the tiles and kiss her. She could just about feel Sam's lips; the slick skin of her front moving against Lara's own as the Englishwoman gripped handfuls of soft flesh just above her companion's buttocks.

As a result of the vivid fantasy she couldn't meet Sam's eyes for a few days. She just felt too guilty.

She thought she was being subtle about it, but her friend still confronted her a few mornings later.

Lara was munching toast at their rickety IKEA dining table while she tried to absorb the minutiae of a boring paper on Assyrian pottery. Sam was behind the kitchen counter, preparing herself a bowl of cereal.

"Lara, are you alright?"

The Englishwoman was startled to the point of breaking out in a cold sweat under her clothes. "Yes. Of course. Why do you ask?"

"You just seem a bit distant the past few days, that's all."

"I'm fine."

"Because if I did something to upset you, you'd tell me, right? I mean, if it's the bathroom thing, I'm sorry. I didn't think it was that big a deal even if you did."

Lara swallowed hard on her mouthful of toast. *This is it. The perfect opportunity to broach the subject with her...*

"I – I'm good."

...If you weren't such a massive coward.

Ignoring her inner heckle, she sighed, "I just feel a bit overloaded at the moment. That's all. It'll come right."

The look she received from Sam was the exact response she expected. Although the American had finally stopped grumbling that Lara overworked herself unnecessarily, she couldn't resist an eye roll. She was unable to grasp why her best friend subjected herself to so much self-inflicted stress when all that was required was a five minute conversation with the Croft family solicitor to fix her financial woes.

Sam had rounded the counter and was standing before Lara. She squeezed the Englishwoman's shoulder. "Well, if I can help in any way, sweetie, you let me know, okay?"

Smiling outwardly as she continued berating herself internally, Lara rested her hand over Sam's.

Several years later she could admit out loud, "I fought that part of myself for a long time, Sam."

That was the truth.

All those hundreds of hours she'd spent travelling by plane, train, boat and bus had given her plenty of time to reflect on her behaviour.

During college, and straight after, she'd resigned herself to the fact that she and Sam could never be a couple. They could work together. They could certainly adventure and have fun together. But an intersection of their career ambitions was the only relationship that she could ever hope for.

And it was fine. It worked.

Until Yamatai.

Returning to the beach to find Whitman had hauled Sam back to Mathias – the surge of purpose she had felt at that moment; the clarity about what was important to her.

Sam.

That was what her world shrank down to. All that she had left. Her only reason to live; to keep on fighting. She was ready to rush back into that Hellhole, face the Solari; even the terrifying Storm Guard, whatever they were. There would be blood and screams and gunshots. There would be guaranteed pain for her. Possibly even death. But she was prepared to endure all that for Sam.

Lara felt fingers settle over the back of her hand. Then the slender digits slipped between hers, where they rested on the stone seat of the amphitheatre.

What was she doing?

"Sam?"

The archaeologist's companion was evidently absorbed in her lap. She mumbled into her chest, "I know. Please. Just don't say anything, alright?"

Lara stared at her former friend. She swallowed hard but respected the wish for silence.

Still unable to make eye contact, Sam eventually whispered, "I miss you, you know. I miss this; just talking with my best friend."

"Me too."

"So why did you do it? Why did you run away?"

At that she lifted her head and looked Lara straight in the face.

"I love you, Sam. So *Goddamn* much. But this life I chose, there's no room for anyone or anything else."

"You didn't answer my question." The American tugged her hand free. "I need to know. I need to know why you just left without saying goodbye."

"Sam –"

But the archaeologist wasn't going to get her chance to explain. She was immediately interrupted. She wasn't even sure if Sam was still talking to her – she seemed to just be venting her frustrations while her former friend took the full, scalding blast.

"Because, yeah, Lara, I know I did a lot of shitty, selfish and stupid things over the years. I got us into trouble all the time. But I never expected something like that of you. So kind and gentle; beautiful and brave. You were my best friend, my saviour. Twice. For one brief moment I even thought you were the love of my life. So how could you do that?"

"Sam, please..."

It was a pitiful response and the archaeologist knew it. She was the one tied to the stake now. But there was no point thrashing against her restraints. The flames were rising but there would be no supernatural intervention to extinguish them. She started trembling.

Sam didn't let up.

"Oh my God. I totally get it now! After Yamatai you didn't feel like you deserved happiness. You threw away everything we could have had because you felt guilty about Roth and Grim and Alex and all the others."

Lara felt the restraints snap. All the nervous energy expelled in one split second. She was on her feet, yelling.

"Why did I leave? Of course I'm a fucking coward, Sam! But I'm also never going to have a husband or a wife. I don't get to walk through the door every day to find someone waiting to throw their arms around me. I'm probably going to be dead before I'm 35, bled out, poisoned or crushed in a tomb somewhere. All alone.

"But guess what? I'm also never going to leave behind anyone, particularly not some little girl who cries herself to sleep every night for months; who doesn't understand where her parents are; who wakes every morning hoping that –"

Her voice broke. She tried to continue but every word wedged painfully in her throat. They piled up, one after the other, ready at any moment to break through the dam. She couldn't breathe. She folded at her middle; her hands clasping her thighs like she'd just completed a half mile sprint.

"Lara?"

She gasped, "You think I'm going to do that to someone? Hurt them like that?"

"You already have."

"No," the archaeologist spat. "I saved you. You get to have a life."

When her companion didn't respond, Lara continued. Still bent double, she snarled at the stone, "You think I'm happy, Sam? I care about nothing. I kill people and I feel nothing. If I die it means nothing. The only time I vaguely feel anything is when I'm fucking tomb raiding. Those moments of physical exhilaration, the cerebral reward. That's *all* I have, Sam. That's all I will ever have."

The voice that answered her was tiny. "Lara... I – I had no idea."

"Well now you –" As the archaeologist straightened, it felt like the rebar punched straight through her left side all over again. *Jesus!*

How she didn't cry out, she wasn't sure. But her hand clamped over her hip.

Sam recognised the grimace and reflex action. The filmmaker gasped, "Lara, that doesn't still hurt does it?"

"Sometimes. Lately it's been particularly bad."

"Since when?"

"Oh, the past two weeks or so."

Sam was no idiot. She frowned, and then cocked her head. "May I see it?"

It was an odd request. Lara was self-conscious about the scar. She had come to regard it as a birthmark – a memento of the day her true self was born on that cursed island.

But with the physical pain and her emotional outburst, she was no longer capable of resistance. With leaden limbs, she tugged her blouse free of her slacks, and lifted the corner of the fabric. *What was the point of fighting it after all?*

Sam closed the gap between the two former friends. Then she bent to examine the puckered pale flesh. Lara wasn't sure what her companion could possibly see in the gloom. Practically all light had been leeches from the sky.

Fingertips stroked across the scar.

Lara shuddered at the sensation. Because of the nerve damage she tried to avoid touching herself there. But it meant Sam's caress was an odd mix of numbness and ultra-sensitivity. The point where deadened flesh met functioning nerves was pins-and-needles ticklish.

Sam straightened but didn't retract her touch. She seemed to be closely monitoring her companion's facial expression as she fingered the edge of the scar. Over and over...

Lara stood silent, stiff; trying not to react. She simply watched Sam watching her, from a distance of less than a foot away.

Eventually the archaeologist spoke, "What do you want from me, Sam?"

The American shook her head, "What do *you* want, Lara?"

Truth. "You."

Sam's eyes closed even as her lips parted. "Oh, sweetie."

The way she murmured it drew all focus to her mouth.

Lara leaned in, and kissed her.

Chapter 13

When Sam didn't respond at all to the kiss, Lara broke from it.

Maybe she could salvage the moment by blaming it on alcohol and a highly emotional day. She wouldn't be manufacturing an excuse; it was all true. Flushed, she couldn't meet Sam's eyes. She winced, "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have done that."

She made to step away but Sam hadn't retracted her touch from the archaeologist's scar. Lara was still frowning at her companion's hand when she felt fingertips skim her cheek. Her eyes found Sam's just as the filmmaker's lips pressed against hers.

This time it was Lara who was incapable of a response. As soon as she had initiated the kiss, Sam's eyes closed. The Englishwoman, though, was paralysed, staring.

What were they doing? What had she started?

She needed to push Sam away but that would mean even more dangerously tempting physical contact. Right then she could feel herself getting tipsy on the filmmaker's touch. It had just been so long. Five years of hollow physical gratification when this was all she really craved.

Her body was starting to respond without her. Her head tilted, so her mouth fit more completely against Sam's soft, wet lips. When fingertips trailed down her throat and splayed out over the exposed skin where shoulder and neck met, she actually shuddered.

Her hand closed around Sam's wrist in a weak attempt to stop her delicious caress. It didn't work. The way the warm, smooth flesh felt against Lara's palm; she loosened her grip and let her fingertips slide up and down her companion's forearm – a woman's forearm, so slender and soft, as opposed to a man's. All the while, Sam's fingertips tickled the flesh over and above the archaeologist's hipbone.

It was so easy for Lara to slip down into the sensation like warm bath water; drown out the internal whines that she stop what she was doing.

The initial single kiss had splintered into dozens of gentle pecks and caresses. Closed lips parted and tongues began to play, teasing sensitive pillows of flesh. It triggered a sweet ache in Lara's groin. She moaned into Sam's mouth.

Immediately the archaeologist regretted it. As she pressed in to deepen the kiss, her companion drew back. For a sickening second, Lara was certain the whole thing had been a cruel joke. That Sam all along intended to work her up and then laugh in her face, forcing her to stagger back to the museum, emotionally shattered, shamed and sporting a mammoth set of metaphorical blue balls.

Except Sam was smiling. Beaming dreamily.

"Mmmm, I forgot how great a kisser you are." Then she teased, "Is there anything you don't do well, Lara?"

Flustered, with oxygenated blood evidently flowing everywhere but her brain, Lara couldn't formulate a response. She didn't feel smart or sexy or accomplished; at that moment she felt like an awkward thirteen-year-old boy. It didn't matter. Sam's mouth pressed against hers.

Yes. *This. Now.*

Gentle caresses evolved under the influence of hunger. These new kisses were open-mouthed, forceful on both sides. Lara felt her insecurities recede. They cowered down as a far more powerful primal force strode forward. Lara clasped her companion's jaw. The hand that had been stroking Sam's forearm sought out her trousers' waistband. Fingers grabbed hold of the filmmaker's shirt hem and yanked it out the way so Lara too could press her palm against warm bare skin. Sam jolted at the touch, and Lara's response was an appreciative growl. Having that kind of effect on someone, it never got old.

Their hips had started rolling against each other. Some kind of mating dance coded into their DNA; made instinctual after centuries.

Lara had briefly worried that she was being too rough, but Sam was completely into it. She pulled the archaeologist harder against herself. Their teeth knocked, and then their kiss deepened.

Some part of Lara was panicking. It was a familiar voice, the same one that had kept her on the straight and narrow through her school and college years – and then had largely gone silent since Yamatai. Right then though, it wouldn't shut up. *You can't do this! Not now. Not here. Especially not here. It's a World Heritage Site.*

Right then, the only World Heritage Site Lara was concerned with was the flesh just above Sam's buttocks, right where her waist started to narrow below. The Englishwoman's hand had slipped across her companion's abdomen and around her back. God, the way the curve fit perfectly in her palm.

"Hey! *Poios einai ekei?*"

Lara's Greek was terrible but the speaker's tone was impossible to misinterpret. A disgruntled security guard, calling from somewhere below them. Breaking from the kiss, the Englishwoman watched a flashlight beam zigzagging up the path towards them. She hissed, "Shit."

Sam, unsurprisingly, found it funny. With her arms draped over Lara's shoulders, she chuckled, "Croft and Nishamura, in trouble again. Just like old times."

"I believe that should be Nishamura and Croft."

"Heh, you got me there. Though I don't believe we ever got bust before while doing this."

Sam began nuzzling Lara's neck. The gentle nips distracted for an eye-blink – *being caught wouldn't be so bad, would it?* – before reason elbowed aside unthinking lust.

Lara seized Sam's hand, and together they fled.

The theatre was big enough that they could slip past the guard once he emerged to scan the space. Then they sprinted back down to the site entrance, no longer caring how much noise they made. By the time they reached the museum they were breathless and giggly. Naughty girls on the run.

Sam immediately pressed Lara up against the stone exterior of the building. The adrenalin from their shared misadventure demanded some form of release. Evidently the first choice for that release was groping fingers and probing tongues.

Lara went along with it. Her hands were up the back of Sam's shirt again, clutching her companion to her as their torsos moved in waves from groin to shoulder. *Yes, God, yes.*

Nothing else mattered until common sense cleared its throat. They were in the shadows, far from the main museum entrance, but that didn't mean they were safe. That bastard Mo was lurking. If he caught them, it would be disastrous.

Lara forced herself free of that moment's kiss. "No," she grimaced. "Not here."

Sam looked disappointed, but she nodded. With the human hubbub inside the museum, it wasn't so easy to pretend that their actions had no repercussions. Reality intruded.

"Where?" the American murmured, as she ran her index finger over the exposed portion of Lara's breastbone.

This was a time for slapdash solutions, like taping a stabilising weight onto a wild assault rifle.

"The hotel. Get your stuff. I'll meet you out front."

Lara pecked at Sam's cheek, and the women parted ways.

It turns out it took longer for Lara to extricate herself from the event than it took Sam to gather all her equipment and haul it outside. Being a guest of honour certainly wasn't without its drawbacks. By the time she passed through the exit, the archaeologist's face was aching from all the polite smiles. And her head was swimming with the multitude of names and faces forced on her. Why was it that she could more easily grasp the kanji system than the identities of a dozen people? Then again, it had been difficult for her to concentrate – her mind kept wandering to thoughts of Sam's touch; her parted, impatiently waiting lips.

So Lara was capable of one more smile – a genuine one – when she finally made it outside and found the filmmaker standing there with her camera case and tripod. Mr Manolis had already called Lara's driver on her behalf so it was a simple matter of loading Sam's equipment into the boot of his car.

It was ill-advised, but Lara couldn't resist running her hand over the small of Sam's back as her companion climbed into the vehicle. Lara followed suit, but not before one final look back at the museum. It was a legacy Richard and Amelia Croft deserved; one that their daughter was incapable of providing.

It was then that she spotted Mo just outside the museum entrance. He was staring at her, frozen halfway through the act of lighting a cigarette. What an unfortunate, profit-blowing time to trade his camera for a smoke. Lara smirked at him before slamming the car door.

Chapter 14

He seemed like a decent, discreet man, but Lara couldn't risk the vaguest possibility of the driver gossiping. So she and Sam sat in the dark of the backseat, chastely holding hands. She didn't dare look at her companion in case a coy smile or heavy-lidded gaze pierced straight through the restraint that she had donned like armour – and which at that moment was making her feel as sweaty as chainmail over a suffocating combination of wool and leather.

Even on arrival at the hotel she kept her platonic distance. She was carrying one of Sam's cases for her, and she was grateful for that. It kept her hands occupied when all she wanted to do was seize her companion by the waist and pull into her right there in the mirrored elevator.

She chanced a glance at Sam. The American was looking down at her feet. Unusually, her expression was pained. But then Lara shouldn't have been at all surprised. What Sam was doing had massive repercussions. She had always gone with the moment in uni; embracing every opportunity for a new, pleasurable experience... but this was so much bigger. There was no way she wasn't thinking about consequences at that moment.

When people spoke about a mood plummeting, it turns out it wasn't metaphoric hyperbole. The archaeologist suddenly felt like her innards had been bound to a sack of bricks, and pushed off a cliff.

What had really changed? What had they resolved with a kiss, however passionate? There was still Steven. And there was still the fact that Lara couldn't share her life with anyone. It was impossible.

If Sam didn't have the resolve to stop whatever *this* was from escalating, the responsibility would fall to Lara. As it inevitably always did when the two roommates were concerned. Even before Yamatai, Lara had always been the one to protect Sam. Even if it meant Lara frequently curled up on a grenade for her utterly ignorant best friend.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?"

Lara had returned to the booth to find Sam's date sprinkling some sort of power into the girl's drink. Sam was still in the nightclub bathroom, freshening her make-up and hair. She was giddy at the prospect of hooking up with the textbook tall, dark and handsome Masters student.

At that moment, though, Loverboy was trying to play down his actions by dialling up the charm. He smiled at Lara, still standing before him. "It's all good, love. It's just a little something to help take the edge off. It's nothing bad, I promise."

Lara pushed the glass across the table towards him. "Then you drink it."

His smile wavered. It was blink-and-you'd-miss-it, but it was enough.

Lara backhanded the glass into his chest.

"What the fuck?!" He began pawing at his sopping, instantly sticky shirt.

Fortunately the club was too busy and noisy for anyone to notice the commotion. Not that Lara cared at all at that particular moment. She planted her fists on the table and leaned in towards him. It was a risky move. He was furious, and he easily had thirty pounds on her if he decided to retaliate. But Roth's teachings had yet to fail her at The Nine Bells, and this situation was little different to the altercations she frequently defused in that dingy backstreet pub.

Tone is the most dangerous word in the English language, girl. Use it to your advantage.

Lara locked eyes with Loverboy. She didn't raise her voice. She didn't even bother with a facial expression. Her hard, unblinking stare was good enough.

"Go now," she said. "And don't you EVER speak to Sam again, do you understand me? Or the next thing of yours that ends up in her drink will be your freshly removed testicles."

Without ever looking away from her – evidently afraid she'd lash out like a cobra if their gazes disengaged – he slipped out from the booth, and scurried across the dance floor.

Even after she sat again, Lara continued to glare at the point where he disappeared. She was seething. She didn't think she'd ever been so angry before.

She was so worked up in fact that she didn't notice Sam's return. Standing before the booth, the American's eyes kept darting between her best friend and the opposite empty seat.

She murmured, "Where is he?"

Without a chance to cool down, all Lara could respond with was a monosyllabic "He had to go." She delivered it flatly, almost petulantly, scowling at her hands on the table.

Sam's disappointment flared into rage. "Lara, what did you do?!"

The archaeology student swung her face up towards her companion.

"Sam, he –"

"No!" The American girl snapped. "You know what? I'm not interested. You always do this, Lara. No one is ever good enough for you, so you go around sabotaging other people's relationships. You're so Goddamn selfish."

There were a hundred retorts Lara could have made, but she was stunned by her best friend's tirade.

Sam shook her head. "I know you're on a mission to fast track your future; happily end up as some spinster professor with your grey hair in a braid, surrounded by books and whatever crap you dug up; sipping tea and wearing frayed sweaters with elbow patches..."

That didn't sound unappealing, actually.

"But that's not me, Lara. I'm not you however much you'd love me to be sitting at your side; two old biddies with dusty, dried up kooses." Evidently the image amused her because she managed a laugh in the middle of her outburst.

It did seem to soften her mood at least. "You only live once, Lara. So just stop it. Stop interfering in my life. Stop trying to turn me into a nun like you."

That rankled. All that pent up rage found its release. The Englishwoman muttered, "You don't have to sleep with everyone who buys you a drink."

Sam's eyes widened. For an instant it looked like she was about to resume her diatribe. But she resisted. Instead she snarled simply, "Don't force your sexual hang-ups on me, Lara Croft. Now leave me the fuck alone."

She scowled once more at the archaeology student before stomping off.

Lara watched her roommate go. *God, she really had cocked up the evening. This was why she preferred the blissful quiet and safe social isolation of the library.*

Right then she remembered what she originally wanted to say to Sam. Lara sighed at her still clenched fists, "You could do a lot better."

Sam's hotel room was closer to the elevator, so that's where they went.

The instant they were inside, Sam dropped her camera equipment and had Lara up against the door. So hard that the archaeologist hit her head against the pine. Sam's tongue forced apart her lips. Her kiss was rough and all-consuming; suffocating.

While her tongue probed her companion's mouth, Sam's hands were fiddling at the waistband of Lara's trousers. She had the zipper down but, working blind, couldn't seem to pluck free the button.

"Fuck." Breathless, the filmmaker broke from the kiss, so she could focus fully on undoing Lara's slacks.

The Englishwoman studied Sam's face. There was desperation there. Not lust. Not anything even remotely close to happiness.

Lara seized her companion's wrists, stopping her.

The archaeologist murmured, "Sam, is this what you want?"

Barely a whisper. "Please don't ask me that right now."

"I have to."

Sam didn't respond. She was deliberately avoiding Lara's gaze; staring instead at the old jade pendant against her chest bone.

Time to embrace that grenade.

Lara took her everything in her arms. She exhaled slowly. "Because if you need time, or if you're not sure..." Her voice broke, and she found she couldn't continue. *Hadn't she cried enough already tonight?*

Sam raised her head. "I want *you*, Lara. I love you."

"Steven –"

"Don't say his name."

"But –"

Tears instantly rimmed Sam's lower eyelids. "I love him too. He reminds me a lot of you actually. Sweet. Genuinely caring. A real absent-minded professor. But he's not you. He's – he's just the next best thing."

Whoever wants to hear that they're the consolation prize?

While Lara was musing over the admission, Sam pressed into her. The American had started nuzzling her companion's neck just the way Lara liked it, stroking a spot with the tip of her nose before skimming it with barely parted lips.

Lara's skin was already goose bumped from the caress. So when Sam whispered, "I missed you," the archaeologist inhaled sharply.

She knew she didn't have the strength to walk away. Not again. Her resolve was already crisscrossed with hairline fractures. All she needed was one reason not to leave, and her wall of resistance would shatter completely.

Sam's palm cupped Lara's cheek. Brown eyes fixed on hers, mere inches away. "Please give me this."

I'd give you every treasure in the world.

Lara tilted her head and pressed her mouth to Sam's.

These soft, shared, tender kisses; they were *right*. A physical rebridging of all their years apart. Carefully re-establishing the intimacy they once shared. An echo of that one single night where they actually acted on their desires. Where for a few sweet hours they cast aside their clothes like they cast aside their doubts about the authenticity of their post-Yamatai wants.

This felt like a continuation of that evening in New York, so there was no need to stop Sam when she began unbuttoning her companion's blouse.

That was until the American woman stepped back, ashen-faced.

"Lara, Jesus!"

The archaeologist followed Sam's gaze down her exposed front. "Oh."

Lara had collected a lot more scars over the past half decade. Yamatai's rebar puncture remained the worst – largely because of her amateur attempt at cauterising it, and the length of time that passed before she received proper treatment – but there were other newer souvenirs from her exploits. Her body was turning into a passport stamped with scars.

Across her abdomen ran a pencil-thin line, already pale pink. Sam was fixated on it.

"Knife fight in Cambodia," Lara explained. "Evidently I'm not as quick as I thought I was."

"You have so many." Sam had started touching each blemish in turn.

Smiling wryly the whole time, Lara began introducing them like vacation photos. "This is from when I took a tumble into a thorn bush while outrunning illegal diamond miners in Zimbabwe... This one, well, it turns out you should never underestimate the range of Chinese-made pistols... Oh, this? Would you believe that Somali rebels use their machetes rather freely..."

Sam looked increasingly horrified.

Lara sighed, "Do you see why I couldn't risk you tagging along?"

The filmmaker cocked an eyebrow. "Do you ever wonder if you would have avoided these if there was someone there with you, watching your back?"

"*You?*" Lara guffawed. "Christ, Sam, I remember the monthly PMS Apocalypse. Without fail. I know your pain threshold."

"Bitch, please! You don't recall those six-inch heels I used to wear?" She grinned, "I think I'd surprise you."

Lara smirked, "Then surprise me."

"Fine then." Sam seized her companion by the hand and led her over to the foot of the bed. She prodded Lara in the chest with her index finger and the archaeologist played along, flopping onto the mattress.

Lying on her back, she was chuckling until the American woman shimmied out of her trousers and tugged her simple work shirt over her head.

Lara sat up, mouth agape. "Bloody hell!"

Sam *had* changed. Until she stood in nothing but a bra and panties, Lara shamefully hadn't noticed it. Now she couldn't look away. Her former roommate's softness had been burnt off. She was more defined; a swimsuit model hardened into an athlete.

Lara was back in thirteen year old boy mode. She stumbled over her words. "God, you – you're..." Eventually she settled on "beautiful." And immediately wanted to slap herself.

Sam's faux scowl, "So I wasn't before?"

"No, no. I was Tantalus for years, the way you unknowingly tortured me with your body."

"Torture, you say?"

Sam straddled Lara. The way she draped her arms around the Englishwoman's neck put her cleavage directly at Lara's eye level.

Suddenly the archaeologist recalled all the agonising times that Sam had recruited her to apply sun cream to her back and shoulders. "*Don't forget around the sides of the bikini, sweetie. And right at the strap line.*"

Sam took advantage of her companion's stunned silence and kissed her. Lara's natural response was to clasp hold of the filmmaker's waist and massage the bunches of muscle that teetered over the top of her hipbones.

Except just clinging to her companion was a waste of such a glorious opportunity. With one hand still clutching Sam's side, Lara ran her fingertips over the American's stomach, savouring every ridge hidden just beneath the surface.

As Lara's hand reached her companion's simple white bra, fingers intercepted her wrist. Sam sat back then, breaking from the kiss.

Lara opened her mouth, ready to apologise for whatever line she had ignorantly crossed. Except Sam smiled, and lifted the archaeologist's hand to her mouth. She slipped Lara's index and middle fingers between her lips. And sucked. It made no sense whatsoever but Lara felt it in her groin.

She squirmed at the unexpected sensation between her legs. *Torture was right*. She would have flushed bright red but she didn't think there was any blood left in her head save what was necessary for base function.

When she tired of her playful torment, Sam removed Lara's digits from her mouth, nipped fleetingly at the tips and then pulled the archaeologist into another deep kiss.

Lara was so distracted by the tongue in her mouth that at first she didn't release that Sam still had hold of her wrist. The archaeologist couldn't suppress a groan when her hand was guided into her companion's knickers. At the exact same time Sam slipped her own free hand down the front of Lara's trousers.

The archaeologist had no doubt that her body was as ready as Sam's at that moment.

Their mouths already performing a duet, the two women let their bodies improvise a dance of their own creation.

Lips. Rolling hips. Throaty moans. And an exquisite, ever-coiling tension below the waist – that was all there was to the world at that moment.

At some point Lara breathlessly commanded, "Turn around."

Sam was in no condition to disagree. She just nodded, her eyes so heavily-lidded they were practically already closed. Weak-kneed and drunk with arousal, she let Lara reorient her, so that she was facing away from her companion; her shins pressed to the mattress on either side of Lara's thighs.

The new position meant the two women were both facing a dressing table mirror opposite the bed.

Sam chuckled, "Kinky," and then cried out as Lara's fingers plunged back into her underwear.

The angle was better. For Sam, and for Lara, who was focused on pushing her lover to climax. It did mean that the pleasure-giving was no longer mutual, but Sam insisted on turning her head to kiss the archaeologist. When she began to ride Lara more fervently, the American woman left her palm against her companion's cheek.

Lara was less aware of the caress though than the fact that Sam had arched back into her and was whimpering her name over and over.

It was an even bigger turn-on than the pseudo-voyeuristic thrill that the mirror provided. Lara looked up from the spot where her hand disappeared into Sam's knickers and caught sight of her own reflection. She – It – was smiling as it teathed Sam's shoulder. A victory leer.

The filmmaker fortunately had her eyes closed, so she didn't see the chilling facial expression peering out from behind her. Lara, though, was staring at her true self – the cold, calculating and utterly selfish predator.

The realisation crushed all air from her lungs. This moment was exactly what her true self had been working towards the past few weeks. Sam helpless in its jaws. Now it had what it wanted, it was going to gorge itself unchallenged. And Lara had helped it, because they both desired the exact same thing. It didn't matter what they did or who they hurt, as long as the wet-eyed gazelle ended up stunned and splay-legged in-between their paws, waiting to be ripped apart.

Suddenly Lara was aware of the metal band grazing her cheek every time Sam rocked against her. White hot white gold that blistered her skin. She clenched her eyes shut at the pain, but at least it gave her clarity.

This was wrong. This was ALL wrong.

She pulled her hand out of Sam's underwear. And stood.

Her companion tumbled onto the carpet on all fours.

"Lara?" Sam panted, staring up at her lover from the floor.

The Englishwoman felt nauseous and weirdly disconnected from her body. Like that moment drunkenness flips from feeling wonderfully world-expanding to the sickening realisation that you've just poisoned yourself.

"This is wrong," she repeated out loud.

"What?!"

She wondered if the words sounded as robotic in reality as they did echoing around in her skull. "We can't do this."

Sam was on her feet. "What do you mean?"

"I have to go."

"I don't understand. What's going on?"

In response, Lara zipped up her slacks and started buttoning up her shirt. It wasn't easy. She was trembling and her fingers were suddenly as clumsy as if they were four times their normal size, and unjointed to boot. She had nearly no fine-motor function, and she felt on the cusp of fainting. She wasn't sucking in enough oxygen in this shoebox of a room. More space; open sky – she needed it.

The sight of Lara redressing sent Sam into a similar panic. Her voice was growing more strident. "What happened? Lara, answer me!"

The archaeologist couldn't risk looking at her. If she did, the beast might wrestle back control. She needed to get as far away as possible. Minimise physical contact...

Sam grabbed hold of the Englishwoman's bicep.

"Lara, please! Don't do this. Not again. I can't –"

"Let go."

"No. I won't." She had started snivelling. "I won't let you go."

"Stop it, Sam."

Lara tried to pull her arm free, and failed.

Next phase: wide-eyed, tearful begging. "Lara, *pleeeeeease!*"

Lara was terrified, she was angry and every second she looked into Sam's eyes, the more guilty she felt. She needed to extricate herself from the situation while she still had control over her temper.

"Let go of me. You have a fiancé."

Both of Sam's hands clamped around Lara's arm. "I love *you!*"

The archaeologist had managed to keep her voice at the level of a murmur, but the sudden tug of war, with Sam putting as much dead weight behind her grip as possible, caused the Englishwoman to snap.

"*NO!*"

Lara lashed out with her elbow.

She simply meant to free herself from the hold but the next second she was staring down at Sam on the bed. The American woman was curled in a foetal position, crying, and clutching her cheek.

Lara wanted to reach out and comfort her. But a voice was hissing between her ears. *Look at what you've done. You're a monster! All you do is destroy lives.*

A second voice, the beast's, was snarling in frustration and anger.

At that, Lara ran for the door. As she closed it, she turned back to face the room. Her last sight was of Sam lying on her side, stripped down to her underwear and sobbing over the shards of her shattered heart.

Lara strode down the corridor to her suite with far more control and conviction than she felt. As usual, her body had engaged its autopilot when, distraught and panicked, she was

incapable of acting. But it was alright. She could live with that default survival mechanism. It was incredibly useful.

Thankfully her body had adopted as its purpose the message – the mantra – that was looping in Lara's head.

I have to go. I have to go NOW.

Inside her room, she snatched up her bag and dumped it on the bed. She started chucking in the contents she had already hauled out earlier in the day. There wasn't much. She usually travelled light.

She reached for the cordless phone and started punching in the number for reception. Then she stopped. It was too late in the night to request a taxi drive her all the way to Athens. She'd have to walk; hitchhike if necessary. If she started now...

The deep internal tremor caused her to drop the phone. She stared at her quivering hand.

No, Croft, keep it together.

Except her muscles would no longer respond. Shuddering all over, she just managed to make it to the bed before her legs gave out.

For the second time that day she burst into tears. Clutching her ribs, she drove her face into her thighs. It was the only thing she could think to do to muffle her howls.

What had she done?! Sam. Jesus. There was nothing that Lara could have done to hurt her more. From falling on grenades for her best friend, the Englishwoman had switched to studding them with nails and sending them to her in a beautiful gift box. Complete with an embossed card that read "With all my love, Lara."

Eventually the waves of grief began to ease their relentless battering. In-between poundings that submerged her all over again, Lara could actually lift her head and inhale the air she so desperately needed. Still trembling, she palmed away her tears as well as the mucus pouring from her nostrils. A few short minutes of crying and her sinuses felt completely stuffed up.

She staggered to the bathroom to retrieve her toiletries and wash her face.

The water felt good against her too-hot skin. Something still pure and cool and cleansing.

Still bent over the sink, she reached for a nearby hand towel and pressed her face into the soft cotton. Once she was certain all the droplets and tear remnants had been absorbed, she looked up again into the bathroom mirror. Directly into a pair of blue eyes.

A monstrous man stood behind her. Over six foot tall. Blonde. In a red tartan shirt.

For a heartbeat they both stood frozen; both startled at the unexpected meeting of gazes.

In the end, he reacted first.

Before Lara could turn, fingers clamped around the back of her skull.

She was propelled forward, straight into her reflection.

Chapter 15

As her forehead struck the silvered glass, her reflection splintered into a dozen white-faced duplicates.

Instantly, her body went limp.

Her chin struck the sink as she dropped, and she bit into her tongue. Blood exploded in her mouth.

She kept falling.

Her useless form slipped backwards over the lip of the bathroom counter, and a second later she was prone on the floor; her head twisted to the side so that her cheek rested on tile. The edge of unconsciousness was perilously close. *Do not black out, Lara. Don't even think about it.* But she did consider it. There was a part of her that found the prospect of casting aside all sense of self-preservation liberating. It wanted to take a running leap into the abyss.

Lara though, clung to consciousness with just her aching, raw fingertips.

In reality, those same fingertips had found a shard of mirror. They folded around it, and drew it back into the concealed safety of the archaeologist's palm.

Lara's eyes weren't cooperating. They wouldn't open properly. So she felt more than saw her attacker approach. He nudged her unresponsive body with his boot, and then stepped over to straddle her.

He crouched down. He was gentler than Lara thought he would be. He tucked one of her escaped locks of hair behind her ear. Cupping her shoulder, he started to roll her onto her back.

That's when Lara lashed out. Summoning what physical control she had, she drove the shard into the top of his foot.

The force she used caused the glass to cut into her own flesh, but she still achieved the desired effect.

The monster howled and stumbled backwards on his good leg. Capitalising on his upset balance, Lara hooked one foot behind his Achilles tendon and kicked out at his hip on the same side. That sent him toppling backwards. He clawed out at a surface to stop his fall but there was nothing within reach in the St Peter's Basilica of a bathroom. He hit the ground hard.

Lara flopped back onto her stomach. Even with the surge of adrenalin, she couldn't stand. Everything was getting foggy again. She had to get out. Now. She started scrambling across the tiles towards the entrance.

A hand closed around her calf and she was tugged back a foot. She kicked out in response. And evidently found a target – there was a cry, and the grip released.

At moments like this she always heard Roth's voice, with his thick Northern accent. *Hurry, Lara!*

She continued to claw her way forward, practically tiger crawling.

But as she reached the door, a figure stepped into it, blocking her escape. She looked up into his face. She didn't know the blonde brute, but this man she'd met before. Unfortunately.

Close cropped goatee and moustache. Even closer cropped hair – a number one buzz cut, in fact. Lithe and dangerously agile. Pierre Dupont.

He wasn't an archaeologist. But the French thief and thug for hire had found his market niche robbing unsuspecting academics and similarly unprepared field workers; removing priceless artefacts from their possession for handover instead to his rich private employers.

In the past five years, he and Lara has crossed paths twice. The first round had gone to Dupont when he ambushed Lara post-expedition in Phnom Penh. The second encounter, deep inside the Vatican catacombs, worked out in Lara's favour. She remembered the Frenchman yelling obscenities as he limped away into the darkness, without the relic he intended on expropriating from the archaeologist.

In the present Dupont stood smug, smirking as he looked down on already battered, bleeding Lara.

She didn't have time to respond. Fists grabbed the back of her shirt collar, and her trouser waistband. Then she was flying backwards across the bathroom. *God, Paul Bunyan was strong.*

She hit the wall above the tub with such force that tiles cracked behind her skull and shoulder blades. The impact was enough. Unlike the mirror, it got the job done. Her last memory was of the beautiful white bathtub rushing up towards her.

"Wakey, wakey."

She came around to the sensation of fingers tapping her cheek, and the sound of running water.

What –?

She meant to utter her question out loud but all that parted her lips was a pitiful groan. "Hnnghh." That provoked laughter from whoever was there. She decided at that moment she wasn't going to give those bastards the satisfaction of squeezing any more audible suffering from her. No matter what.

Gingerly she opened her eyes. *Christ.* So much light. She winced. Everything hurt. Her head and back especially. Pain was the only thing that linked her body and brain; otherwise she felt as disconnected and uncoordinated as if she was trying to sprint straight out of a deep sleep.

How long had she been out? Her forehead felt sticky with partially dried blood that had trickled down into her left eyebrow and matted it. Her tongue was throbbing, and the strong tang of iron made her feel sick.

Through the haze of hurt she tried to form some context. But it was like trying to build a castle with desert sand that hadn't felt rain for centuries. Sense kept slipping between her fingers like fine white grains. The most she could determine was that she was still in the hotel suite's wrecked bathroom. She was propped upright on the toilet seat, her arms trussed tightly behind her at the wrist. Whoever had tied her up knew what he was doing. Every attempt to test the bindings caused the cords to bite more painfully into her skin. *Bugger.*

"I don't advise you struggle."

Despite her head feeling like a cannonball attached to her shoulders by a reed, she managed to raise it. A man stood directly in front of her, arms crossed. In her concussed state, his face kept slipping in and out of focus, and his name was just a jumble of letters. *You know him, Lara. Think.*

But all she wanted to do at that moment was appreciate the way the light partially silhouetted him. It was beautiful. It was like she could see his aura; rainbowed, with dust motes floating around in it.

Eventually she recalled his name, and everything of that evening's awful nightcap came back to her. "Du... Pont."

"And here I was worried you didn't remember me, Mademoiselle Croft."

It was difficult to focus but she tried to fix her gaze on the scar that crossed the bridge of his nose and arced down towards his moustache. A memento of their catacombs' encounter. She was slurring her words but it didn't matter. She smiled weakly, "S'looks good... Brings out your eyes..."

The Frenchman's sneer never wavered. "Please excuse my manners." He took a step towards the archaeologist. "Bonsoir."

His fist hit her squarely in the cheek.

She toppled sideways with the force of the blow. Without her arms, she had nothing to brace her fall. She landed hard on her chest.

Laughter again; Dupont's and that of other men in the bathroom. She hadn't seen them. She wasn't sure where they were in the monstrous space, or how many of them there were. Paul Bunyan had to be among them though.

Almost immediately a hand clamped around her tricep. She was tugged upright again and deposited on the toilet.

A second later a second blow found its mark.

Down she went again. Her temple struck the tile and the room started spinning to a soundtrack of cackles and running water.

The third strike was the hardest. She must have blacked out because the next thing she was conscious of was the fact that she was sprawled face down, her chin resting in an expanding pool of her own blood and spittle.

She had started shuddering. A part of her wanted to start crying and begging. A small part of her. A larger part of her was elsewhere, climbing with Roth.

She was clinging to the rock face, calling his name. All strength had fled her limbs and she was stuck; paralysed and trembling. But he wouldn't come for her. Several feet above her, he waited. "Come on, Lara. Just a bit further."

"Roth, I can't. I'm scared. I'm too tired."

He just smiled at her. "You can get out of this, girl. I know you can. Now hurry up, there's a beautiful sunrise and some Glenfiddich waiting for you. Move your arse."

She started to draw her knees up to her chest. *Stand, Lara, that's a start. You still have your legs.*

Dupont's boot connected with her ribs. She cried out. Over and over he kicked her. And over and over she broke her vow of silence. Lara tried to turtle but every time she managed to curl up to protect part of her body she ended up exposing another vulnerable bit. Her gut. Her kidneys. It was like a vicious no-rules scuffle for a football.

"English whore!"

Pain pulsed at random points across her skin, but all she could do was cringe at each impact.

A voice spoke up, disapproving. "Dude." From her position on the floor, she wasn't sure who it was, but he had an American accent.

In response to the criticism, Dupont's grabbed hold of Lara's ponytail and hauled her up onto her knees. He yanked back her head.

"Never underestimate this little bitch. She's tougher than she looks. And way more trouble."

To reiterate his point, he drove his knuckles into her stomach.

Lara vomited.

Dupont released his grip and she folded back down into a tight ball; her shins on the floor and her chest against her thighs. She couldn't stop retching. The acid of the regurgitated champagne seared her tongue even as the humiliation pinched tears from her eyes.

The American voice again. "She doesn't seem so tough to me. Just some pretty little thing who's been lucky until now."

She couldn't see them from her position, but she could feel the pleased gazes of the people watching her. So much shame. Her body was shaking even harder from the combination of agony and trussed up adrenalin.

Hate. That was her purest emotion at that moment. Hate for them. Hate for her pathetic self. She was going to make them pay with blood and pain to match her own; yes.

Dupont was speaking again. "I think you'll find we're not unreasonable, girl. Here, let's help clean you up."

Two pairs of hands grabbed her; one set on each tricep. She was hauled out of her crouch and dragged to the bathtub by two men in black. She tried to head-butt her escort, but her act of defiance was mistimed and too feeble. She was rewarded with another blow to her kidneys, and she went dead below the waist.

Fully clothed she was deposited in the tub. Kneeling in it, the cold water reached up to and tickled her bottom ribs.

Dupont was holding her upright by her shoulder. He frowned as he examined her face.

"That looks painful. Does it hurt?" He dug the thumb of his free hand into the gash on her forehead.

Lara gritted her teeth against the pain. But it wasn't enough to stop renewed tears.

He continued to gouge into the cut. "Does. It. Hurt?"

When Lara didn't respond despite the fresh blood trickling down the side of her nose, he smirked, "Don't worry, cherie, a nice bath will make you feel better."

He took a fistful of her shirt, right between her breasts. Then he sighed, "I'm forbidden to kill you, but that doesn't mean I can't take you to the edge over and over."

Lara murmured, "I'm flattered..."

Dupont looked confused at her response. She relished that. Then she added, "To be the first woman you've ever been able to truly promise that to."

He shoved her backwards under the water.

Lara was a strong swimmer. She was physically fit. She could hold her breath for a long time. But that didn't mean she didn't struggle with panic. She tried to will herself to keep calm. There was nothing to worry about. Dupont said they were forbidden to kill her. They were just tormenting her; they had no intention of drowning her. *Don't give those pricks the pleasure of watching you succumb to hysteria, Lara.*

But even as she tried to rationalise her situation, the doubts multiplied and began to muffle the reassurances. *How much longer will they keep you under? What if they accidentally kill you? You know you can't hold your breath much longer.*

That triggered memories of the Endurance. Trapped in that tiny cabin, the seawater rising around her. Pounding on the porthole, even as the torrent passed over her head. She remembered that feeling of complete desperation, the fight, and the weird acceptance that followed it as she expelled all the air from her lungs, and started to sink into the darkness. Watching the light retreat above her.

Dupont pulled her upright, bringing her face out of the water. She didn't even have a chance to think about it. Her body's natural response was to suck in as much air as possible. She was still inhaling when she was forced under again.

That wrecked her efforts to stay calm. She didn't have enough air. She'd breathed in a mouthful of water as she submerged. It triggered a coughing fit, and she watched the precious oxygen escape in bursts of bubbles from between her lips. She needed out. She started thrashing.

Eventually Dupont hauled her up again. Probably more to delight at the look on Lara's face than anything else. He looked expectant, like his captive was supposed to say something; plead for her life maybe. She wouldn't give him that satisfaction. So down she went again.

The archaeologist decided she had to do something to distract herself from the situation. Groping around beneath her, she found a sharp-edged piece of tile. She managed to close a hand around it and slip it into the back of her slacks.

Just as Dupont tugged her up.

Head cocked, he asked simply, "And?"

She managed a smirk. "Your father smells of elderberries."

Dupont's eyes widened with rage. And she was submerged a fourth time.

It went on and on like a looping nightmare she couldn't wake from. Repeatedly she was held under, never knowing how long each immersion, or surface break, would be. As much as she didn't want to admit it, it was wearing her down; chipping away chunks of her resolve.

She was on the brink of begging for mercy when Dupont yanked her up again. He was wild eyed; snarling at her. "Who's that?"

Sopping, shivering and still largely disorientated, Lara just stared at him. She didn't understand. She was too busy rasping and coughing.

Then she heard it. Hammering on the suite door. And a voice.

"Lara! I know you're in there."

Sam. *Oh, God, no.*

Dupont shook the archaeologist, but his physical attempts to restore sense were nowhere near as effective as the sound of Sam's voice. No matter what, she couldn't draw Sam into this, whatever *this* was.

"Nobody," Lara muttered. "It's nobody. Just some rash of a reporter."

"Get rid of her."

With pleasure.

Lara inhaled deeply in an attempt to flush the panic from her voice. "Go away, Sam!"

"No!"

Of course it wouldn't be so easy. The Englishwoman winced. "Leave me alone!"

"We need to talk, Lara."

She didn't have to fake it. The emotion in her voice, the desperation, was completely real. "Please, Sam, I can't. Not now. Go away. *Please!*"

"I'm not leaving until we discuss this. I'm not letting you do this again."

At that Dupont swung his gaze from the entrance back to his captive. Eyes narrowed, he examined her face closely.

Lara ignored him. Forcing a scowl, she yelled, "I said bugger off!"

There was a moment of silence outside. Then Sam snapped, "If you want to have the conversation like this, Lara Croft, fine by me." She raised her voice, "I'm sure all the other guests would love to hear about your fondness for fucking me, and then running away like a complete and utter chicken shit!"

No. Dear God, no.

Dupont's face did a little two-step of a dance. First, surprise. Second, leering delight. A grin overwhelmed his face as he looked down at Lara. Then he glanced over his shoulder at his companions, and nodded towards the door.

"Let her in."

Chapter 16

"Well, well, Lara Croft a dyke." Dupont savoured the words, letting his tongue trace his grin obscenely for extra effect.

If it were any other day of the past five years, the archaeologist would have already drawn blood with a verbal or physical reprisal. Right then though she had only one priority. Protecting Sam.

Lara opened her mouth to yell a warning, but Dupont evidently expected it. He thrust a rolled-up facecloth between her lips; jamming it past her teeth and over her tongue so she had no easy way to expel it.

"Ssshhhhh. Don't spoil the surprise, mademoiselle."

No. I have to stop this. I have –

But what could she do? She was bound and gagged. There was no time to dig around for the piece of tile and saw through her restraints. She could barely keep her eyes open. The world kept lurching around her like she was on a ship's deck. She couldn't even breathe properly – in-between the crying and coughing, her sinuses had become completely blocked. And now her only reliable air intake was wadded with fluffy cotton fabric.

Tears blurred her vision again at the realisation of her helplessness.

Dupont grabbed hold of her collar and hauled her sodden form from the tub. He dragged her that way, her thighs and shins trailing on the floor, out of the bathroom and into the suite's living area.

It did at least afford her a glance of everyone else with the thug. The blonde brute in his red plaid, as she expected, and two other nondescript men wearing black – one with a shoulder holster for his pistol, and the other with a compact assault rifle, a FAMAS by the look of it, strung across his middle.

It was kind of flattering that four burly, weapon-bearing men had been dispatched to subdue her five foot six, unarmed and completely unaware self.

Dupont dropped Lara at the foot of her bed. Facedown on the carpet, her body shook itself free of her constantly churning mind, and she passed out.

The next moment she was propped upright on her knees, facing the door.

Dupont had stationed himself and his cronies to either side of the entrance. He indicated to the FAMAS carrier to open the door, and the man's arm landed heavily on the handle.

Then he slowly drew it open.

Sam was damp cheeked and scowling on the other side of the threshold.

"Well it's about fucking..."

It took her a heartbeat to process the scene before her. All rage fled her face along with all mottled colour. "Lara!"

She rushed into the room even as her companion desperately attempted to alert her to the danger. Lara cried out, trying to filter a comprehensible message through the muffling. "Mmrnnnn! Mmmrrnnnn nnnrrr!"

Sam was three steps into the suite when the door slammed behind her. She jumped. She had only managed a half turn when the giant seized her from behind. One hand over her mouth; the other pressing a revolver to her temple in case she decided to bite, elbow or stomp. Utterly confused and panicked, the filmmaker sought out her former friend's eyes.

Lara stared back. All she had to communicate with was her pitiful gaze.

I am so sorry, Sam. This is my fault. All over again.

She couldn't even reassure her companion. There was nothing she could do.

At that realisation, the oxygen starvation kicked in, and the world shifted suddenly to a twenty-degree angle. Lara felt her pupils roll backwards under leaden eyelids. Her torso flopped in the same direction...

"Now, now, there will be none of that, your ladyship."

She heard Dupont's voice before his face materialised out of the darkness, as if he had stepped into the aura of a lit candle.

He was holding her upright again by her hair; her ponytail wound around his fist like boxers' wraps.

"Stay with us," he insisted.

With his free hand he pinched either side of her jaw at the joint. It forced her mouth open enough for him to extract the cloth. As he pulled it free, he murmured, "You scream and we kill your girlfriend on the spot."

Lara slurred, "Let her go."

The Frenchman sneered, "You think you're in a position to make demands?"

"She –" *Forgive me, Sam.* "She's nobody."

Slowly the rest of the room began to reform out of the gloom. There was Sam, still restrained in the hulk's arms. She looked terrified. And hurt; stung by Lara's words.

Surely she had to know it was acting on her former friend and lover's part? Surely Miss Movie Maker had to realise this was for her own good? That Lara would do everything in her power to protect her, as always. No matter the price.

The archaeologist layered her voice with as much indifference as she could. She returned Dupont's sneer and arched in eyebrow in Sam's direction. "Whatever this is, she has nothing to do with it, or me. She's just some shag."

"Really? A few minutes ago she was 'only a reporter.' Now she is 'just some shag.' Your story keeps changing, Mademoiselle Croft."

Lara scowled at him. Anger was better than fear. It sharpened her senses; kept her both conscious and alert. Twinned with the rage was a dark fantasy of standing over Dupont as he clasped at his slit, gaping throat; blood bubbling between his fingers the whole time.

Her bluff didn't falter, which seemed to annoy her captor. He released Lara's hair. "Let's play a little game, shall we?"

He strolled over to Sam. Without any preamble he ripped her blouse open, exposing the American's bra and the soft, creamy skin of her midriff.

Sam was trying to be brave. God, she was trying so hard, but she still shrieked when Dupont touched her. Her cry was just smothered by the palm over her mouth.

Lara jolted at the sight. She couldn't react any more than that or she'd give away her feelings, and all would be lost. Still, she could feel her muscles tightening in preparation to fight. There were four of them, armed, and then there was her, without even the use of her arms. Meanwhile, the rest of her body was barely cooperative. But the futility of her situation didn't matter any more. She'd charge them; take their full combined force, accept every one of their bullets, if it meant Sam had a single chance to escape.

Dupont was trailing his fingertips over Sam's quivering stomach. He glanced over his shoulder at the Englishwoman. "Is it true what they say about Jap girls, Lara?"

It was more than fury that she felt. There was a lust for savage, razor-edged retaliation; the same one that got her through Yamatai in the end, when she could barely stand.

She spat, "You cunt!"

Dupont laughed.

She could picture him writhing around on the ground with his slit throat. But she could also see him lying there with his lungs punctured multiple times. A dozen wounds leaked a frothy pink mess – showing off the function of his alveoli to the world in something that might pass for a botched Biology class dissection.

This would become a reality very soon.

It just wasn't yet.

Dupont grabbed Sam by the forearm, yanked her out of the giant's arms and flung her down on the carpet on all fours, right in front of Lara.

Their eyes met.

The look on Sam's face – the horrible simultaneous scrunch of her mouth and brow as she tried to suppress her sobs – it made Lara want to beg for water torture again.

She only half-heard Dupont. "Larson, your revolver please."

The brute handed over his gun, a classic Smith & Weston. The Frenchman released the cylinder and assessed the chambers. Evidently happy, he snapped everything back into place. Then he strolled up to Sam.

He pressed the muzzle against the back of her head, but it was Lara he addressed.

"If she means nothing to you, then we have no reason to keep her alive. She's seen too much."

Eyes clenched shut, Sam was shuddering violently. Tears kept dripping down onto the carpet beneath her. Still, she kept silent.

There was no bull-rushing out of this situation. Lara couldn't risk it. Dupont had a very itchy trigger finger.

Roth's gravelly voice offered advice again. *Use your head, girl.*

Lara masked the tremor in her voice with a growl. "You really want a murder charge on your head, and all the police attention that brings? Just..." She was speaking to Sam more than the Frenchman. "...knock her out. Leave her here and take me with you."

Sam opened her eyes at that. She looked straight at her companion, and Lara tried to reassure her with a barely perceptible nod. She was going to get them out of this, she promised.

If Dupont wasn't watching their interactions so carefully she would have mouthed "*Trust me.*"

The Frenchman seemed nonplussed by her suggestion. With a flick of his wrist, he disengaged the revolver's cylinder. He patted the bullets out into his palm.

"Like I said, we're going to play a little game."

He reinserted one bullet, spun the cylinder, and then clicked it back into place. He pressed the gun to Sam's skull.

No.

Dupont smirked, "I count to three, and then we start to play."

There was no delay. He started immediately. "One..."

Lara swallowed hard on the plea that surged up her throat. Dupont had called her bluff, forcing her to go all in in this high stakes test of will. If she folded, it was over. If she held her nerve, she had a chance at saving Sam. The filmmaker would probably have a bad headache and noticeable bump the next day from the pistol whipping, but she would be extricated from the situation. The archaeologist let her mouth form a straight line, and clenched her teeth behind it. *No reaction no matter what...*

"Two..."

When Lara didn't say anything a second time, Sam began pleading. Not to Dupont; to her once best friend, her twice saviour. Eyes wide, she begged, "Lara! *Please?*"

Forgive me, Sam.

"Three..."

The filmmaker clenched her eyes shut, but Lara wouldn't let herself look away. She owed Sam that. If anything happened – *God, if anything happened...*

Dupont pulled the trigger.

... You will kill every single one of them. Every sack of shit. Whoever hired them. All of them. It doesn't matter who they are or where they are. You defeated a Storm Queen and her undead army for fuck sakes.

Click.

Still alive.

Sam started weeping out loud. Lara shuddered reflectively at the tension release.

The relief was only momentary.

Dupont arched an eyebrow, "You surprise me, Miss Croft."

Then he spun the cylinder again, and restarted the cycle of torment.

"One..."

Fists balled, Sam kept her head down. She was no longer looking at Lara, but why would she? There was no help there. The woman who had it in her power to save her was prepared to let her die. And on the same night she had already sliced apart Sam's heart for the second time with her sharp selfish desires.

A small part of Lara was glad that she couldn't read Sam's expression behind the veil of her hair. The sight of her partially exposed body hiccupping ceaselessly with terror and grief was bad enough. Combined with the sound of her whimpers...

"Two..."

How much longer was Dupont going to play this awful game? More importantly, how much luck did Lara really have left? Gambling with another person's life – with Sam's life – she just couldn't. It was her Achilles' heel.

"Thr–"

Her mettle snapped.

"No! Stop. Please. Don't hurt her."

Lara sighed, defeated.

"Please. Whatever you want, I – I'll do it. Just don't hurt her."

The archaeologist wanted Sam to recognise her remorse, but even with the Russian Roulette over, the American wouldn't raise her head.

She was broken. Lara had broken her.

Surprisingly, now that he had his victory, most of Dupont's malice seemed to evaporate. He still sported the smile of a smug son of a bitch though. He handed the revolver back to the giant and gazed down at the beaten archaeologist.

"Merci, Mademoiselle Croft. I was wondering how we were going to get you to cooperate, but in the end you gift-wrapped it for us."

Lara thought the monstrous thug – his name was Larson apparently – was going to pick Sam up off the ground. But it was Dupont who hauled the filmmaker upright.

Having limped across the room, Larson stood before Lara instead. He holstered his gun, frowning as he assessed her face the whole time. She knew what was coming, but she had no fight left. Shoulders sagging, she still managed to raise her head as his fist descended.

All that time spent clinging to consciousness by her fingertips; it was over. It was like being blasted off a mountain peak by a gale. Untethered from anything, there was nothing she could do. She spun around from the force of the blow.

A sensation of weightlessness, falling without any desire to flail, and then blissful nothing. No pain. Just complete detachment. And darkness.

Flashes out of the blackness. Vivid images like Neo-Classical oil paintings. Only the most dramatic moments and the most emotionally resonant, rich colours. She wanted to stand in front of them each for hours and absorb every detail. But it felt like she was being rushed through a gallery on a time-starved group tour.

The toes of her shoes scraping along a plush, geometrically-patterned carpet. Her feet flanked at the same time by two pairs of rugged leather combat boots.

A literal flash, and blood splattering as Mo took a rifle butt to the face.

A pasty complexioned hotel employee standing behind the reception counter, hands raised above his head, as their party passed through the deserted lobby.

Two iron-grey vans parked outside on the dark street, their rear loading doors wide open.

Lying on her side within the dark metal shell; knowing that outside, the vehicle was racing along the windy mountain roads. The swift, erratic motion made her feel sick all over again.

She didn't remember the impact of being tossed inside but she definitely felt cold. Her still-wet hair and clothes did not pair well with the unfurnished van interior and chilled air of Mount Parnassus in autumn. She was shivering badly, almost like she was having a seizure.

In one of her marginally longer moments of cognisance, she realised that Sam was there, with her arms trussed behind her back. She was sitting upright, against the side of the vehicle. Her shirt still gaped open.

Sam wouldn't look at Lara. She focused on her own knees instead. Not that it mattered. It wasn't exactly like they could formulate an escape plan. Lara was useless. And the two men in black were also present. They kept their weapons trained on the women.

How did you let this happen, Lara?

Her own voice answered her, even icier than she felt. *You know how. Or should that be "her"?*

That was the truth. The constant pain. The dangerous distraction. All the things she had done and lost and sacrificed. It had one source, whether she was running towards it or away from it. It made her weak and vulnerable to her enemies. *You should have continued playing Dupont's game.*

Lara managed to mutter just three words before she plunged once more into pitch black senselessness.

"Goddamn you, Sam."

Chapter 17

Things were finally coming together.

Now that she was fully registered, the phone calls from Mr Dorchester seemed to be decreasing in frequency and exasperated intensity. There really wasn't a point anymore. Roth certainly didn't disagree with her intentions – in fact, she was sure he'd signalled approval when he gave her one of his single armed hugs in response to the news. The family solicitor, though, had fought her every step of the way.

"This is all completely unnecessary, Lara. You can practically walk into your father's alma mater, or your mother's for that matter. You've been accepted at both, and they are far more prestigious than that college in London you've selected for some inexplicable reason." She heard papers rustling on the other side of the line. "As for this obstinate refusal of yours to accept the funds for your education, it's highly misguided. It's not the inheritance you insist on locking away so tightly. This money has been earmarked for your university studies since before you were born. If your parents were here today, it's exactly what they would be using, so there is no reason to constantly reject..."

Lara found it difficult to get a word in once the lawyer started. She'd eventually settled on the strategy of letting him talk himself out, and then, once the "conversation" was over, silently doing what she originally intended anyway.

It had been a good day. She'd even landed a part-time job, despite resistance from Mr Ansell, the proprietor at The Nine Bells. She could tell he had no problems with her single page resume when he scanned it in front of her. It was padded with hands-on jobs she'd taken during school holidays, as well as Summers with Roth. However, the more times the barman's eyes darted over her, the more a scowl set in.

Eventually he grumbled, "You're too soft, girl. Worse than that, you're posh."

Lara was taken aback at that comment. She'd never been on the receiving end of it before, and wasn't sure how to respond. It turned out she didn't have to, because Ansell offered his explanation immediately.

"Posh. I can hear it in your voice. You reek of a public school upbringing – I bet you even play polo. And some of my regulars, they won't like that. They'll eat you alive."

She wasn't sure where the retort came from, but Lara felt herself prickle. She straightened completely. "No, they won't. I can look after myself. And I need this job, Mr Ansell."

His response was silence, and they stood for a moment simply sussing each other out; on one side a grizzled, two-stone overweight pub owner, and on the other little more than a fresh-faced schoolgirl barely used to liberation from blazers and knee-high socks.

Still, the young woman didn't let her gaze waver, and Ansell finally muttered, "Let me see your hands."

She presented her palms to him. They were rough and calloused – climber's hands. Their battered state seemed to placate him. "Hmmp." He added gruffly, "You're on trial for a week, Croft." He nodded his head, "Come back tomorrow night for training, starting 5pm sharp."

His voice and demeanour hadn't softened at all, but Lara found herself gushing with gratitude nonetheless.

"Yes, sir. Thank you, Mr Ansell, sir."

"I'll be watching you closely, Croft. So don't bugger up or you're out."

"I won't disappoint you, Mr Ansell."

She was beaming as she entered the residence. Students, most of them First Years like her, were still moving in before the start of the new uni year. It was all noise and general chaos, but Lara was in good spirits. She already had her celebratory evening mapped out. Tea, biscuits and a head start on her Archaeology 110 textbook. She'd just resisted the urge to check out a fat tome on the Champa Kingdom from the library. God, what a delicious selection of books – it was one of the reasons she had selected the college. She couldn't wait to get stuck in.

She strolled down the corridor to her dorm room, balancing her paper cup of tea on the set works in her arms. She had already kind of succumbed to temptation, and flipped over the top book so she could read the lengthy blurb on its back cover.

It was probably why she didn't see the obstacle before her shin connected with it mid stride. Her momentum was enough to topple her. And with her hands full there was nothing to stop her fall.

"Shit!"

She crashed down on her front. Squashing the full cup of tea between her chest and textbook.

For a heartbeat she just lay there, sprawled in the hallway. Then she realised the racket had stopped. Everyone on the floor was staring at her. Some were even trotting forward to help her.

The first person at Lara's side was a Japanese girl. Except it turned out she was actually American when she opened her mouth. Not that Lara absorbed a single word her Good Samaritan said.

Dazed, the Englishwoman looked back at what had tripped her. A box of camera equipment. The American followed Lara's gaze and immediately winced. She kept apologising and was already trying to tug her companion upright.

Lara resisted the urge to yank her elbow away as she got to her feet. She wasn't hurt. Well, not physically. She was a bit winded but fortunately her tea had just been warm; not hot. So while her shirt was sopping, she wasn't scalded. Her cheeks, however, felt like she had just opened an oven door in her face. And her heart wouldn't stop hammering.

She found herself muttering robotically, "I'm fine, really, it's alright, I'm fine." Over and over she repeated it as she pawed at her top.

She turned to retrieve her books and discovered that the American girl already had them in her hands. She was using her sleeve to mop up the spilled tea. When she paused to study the one mottled, blistered cover, Lara seized the opportunity to snatch the reading materials back from her.

"Thank you," the English girl said all too brusquely, before she darted towards her room – head down to avoid the eyes still on her.

Lara, could you have made a bigger fool of yourself?

The following afternoon, she was reading on her bed in a bid to distract herself from the prospect of her first night at the Nine Bells. It wasn't really working. The confidence she expressed the previous day felt just like that – bluster with no basis. It was like a just-formed layer of ice over a Winter lake. As soon as her abilities were tested, the illusion of solidity would crack and she'd plunge down into the breath-stealing water while everyone watched.

She was rereading the same sentence for the fifth time when there was a knock on the door. Lara thought about ignoring it for a moment, but then decided she actually craved an interruption to haul her out of her head.

Standing on the threshold was the pretty Japanese-American girl from the day before. She clutched a cheesy souvenir Union Jack mug with a Terry's Chocolate Orange wedged inside. Immediately, she thrust the mug out at the bemused English student, and started rambling.

"Here, this is just a little something to apologise for yesterday. I felt really bad..."

Lara tentatively accepted the offering. "Thank you. It's lovely, but, uh, it's quite unnecessary."

"No, it is." The girl scowled at herself. "I wasn't thinking. I'm a complete ditz sometimes. I shouldn't have left my equipment out in the hallway like that."

Oh, well that explained the gift and apology.

The girl was still talking. "You looked really upset. And you could have been badly hurt. It was all my fault..."

The girl looked really upset herself.

Lara studied the mug. It was a nice gesture. And, come to think about it, the first time anyone had ever done something like that for her.

That made summoning a smile easier. She murmured, "It's very sweet of you."

That seemed to snap the girl out of her self-loathing. "It's Samantha by the way. Well, Sam."

"Lara."

"I'm four rooms that way." Sam nodded in the direction of the stairwell. Then she chuckled, "Although I think you already know that."

Lara returned her companion's grin. It was all she could think to do. She was terrible at sustaining small talk. She could feel skittishness settling into her bones as the silence between the two young women lengthened.

Her eyes dipped to the apology gift, and a brainwave struck. She plucked out the chocolate ball. "Would you like a slice?"

The American girl looked confused. "A slice?"

"I'll show you."

Lara led the way back into her dorm room, with Sam following close behind.

The English girl didn't even know her companion but she suspected Sam was insatiably curious; that an invitation into someone's personal space would translate for her into "Please feel free you stick your nose into everything."

So Lara wasn't surprised when she turned around and found Sam already assessing the contents of her desk, and the pin board above it.

She held up Lara's copy of Hiragana and Katakana for Beginners. "I thought you were an archaeology major?"

"I am. That's more of a personal project. I want to specialise in Asian archaeology and I think it'll be useful."

"You're learning Japanese... for *fun*? Jesus, I am never introducing you to my father. He'll disown me on the spot and adopt you instead."

That made Lara laugh. She tugged off the blue sticker that kept the chocolate's wrapping in shape, and began peeling back the orange covering. She showed Sam the sweet nestled inside. Still smiling, she explained, "This is the best part," and tapped the confectionary on her bed frame. Instantly, the ball cracked into a dozen individual segments.

Lara offered the chocolate to Sam, and then popped a piece in her own mouth.

When the archaeology student looked up again, she found that Sam had moved on to examine the poster on the pin board – a dramatic silhouetted shot of a woman climbing the Dolomites at dawn.

Sam sighed, "I really need a GoPro if I'm ever going to do anything like that."

"You *climb*?"

It was an undeniably rude reaction but she couldn't suppress the surprise in her voice. At first glance Sam was the dainty Asian girl stereotype; small and slender with not a pound of muscle on her.

Lara's companion seemed unfazed by the shock that greeted her admission. "Yeah. Not very well though. Nothing even close to this." She continued to stare at the image. Suddenly she spun around, "That's not you, is it?"

"In the photo?" Lara chuckled. "No. But my, uh, uncle, he's promised to take me after graduation."

Sam's eyes lit up. "Hey, the uni has a really awesome bouldering wall. You keen to try it out sometime?"

"Yeah. I – I'd like that."

Delicious warmth spread through Lara's chest and out to her limbs. She couldn't remember the last time she'd been invited to share in any experience. She'd spent so many of her school days as an amiable but shy outsider that she had grown accustomed to being alone. Sam's inclusion was a wonderful feeling.

"Awesome," Sam grinned. "Well, I better go. I'll see you around, Lara. And I'm sorry again."

Still dazed by the girl's self-assurance – as if she'd been physically punched by it –

Lara simply raised a hand as Sam vanished around the corner.

It was over a fortnight before Lara and Sam spoke properly again. They'd greet each other in the hallway and on campus, but between two part-time jobs and her full-time studies, Lara's life had shrunk down to books, beer serving and her pillow during a few snatched hours of sleep. There was no time for socialising.

Sam, meanwhile, was always part of a crowd whenever Lara saw her. That made approaching the American girl challenging. Sam would always try and wave Lara over, but a heartbeat after she entertained the prospect of joining them, the English girl pictured herself standing silent and stiff off to one side, forcing a smile while Sam and her friends interacted effortlessly.

It became easy for Lara to accept the notion that Sam was just one of those people whose charisma and fun-loving spirit meant she was never alone. Others were automatically drawn to her. Lara was just one of many. At the same time, her popularity meant that Sam's promises and invites were largely worthless. She was too busy mingling. So Lara wasn't expecting to hit the climbing wall with her res-mate any time soon. It was just one of those things. Life continued.

Life continued until the evening Lara entered the deserted communal kitchen and found Sam in tears. The American girl was sitting on the counter in front of the microwave, cradling her mobile phone.

Lara approached slowly but it was enough for Sam to snap her head up at the interruption. She immediately began sniffing back her tears, and faked a smile

"Are you alright?" It was a stupid question. Of course she wasn't, but Lara was awful at this sort of thing. "Is there someone I can call?"

"No."

But she had so many mates?

Sam leapt up. "I'm sorry. I'm being stupid."

She tried to slide past Lara but the English girl stopped her by placing a hand on her shoulder. "Can – Can I help, Sam?"

"Not really." She rolled her still-wet eyes. "I just feel like I'm making a horrible mistake."

That sounded serious, and Lara must have looked seriously concerned because Sam immediately clarified, "Well, more correctly I'm being made to feel like I'm making a horrible mistake."

That was more understandable for Lara. She smiled wryly, "I know that feeling. Would you like to talk about it?"

Sam shrugged. Then her eyes settled on the instant noodle cup in Lara's hand. "God, we've got like four more years of eating this shit. Come on, sweetie, I'm taking you out for dinner."

She seized Lara's hand, and started dragging the English girl towards the door.

Way to avoid the issue.

"Sam!"

An excuse was already forming on Lara's lips, when an internal voice berated her. *Lara, this isn't school any more. You aren't forced to spend time with anyone. If you don't make the effort you won't make any friends.*

So less than thirty minutes and four briskly strode blocks later she found herself sitting opposite Sam in a hokey little Indian restaurant. The place clearly had a following among the pence-counting academic community. The two girls were surrounded by students and lecturers in the sit-down section of the eatery. Meanwhile, the takeaways counter was even busier. The phone rang non-stop, and people were milling around, waiting for their orders to be presented in plastic shopping bags.

With a different garish colour on every wall, metallic-accented paintings of Hindi gods and a tiny TV mounted in the corner that was showing Subcontinent cricket, the family-run restaurant was about as unpretentious as you could get.

Lara immediately liked it.

She was also surprised to discover how much she liked red wine. She didn't drink much normally, but while they waited for their curries, Sam kept topping up her glass from a giant carafe placed on the table. As a result, the English girl was beginning to feel decidedly unlike herself. Relaxed. Witty. Smooth. She let a silly smile seize her lips; the alternative was her starting to giggle.

Not that she thought her companion would mind. Sam seemed a lot looser herself, but she was still avoiding the issue of what had upset her back at the residence. Lara would have

pushed the topic, except she realised that Sam was scrutinising her; head cocked to one side, and chin resting on her knuckles.

Her stare was so disconcertingly intense that Lara dropped her gaze to her napkin-draped lap.

Sam frowned, again more at herself than her companion. "Sorry, I'm just trying to get my head around you."

"Really?" Lara looked up. "How so?" To give herself something to do, she tore a piece off the naan bread that had already arrived.

Sam leaned in, conspiratorially. "I mean you're this complete nerd, right, but then you look like a freakin' supermodel. I've see guys literally drool when you walk past, and yet you're just so adorably unaware or awkward. What's up with that?"

It felt truly bizarre, like they were gossiping about another person. Lara had never been forced to examine herself like that. She blushed, "I don't know how to respond to that."

"Tell me what you do for fun?"

Lara made the mistake of going with the obvious, honest answer. "I read mostly."

"*Seriously?*"

"Uh..." She ransacked her mind for something more exciting to appease Miss Life and Soul of the Party. "I really like to travel. Climbing. Archery sometimes. Running. I honestly don't have much time –"

Two male students entered the restaurant.

Sam flashed them a smile, which was instantly returned. *God, she was good at this.*

The segue in conversation was obvious.

Sam leered across the table at Lara, "No boyfriend tied up in your wardrobe?"

"No."

That was another thing she hated being grilled about – she'd kissed a boy or two in her teens as a result of socials and forced interactions with her school's brother establishment. But dating had never been a priority for her. Or shagging. She assumed that her hormones had yet to kick in, or they were faulty, or she was an asexual.

She was embarrassed about it. So much so that she could no longer meet Sam's loaded gaze. She let her eyes settle on the front door instead, at the exact moment it opened and a stunning Indian girl entered.

Sam shifted in her seat to track Lara's line of sight.

That did it. The American girl wiggled her eyebrows. "What about a girlfriend then?"

Red cheeked, Lara gaped at her.

Fortunately the inquisition was momentarily halted by the arrival of their curries. Lara had chosen the butter chicken. Sam went with something impossible to pronounce. When the English girl asked what it was, her companion shrugged, "Psshhh, I have no idea. Sounded exotic and exciting though."

Halfway through their meal, Sam paused to refill the wine glasses. She used the opportunity to restart the conversation.

"I'm curious..."

No shit.

"...If you're such a brain, Lara, why aren't you at Oxford or Cambridge or something? Why here?"

Lara swallowed, and dabbed her mouth before answering. "I didn't want to be accused of trading on my family name. My father was prominent in his field. I don't think the shadow of his reputation will fall on me here. Or, I hope it won't."

Sam frowned. "Was? Did he die?"

Dead always sounded less blockbuster-dramatic than disappeared. The last thing Lara wanted was for Sam to think she was any more of an oddity, and probe deeper. So she sighed, "Yes, when I was eleven. In a plane crash; both he and my mother."

"God, when I was eleven I used to wish my parents would vanish."

The memories struck her like a boxing combo. One: Her arms wrapped tight around her mother's waist, her face pressed into the reassuring scent and warmth of Amelia Croft. Two: The first time she returned to Croft Manor after her parents' disappearance, and how the overwhelming desolation drove her, panicked and desperate, to her mother's walk-in closet. Hours later, Winston found her there, asleep in a nest of clothing she'd tugged off shelves and hangers. Even unconscious she wouldn't release her mother's soft fleecy nightgown. Of Amelia's entire wardrobe, it smelled like her most of all.

So Lara couldn't stop herself. Her mouth dropped open. "That's horrible."

"Yeah, well I'm not a particularly nice person, so." Sam's eyes dropped to her plate.

The relaxed intimacy between the girls had disappeared. Somehow they had detoured into Emo-ville.

Eventually Lara murmured, "Are your parents the reason you were crying earlier."

"In part, yeah."

Sam's head dipped, before popping up barely five seconds later. The slumped shoulders had been replaced with straight tempered steel. She was scowling. "Do I look like an accountant to you, Lara? Or a lawyer? I mean, sure I'd be a fabulous lawyer, but *seriously*?! My parents are pissed that's not what I've signed up for. My academic advisor won't even back me up."

"What are you studying?"

"Filmmaking. I really want to make documentaries."

"I think you'd be great at that."

Sam brushed off the compliment with a sigh. "You don't even know me, Lara."

"No, not yet. But I can see how perceptive you are, the way you get people to open up and tell their stories so effortlessly." Her cheeks coloured at that admission, so she quickly added another truth. "And I can see how passionate you are about it; the way your eyes light up and you get so animated as soon as you start talking about it."

For a second she thought Sam was going to leap across the table and hug her, her smile was so buoyant. "That's the first nice thing anyone has said to me about it."

Time to invert the spotlight before her smouldering cheeks burst into flame. Lara took a sip of wine to douse her bashfulness. Or maybe hurdle it.

"What are you doing over here, Sam?"

"My parents didn't want me getting tangled up in..." She shifted to a heavy Japanese accent, "*American college debauchery*." Then she added with a grin, "So they sent me to the UK of all places. Ha! Not their smartest decision."

"Your parents are Japanese?"

"My dad is. My mom's Portuguese."

"That's unusual."

Sam's smile dimmed. "No, that's a business arrangement." She tucked back into her bright red curry.

"Oh."

Lara wondered how much she had come to romanticise her own parents' relationship in their absence. But despite all the stories of divorce, dour-faced unhappiness and, sometimes, flat out cruelty she'd heard from the girls at her school, she still could only ever picture her parents as adoring of one other as they were of her.

Amelia Croft standing with her arm draped over her husband's shoulder as he sat prodding maps and book passages at his desk.

That time they fox-trotted around a camp fire in Mongolia, while Lara lay half-watching-half-dozing in her sleeping bag.

Looking back on those moments, the young Englishwoman couldn't imagine ever having something like that. She was completely disconnected from that sort of thing. She didn't really have anyone – even Roth was tighter with Reyes than her.

So the question slipped out without her even realising it.

"Why this tonight, Sam? Why me?"

The American girl in cheerful socialite mode was irresistible. When she expressed her secret vulnerable side though – when she was unguarded and completely emotionally honest – Lara felt a stronger pull to her. An affinity. For a second they didn't seem so different.

Sam murmured, "Moving here has been hard. I don't have many friends. I guess you don't either?"

"No."

"Looking at you, that blows my mind."

Lara flushed. Smiling shyly, she looked away. "Sam, stop saying that. I'm nothing special."

The American student waved her hand dismissively. "Whatever. There's something about you. I want to solve the mystery of Miss Lara..." She let the statement dangle incomplete.

Lara helped her out. "...Croft."

"Good. That'll make online stalking you easier."

Lara's face fell.

"I'm only kidding, sweetie. Well, a little bit. Are you finished?" The way she jumped topics, it was disorientating sometimes.

Lara looked down at her plate. Yeah, she had eaten enough. She nodded.

Sam beamed in return, "Great."

She signalled for the bill, which the English girl noted was paid for with a platinum card.

It wasn't until she stood to leave that Lara realised how drunk she was. She felt completely disconnected from her body. She wanted to wave her hands in front of her face, but that would be a giveaway as to how uncharacteristically smashed she was.

Standing outside on the pavement though, she let a stupid grin spread over her face. Everything, inexplicably, just seemed so damn funny – from the realisation that she had put her jacket on inside out, to the bouncy strut of the Yorkshire Terrier being walked across the street.

Sam was watching Lara, looking so much more collected than the archaeology student. She seized her companion's hand. "Come on. We're gonna have some fun; unleash that closeted party girl I know is dying for a night on London Town."

Lara woke facedown on her bed the next day. She was lying on top of the covers, still wearing her jacket (right way on, at least), but stripped down to just panties and socks below the waist. Her jeans and sneakers were piled in the middle of the floor like some Twenty First Century cairn.

Her phone lay next to her hand on the mattress. Just lifting her head to locate it triggered a deep, resonant throbbing in her skull.

The pain was forgotten though as soon as her eyes focused on the screen. First there was the time – already 11:43. Lara had missed two lectures. Then there were the seven friend requests, as well as text messages from numbers she didn't know.

Hey, Lara, great meeting you last night. Want to grab a coffee sometime?

Lt me knw whn ur up 4 da peircing.

UR rite FIT, luv! :)

What had happened last night?

Her body immediately burped tequila in response.

The second clue took the form of her brand new phone background.

Galvanised by the image, she set to work as if she already were a qualified archaeologist – pawing, blowing and brushing away dirt. More precisely, but just as gingerly, she opened her Photos folder.

Aghast, hand over her mouth, she swiped through the dozen pics.

Christ, she didn't remember any of this.

Notable images included her dancing on a nightclub's speaker with Sam; the two of them surrounded by what looked like half a very drunk rugby team; and a photo of her giving the thumbs up while Sam snogged some guy behind her.

Then there was the new phone wallpaper: a selfie of Lara and Sam, both horribly wasted. The American girl was at least pouting in the direction of the camera. Lara's face was pressed into the crook of her companion's neck. Her eyes were closed but she sported a big grin.

Very much like her grin at that exact moment.

Chapter 18

She was broken. Only one sense at a time was functional; seemed capable of clawing her mentally out of the tar-like blackness. None got far before she was sucked back down into unconsciousness.

The flashes of feeling were few and far between.

A sharp, brakes-squealing stop that threw her back into the cold rear wall of the van.

A campsite in soft dawn light, entirely populated by armed men, all in black.

The sensation of once again being drag-carried between marching captors.

Voices somewhere ahead in the darkness. A woman's, with the drawling accent of the southern United States, snapped, "What did you idiots do to her?"

Pierre Dupont responded sulkily to the telling off. "She resisted..."

"I don't care. You think I wanted her as an ornament? A bed warmer? Jesus Christ, just look at her! I need her for her brains; in this state I don't even think she knows her own name."

Then things became extra muddled in the pitch black.

There was a flurry of motion around her. Hands pawing at her. The cord at her wrists was untied and she whimpered at the bitter-sweet sensation of release. Full circulation returned to her hands, and it felt like she had just caught a nail-studded rugby ball. It didn't hurt as much as her shoulders though. Hours of being trussed up meant, even liberated, her shoulders cramped painfully. They resisted a more relaxed position, and her arms remained stuck in an awkward pose. Trying to bring them around to her sides was agony, and she whimpered in her captors' arms.

The liberation from bondage didn't last long. Fists clamped around her forearms and she felt herself being forced into a metal chair. Then the cords were back, binding her at the wrists and ankles to her seat. She bet there were still rifles pointed at her. They weren't taking any chances.

While she was being retied, hands set to work unbuttoning her shirt.

Adrenaline surged despite her impotence. Locked in her body, she knew she was in no position to fight them off if they wanted their way with her. She was defenceless.

Her chest had started heaving so much that at first she didn't notice the unbuttoning had stopped. She only realised it when she felt a disc of stainless steel against her breast bone; so cold it triggered goose bumps.

A second later, the icy metal pressed against her back, and she began to calm a little. Even in the darkness, even in her helplessness, she could recognise the gentle considered motions of a physical examination. Of course, such tender treatment could be the threshold to a new round of torment...

Which seemed confirmed when she felt a sharp pain in her right arm, just inside the elbow. She may have cried out; she definitely winced. And she definitely lost time again.

She came round to the sensation of palms cupping her jaw. They tilted her head from side to side. Delicate fingers probed around the back of her skull, testing her neck and the glands beneath her ears. After Dupont's beating, it felt so good to be caressed like that.

A second woman's voice, also American, but more urban non-descript, murmured, "Miss Croft, Lara, can you hear me?"

"Hngh."

"I need you to follow the light, alright? Please try."

Fingertips forced Lara's right eye open, and then her left. A penlight shined; so bright that her eyes immediately teared up. The combined illumination and salt water created a haze that was impossible to see through. A long-haired figure stood silhouetted in the mist; that was all Lara was capable of making out as the light danced from side to side.

Once the assessment was complete, soothing darkness returned.

Exhausted, Lara let her head loll forward. All she wanted to do was curl up and sleep.

The soft female voice muttered, "She's badly concussed, and she has a fever."

The other woman growled, "Oh, for fuck sakes."

Several seconds of silence passed before the latter continued. "Wake her. I want to speak to her."

"Uh, I advise against that. She needs rest."

"Thank you for your recommendation, doctor, but my time is limited. Stim her."

"But – "

"I'll chance the consequences. Do it."

Suddenly Lara's heart was pounding again; in her chest and even echoing in her skull. She jolted upright, eyes wide. Her natural instinct was to jerk against her restraints but she was bound tight. With a surge of clarity that she hadn't experienced since she ascended to the museum podium, she absorbed her surroundings.

Or tried to.

Everything was too bright. The colours were too vivid. The world was actually humming. She wanted to clamp her hands over her ears and eyes but without the use of her arms, the most she could do was swing her head from side to side. That was a mistake. It triggered a headache unlike any she'd ever suffered before.

The groan that parted her lips wasn't dissimilar to the sound she made over the toilet after an evening of binge drinking. *Dear God, please make it stop.* That was pretty much the same plea she made after a heavy night out as well.

But she didn't really want God. Roth was the authoritative voice of wisdom she craved. She tried to imagine his advice.

She concentrated hard on calming her breathing, and focusing on one single thing at a time.

She was sitting before a simple fold-out table, stainless steel and cleared of all clutter except for a pile of folders. She was inside a tent. The beige walls around her seemed to be canvas or tarp. They rippled ever so slightly, although it could have been her malfunctioning eyes.

Her restraints were synthetic, military-grade cord like before. A medical needle was sunk into her right arm, and she followed the tube up to a drip stand. Her gaze didn't reach the saline bag uninterrupted though. Still clutching the tube was a longhaired woman in a lab coat. Red haired, worn enough to suggest she was in her early forties, she looked at Lara with an expression of pity. She held a hypodermic needle in her free hand.

The woman could have been nervous as well. Armed men were stationed at two metre intervals around the space. It was hard to work out their combat readiness, or if any of them were Dupont. The table existed as a tiny island of light. Away from it, the room fell swiftly into gloom.

The set-up seemed designed to draw Lara's gaze to the woman sitting across from her. She was a perfectly poised blonde, maybe in her late thirties. Her hair was cut in a bob and she wore a tailored suit. Lara was clueless when it came to fashion – she had always had Sam to recognise and blurt out the names of designer wear on sight – but the woman's suit was what the archaeologist associated with Armani.

Once the blonde must have been beautiful... or perhaps "handsome" was a better choice of descriptor? The woman's features were finely sculpted, but none of them looked petite or anything even close to pretty.

Not helping matters was the fact that the strength and solidity of her bone structure had taken on an eerily accented quality. The woman was gaunt, horribly so. The light in the room darkened the shadows in every hollow of her face. It also made her yellowed skin look even more inhuman and inanimate.

Her blue eyes though, remained alert. Her gaze tracked Lara's, and she mimicked the archaeologist's look of surprise when the young woman realised they were both attached to a drip. Lara hadn't realised it before, but the woman's right sleeve was pushed up past her elbow to accommodate the needle piercing her flesh.

The blonde's lips peeled back to reveal a skeleton's grin short on gum. She drawled in the same Southern accent Lara had heard before.

"Two peas in a pod."

Chapter 19

The blonde continued to grin at her. "I do apologise for all this, Lara. Really. The way you were treated was quite unacceptable. But, well, I'm rather pressed for time."

If the honey she drizzled over her words was supposed to placate Lara, it ended up being more like toffee poured directly into a tooth cavity. Lara glowered at the woman in silence.

The archaeologist's demeanour didn't seem to surprise the blonde though. Her smile and supreme politeness didn't waver.

"Please understand, I never wanted it to come to this, but circumstances forced me to escalate my plans. You are an exceptionally difficult woman to pin down, Miss Croft." Her smile turned a shade darker. "Looking at you, well, that seems to be literally true as well."

Lara was sick of the games – the niceties masking the woman's complete power over Lara and Sam as her prisoners. So the archaeologist broke her silence with a muttered, "Who are you?"

"Ah, yes, you probably wouldn't recognise my face." The blonde pulled her mouth wryly, "Most people wouldn't these days, to be honest." She straightened in her seat; a further little show of power on her metal throne. "Perhaps my name means more to you? Jacqueline Natla. CEO of Natla Technologies."

Lara stared at her blankly. The name did fire off some synapses in her brain but it was murky in her memory right then – just smoke, blood and destruction; pain and Sam's pleading eyes. Lara's head hurt too much for her to ransack its contents. But she was angry, and feeling recklessly keen for a fight.

So she lifted her head and summoned the highborn ancestry in her veins, channelling it entirely into her accent. "I'm afraid I haven't had much time to monitor the markets in between my polo games and pheasant shooting. Should I give my financial advisor a call?"

Again, the woman seemed unruffled. She reached for one of the folders on the table, opened it and began flipping over the pages.

"You've turned down enough job offers from me over the past five years. When you weren't ignoring my emails and calls, that is."

Lara's arced her gaze dramatically across the tent, pausing at each rifle-packing man before letting her eyes finally settle on her wrist restraints. She smirked, "So this is all in aid of an apology? I say sorry and I'm free to go?"

Natla ignored her prisoner's sarcasm. "I wanted to finally meet you. Make my proposal face to face; see if that makes a difference."

Unlikely.

The woman said, "I must say, you took the bait quite wonderfully. After years of skittishness, a rare little bird hopping straight into the trapper's hand when he simply offered its favourite seeds. I guess all those donations I made in your parents' name were worth it in the end."

Natla's admission pierced straight through Lara's bravado. Her face must have showed it, because the woman's grotesque smile widened.

"A rare little bird. Exquisite and fiery. But not very bright." She added with a scowl, "Then again, it took me far too long to identify your motivational triggers. I would have lured you here long ago if I'd known what really matters to you. But you made it so difficult; always flitting away, always running... always sending out ambiguous signals."

Dupont appeared from the darkness to stand beside Natla. Held in front of him like a tower shield was Sam. Her wrists were bound and she was gagged with duct tape. She'd been crying; very recently if her swollen eyes and blotched cheeks were accurate indicators.

Still, there was a spark of the old rebellious spirit Lara loved. Sam resisted every step. Dupont had to shove the filmmaker forward, and she struck out with her splayed elbows, hoping to catch him. It earned her a hard shake as a warning.

Right then, though, her gaze met Lara's and the fire was instantly doused. All that was left was soggy, steaming disappointment, and her eyes sunk to her feet.

Lara had to swallow hard on her own tears. Normally she was a master at masking her emotions, but her feelings kept surging to the surface. She wasn't sure if it was her concussion, or the drug she'd been given, or even just her proximity to Sam. The sight of her former best friend was like tripping onto a bed of nails; a harsh needling reminder that Sam was once again in danger because she trusted Lara unquestioningly.

Whatever the reason, Natla seemed delighted about the effect her reveal had on her captive. She smiled, "Evidently your obsession with the Far East runs far deeper than anyone thought. I certainly never suspected."

Ivory teeth peeked from between the curve of her lips, and the effect was unsettling. "I need to thank you for making everything so crystal clear, Lara. Finally. It makes everything a lot easier."

Lara stumbled over her words, "She – She's unimportant."

Natla waved away the lie with a frown. "I know *exactly* who she is. I've even done business with her father a couple of times. Samantha Nishimura."

Sam's head shot up at the mention of her name, but Lara couldn't let herself be distracted by concern for her companion. It was already so hard to concentrate.

Natla plucked up another folder and splayed its contents out on the table. Lara looked down on an array of documents, newspaper clippings, laser jet printouts and photos. She recognised several images from her friends-only Facebook page, depicting her ancient college era exploits with Sam. There even was their graduation pic, so creased, dirty and water damaged that it must have been her old locker original from the *Endurance*, brought all the way back from Yamatai.

Sam's name and face appeared on dozens of the annotated pages. But as Lara was trying to make sense of them, they started swimming together. The world tilted dizzily, and the Englishwoman clenched her eyes shut. She clutched at the chair arms to steady herself, and was vaguely aware of the doctor bending over to examine her face.

Natla's voice pierced through muddle in her head. "I always thought it was odd that you two went from glued at the hip to completely cut off from one another." She added, "Half a decade of fighting, fucking and tomb raiding; you hid her feelings for her very well. I imagine it must have been very difficult?"

Lara swallowed hard on a sudden upwell of nausea. Eventually she managed to murmur, "Let her go."

Natla shook her head, almost apologetically. "I can't do that now. You dragged Samantha into this. However, I do have a proposal for you."

"What?"

"Work for me, do what I want and afterwards we'll set her free, untouched. There will even be a generous financial reward for your obedience."

Natla scooped up the papers and slipped them back into Sam's folder. In their place she positioned a single document. Lara stared at the figure that followed three lines of legal ramble – it was enough to pay the rent on her London flat for a decade. Even accounting for inflation.

She hadn't meant to react, but evidently her poker face came bundled with an obvious tell.

Natla waved her hand, "Everybody out. Except you." She pointed at the doctor. "Miss Croft and I have business to discuss."

Immediately the armed men started filing out. Dupont released Sam into the custody of two mercenaries, but he continued to stand his ground. Scowling, he bent over to speak to his seated employer. "Miz Natla, do you think this is wise?"

"Just look at her, Pierre."

They both did.

As physically awful as Lara felt – aching all over, trembly and nauseous – she could now also add "objectified piece of meat" to the list of ailments.

Her shirt still yawned open, and both Dupont and Natla were appreciating the impressive cleavage that her bra created.

She couldn't help it. She hunched her shoulders in response to their leers, the same way she had since she was fourteen and first sprouted the damn attention-grabbing things on her chest. *Thanks, Mum.*

Her red-cheeked reaction made Natla chuckle. She didn't share Lara's shame though. The woman continued to devour every inch of the archaeologist's exposed skin. She looked disappointed when her heavy-lidded eyes reached the still-buttoned fabric just above Lara's navel.

Dupont grunted, and left, pistol in hand.

As soon as he was gone, Natla physically relaxed. She continued to look self-satisfied but Lara recognised exhaustion in her expression and posture. The long-haired doctor scuttled around the table to administer something into her employer's drip.

Natla acted like the woman wasn't even there. She grinned at her captive, "Lara, you continually surprise me. If I'd known sooner about you and Samantha; about your preferences, I would have courted you much more aggressively. The thought of looking down and seeing that ponytail bobbing between my legs, it makes me shudder. Maybe once we've concluded our business deal?"

"Go fuck yourself."

Natla laughed, "You're definitely more ASBO than aristocrat. But maybe I'll follow your recommendation after this meeting."

"Just tell me what you want me to do."

For the first time, Natla's smile flatlined. "I'm dying, Lara."

"My condolences."

"I don't have much time left. Weeks probably; a month or two at most." She nodded in the direction of the doctor, who was taking her pulse. "Good Doctor Stone here is keeping me together by pumping me full of meds past my eyeballs, but they won't work forever, and frankly I'm out of options."

"When I was diagnosed with this cancer, I laid out my plans, A through Z. I tried everything. Accepted treatments. Experimental. Legal. Illegal. Drugs. Surgery. God, even Reiki. Some helped for a while, others just controlled the symptoms, but ultimately the bastard little tumour grew and multiplied."

Lara rolled her eyes. "So you want me to find you the Philosopher's Stone? Because if you're after the Elixir of Life, I'm afraid – "

"Something like the Philosopher's Stone, yes."

Lara couldn't help it. Her heartbeat danced. The prospect of uncovering something lost or legendary always excited her. It simultaneously thrilled and satisfied her like nothing else. She wouldn't admit it to Natla, but deep down her curiosity uncoiled.

The blonde woman took Lara's silence as an invitation to continue. She stated simply, "I'm looking for the Aegis of Athena."

Lara blinked, "You couldn't turn to homeopathy for your miracle cure like everyone else?" Then she started laughing. It was an unwise reaction – Natla's smile tightened, but didn't extend up to her unblinking eyes. They practically sparked electricity her glare was so intense.

"Ah, that famous snark of yours," she muttered through clenched teeth.

It was as much a warning as a rattlesnake's quivering tail, or a black mamba rearing up, but Lara couldn't stop snickering. Mostly it was a vent for her despair; her overwhelming sense

of hopelessness. How could she hope to extricate herself and Sam from this nightmare if she'd been assigned an impossible task? An order to track the Easter Bunny.

Natla hissed, "It's real, Lara."

Between gasps and giggles, the Englishwoman managed to force out her response. "You're talking about gods!"

"Powerful beings that positioned themselves as deities in the minds of the idiot, unthinking masses. I thought you of all people – "

"There are no gods. There is no God." As much as it throbbed, Lara shook her head. "I've seen things I can't explain, otherworldly forces at work that defy all accepted laws and understanding of our reality, but you're talking about next level mysticism."

"You'd be surprised, girl. Genesis 6, verse 4: 'In those days, and even later, there were giants on the earth who were descendants of human women and supernatural beings. They were the great heroes and famous men of long ago.'"

Jesus, a Bible Belt religious nut.

Lara had flushed all manic laughter from her system. In the aftermath, she just felt tired and weak.

"Please, Natla, I can't help you. I'm sorry."

"It's real, Lara."

The businesswoman drew three page-size photos from another folder. She laid them out in front of Lara like tarot cards. Each was of an ancient scroll, marked in margin-to-margin Greek letters. The condition of the parchment was phenomenal. Lara gaped at them, and then at Natla.

The woman's smug smile was back. "Construction projects uncover the most amazing finds. Just like these scrolls. They tell a story previously unheard of. For a time, very long ago, before the city had even really risen in power, the Aegis could be found in Athens, as a powerful sign of its patron goddess's protection, and as a warning to potential invaders. One day a band of women assaulted the sanctuary where the sacred artefact was kept, and fled with it. Their victory was a surprise but these women were desperate. Slaves, prostitutes, shamed outcasts and the abused from all classes, they had been drawn together in a cult that celebrated the power of the Feminine. They were Amazons for want of a better word.

"The women fled into the wild lands. Their intention was to regroup, grow their numbers and then return to their homeland, using the Aegis against the Civilised World of Men. All opposition would flee or turn to stone when confronted with Medusa's severed head, attached to the Aegis thanks to Perseus's votive offering. And should any Amazon fall in the conflict, the Aegis would be used to heal them completely. In theory, they would be unstoppable.

"Except the women were split between devotees of Artemis and Athena. The majority were followers of Artemis; they craved bloody, merciless revenge, and return to a life of hunting and foraging, free of city walls and men's rules.

"The followers of Athena though were more contemplative, and were plagued by guilt and worry. They had gravely insulted the goddess with their actions, and they didn't want to compound their crimes by leading an attack on any settlements that enjoyed Athena's patronage. So they stole the Aegis, with the intention of offering it back to the goddess.

"They didn't get far though. The devotees of Artemis caught up with them. Sister fought sister, and in the end only a handful of Artemis's followers were left standing knee-deep in a field of bodies and blood. But it turns out these survivors were as rash as their goddess, to their detriment. Recognising their fate, Athena's devotees managed to hide the Aegis before the battle. Artemis's Amazons had left no one alive to interrogate. And so the Aegis was lost."

Lara sighed, "That's a very compelling bedtime story, but it means nothing."

"It's here in our world, I know it!" Natla slammed her fist on the table.

Immediately, she withdrew her hand, and adjusted her mask. But she had let it slip and Lara had seen rabid fear and desperation behind the self-possessed front she presented. This 21st Century Empress had conquered the world of business single-handedly, but now her palace was collapsing beneath her. Her reaction to it – clawing at everything as she slipped into the chasm – was genuinely sad, and terrifying.

Lara chanced a glance at the doctor standing to Natla's side. She seemed to be just as shaken by her employer's outburst. Lara suspected that she had seen behind the mask more frequently than anyone else, and there was atrocity there.

Lara frowned. She was suddenly extra cautious about crossing the fracturing palace floor. She addressed Natla, "You think the Aegis is in Delphi?"

"No, but the Oracle is." Unruffled again, she added, "To find an ancient artefact I thought it best to ask an ancient seer. That's what I'm doing here."

A madwoman; I'm at the mercy of a madwoman.

Natla stood. She was much taller than the archaeologist, and with her slow, disjointed movements, and skeletal frame, she reminded Lara of a mantis. The eerie similarities triggered a shiver under Lara's clothes, as if insects were crawling over her. She resisted the urge to grimace as Natla rounded the table and loomed over her.

The blonde woman's gaze had turned darker, icier.

"I see the way you look at me, Lara, but let me make something clear. There's a big difference between that lunatic Mathias and myself. Mathias needed Samantha for his ritual. He had to keep his precious Chosen One pure and untouched so that she remained a worthy vassal for the Sun Queen. Me, I have no such concerns. You and your amazing instincts are my only priority."

She reached out and stroked Lara's cheek. The touch stung; a bruise must have already started forming as a result of Dupont's beating back at the hotel.

Natla cocked her head. She made sure Lara's brown eyes were locked with her blue ones before continuing. She spoke almost tenderly, "So you will do exactly what I say or there will be consequences for your beloved."

Natla wound Lara's ponytail around her hand. Then she yanked back the Englishwoman's head. It brought Lara's ear to Natla's lips, and she could feel the grin spread against her skin.

"Disobey me, question me even, and my men will enjoy setting her straight, so to speak. Perhaps you'd like to watch? Tell her to *look at you* while they're taking turns? Would you get off on that?"

Lara exploded. "You fucking bitch!" She thrashed at her restraints, snarling and yelling. If Natla didn't have a fistful of her hair, she would have head-butted the billionaire.

Natla seemed amused by the eruption. She took a step back and let Lara's rage burn out. It didn't take long. Fire lanced the Englishwoman through the forehead. She went blind, and words jumbled in her mouth, "You don't fucking touch – You, you – Fuh – Muh – I will – Monster!"

It was impossible to maintain fury when you completely lost coherence.

Lara sensed the doctor rush to her side. She felt the woman's cool hands scuttle over her wrist and forehead. Rage receded at her touch; enough so that Lara heard Natla murmur, "We're both monsters, Lara."

Back in control of her tongue, the archaeologist spat, "I – I'm *nothing* like you."

"Yes, you are. You're a monster, Lara, the worst kind. The one that no one suspects thanks to your pretty, girlish exterior. But when you want something you do *whatever* it takes to get it."

Natla continued to smile down at her, arms crossed. "Be honest. If you were untied right now, and you had access to a gun, you would kill me, every man in this camp; even the good doctor here who has been nothing but kind to you. All these people just doing their jobs; men and women with families. You wouldn't hesitate, even if they begged. You would be brutal and cold and cruel."

Lara wanted to fling back a denial, but it was true. For a short while after Yamatai, every day she would tell herself that what she did on the island had been a necessity. It was a case of kill first or be killed. But the mantra became threadbare very quickly. She could see herself holding an assault rifle at point blank range to an injured man's chest, and pulling the trigger. The burst practically tore him apart. Over and over she did it, letting her rage and a perverse sense of justification push her forward through the blood-tainted mist. The past five years, she had just continued the pattern. *Oh, God.*

She wanted to curl up and put her head in her hands, but Natla had taken that option from her. Instead, she simply looked up at her captor.

Natla was playing sincere, sympathetic therapist. "That may scare some people, Lara, but I understand. We're very alike in that aspect. We've made sacrifices, done horrible things in pursuit of our goals. But that kind of single-mindedness is admirable."

"No."

"Imagine what we can accomplish with our goals aligned." Natla clasped Lara's thigh, and let her thumb slide up the inseam. The archaeologist no longer had the energy to be disgusted. She closed her eyes and just listened instead.

"I've watched you grow, Lara. Evolve. That sweet, soft thing that toddled off to Yamatai, you may like to pretend that's still you but that girl is long dead. I'd bet that Samantha Nishimura is the very last thing you have left from that old life? That's maybe why she's so important to you?"

"She's the last link to what you were before you slithered out of that skin; your last iteration. Everything that you were, your innocence, your gentleness – it's invested now in her. She's your safety deposit box. The only person in the whole world who knew and loved what you were before. Because you know you're impossible to love now. Admire certainly. But nothing else."

Lara felt Natla's other hand run through her hair. "Find me what I want and she gets to go home unharmed. Do you understand?"

The Englishwoman opened her eyes. Natla was giving her best enigmatic Renaissance Era smile, with a morbid twist. "You start work in a few hours. Get some rest."

Lara was aware of the doctor injecting something into her drip tube. Almost immediately her limbs turned to lead. The last thing she remembered was Natla tilting her head and pressing her mouth against her prisoner's limp parted lips. Lara tasted death.

Chapter 20

The sound of rain whispering on leaves. A strong scent of pine. Cool, fresh air against her cheek, colder than the linen sandwiching her body. Crisp, fine cotton slipping over her skin.

Lara opened her eyes. She was lying on her side, right on the edge of a bed. She was inside a room that was all plaster and pine finishings. No excess furniture. Nothing more than was necessary. Two metres away from her was an open window. Through it she could see a wrap-around veranda, also wood. The light beyond was soft and grey, a pleasure after the migraine-triggering harshness of Natla's meeting tent. This place though, was bliss – a perfect retreat from everyone and everything her life had become. It reminded her of the old gamekeeper's cottage on her parents' estate. It was all so simple and clean and...

A slender arm snaked around her waist from behind. The sheets rustled and a woman's bare breasts pressed against her – she realised for the first time – equally naked back.

Lara's pulse accelerated.

No, please, no. Not her.

"Mmmm, morning, babe."

It was a familiar voice, and it was followed by a familiar set of lips pressing against her shoulder.

It didn't relax Lara though. She turned her head sharply.

Sam had propped herself up on one elbow. Still half-asleep, she was looking down at her companion. Lara knew that groggy yet contented expression; she remembered all the mornings she wanted to smooth out that same wild bed hair with her fingers but was forbidden by the platonic rules of their friendship.

This was far from platonic though. Sam snuggled closer, parting Lara's thighs with her knee. Their legs interwoven, Sam began to trail the front of her toes up and down Lara's shin. Her bright, perfectly painted nails provoked the intended reaction; goose bumps skittered across Lara's skin. This kind of playful physical intimacy, she'd only ever enjoyed once before in her entire life. And she'd thrown that away.

The filmmaker grinned, "God, you're always up so ridiculously early."

Sam's palm left Lara's stomach. Almost instantly, her fingers found her lover's left hand, limp on the mattress. Like a slowly spreading pool of batter, Sam's palm flattened over the back of Lara's hand. Her digits slipped between the archaeologist's, entwining them. For the first time Lara realised they both wore a thin silver band. Matching rings.

She was still digesting the information when Sam began dotting kisses up her neck, starting at the jutting tip of her collarbone. When she reached her lover's jaw and realised the Englishwoman was frowning, the filmmaker asked, "What's wrong?"

"This isn't real."

Sam cocked her head. She smiled in return, "Does it matter?"

"Yes." Lara swallowed hard. "Because it makes everything hurt so much more."

Her companion looked hurt. "Lara – "

The archaeologist was already forcing herself back to consciousness. The weight of the fantasy made it feel like she was at the bottom of a lake. Except her lungs weren't burning, or her brain screaming for air. It was nice down there. She wanted to stay, just like she wanted to stay curled up in that bed of bliss forever. But another voice was nagging her. It wasn't Roth for once; it was her father.

It's a delusion, Lara; all a lie. You know better, Ladybird. You know what's important.

Using long strokes, she began hauling her heavy, exhausted body back to the surface. And all the harshness that waited there.

As expected, she woke to bright stabbing light. Grimacing in a pathetic defence against it, she reached up to rub her face. Or tried to, anyway. She managed to lift her arms about an inch off the mattress before she realised she was once again bound. Belted restraints at her wrists and ankles kept her attached to the hospital bed.

"Bollocks!"

Too weak to fight against the straps, she flopped back on the cot and blinked wet-eyed at the beige canvas ceiling of this particular tent.

Her motion attracted the attention of the long-haired doctor from earlier. The woman scurried over to Lara's bedside.

After a quick press of her palm against the archaeologist's forehead, her fingers tested the pulse point in the younger woman's throat. "Miss Croft, I'm Doctor Stone –"

"I don't care who you are," Lara snapped.

She immediately regretted it. She needed allies if she was going to escape and save Sam. Given the granite physiques and expressions of Natla's men, Stone was her best bet – evidently as soft as her name was hard.

If Stone had seemed subdued before, Lara's outburst had pushed her right back into the deepest, most inaccessible recesses of her shell. The doctor withdrew her hands from Lara and hooked them together. She gazed at her feet.

Lara sighed, "I'm sorry." *I'm just so fucking frustrated.* With everything, from her trussed-up inability to defend herself against Pierre's beatings and Natla's threats, to the cruelly tantalising dream that she could never enfold herself in. Thinking about it just made her angrier. The predator had already been chained up inside a cage for far too long. Now it had spent a day being poked with sticks and pelted with peanuts.

Stone murmured, "It's understandable. How do you feel?"

Until Lara could test her limbs and stretch out her muscles, she couldn't be sure. Her head was still pounding but she felt... odd. Physically and mentally disconnected for the most part.

"Strange."

"That'll be the painkillers. You were quite banged up when they brought you in here, in addition to your concussion." The woman seemed far more comfortable when she was able to stick to medical speak. "The meds have helped with your fever too. It's still a bit high but your temperature has improved a lot. You heal remarkably fast, Miss Croft. It's incredible how –"

No point beating around the bush. "Let me go."

Stone's professionally neutral expression crumpled. She shook her head, "I can't do that, Lara."

The Englishwoman dropped her voice to a whisper. "Just loosen one strap. I'll do the rest."

Stone frowned, "Miss Natla is an awful woman, but she does keep her word. She rewards loyalty and obedience. It's in your best interest to remember that."

"She's holding something over you too?"

Stone didn't answer but Lara recognised a flash of despair in her eyes.

Natla, you bitch.

Stone rested her hand on the archaeologist's clenched fist. "Don't push her when she's this desperate, Lara. Please. It will go very badly for you and your friend."

Stone stepped away, returning to her workbench set up with a pile of folders, test tubes and a microscope. Her medical paraphernalia was there too, although Lara suspected all scalpels had been removed.

Fine. She'd have to do this herself, as usual. The first step was to get to her improvised knife – that sharp piece of tile she'd forced into her back pocket at the hotel. If she could convince Stone that she needed the bathroom...

Then she realised her clothes were gone. She was wearing a hospital gown.

She called out to Stone, "Where are my things?"

"I undressed you." With an inscrutable expression she added, "Your *belongings* are under your pillow. Remember what I told you. Do what she wants and you'll get to go home. I strongly advise against anything else."

Then she picked up a walkie-talkie and spoke into it. "Miss Croft is awake."

Within three minutes, Jacqueline Natla hobbled into the tent flanked by two of her men in black. In a row behind her stood Dupont and Larson. Sandwiched between them was Sam. She looked unhurt, alert, and she was no longer bound. That was something to be grateful for at least, even if she stared blankly at Lara.

Natla was speaking; a Godawful skeleton's grin stretching her face. "Good afternoon Lara. I trust you're well rested and ready to work?"

She didn't wait for a response from her scowling prisoner. She nodded to the men on either side of her, and they approached Lara. Neither was armed, much to the Englishwoman's disappointment. Natla had clearly thought ahead.

There were still more security measures to come. Natla turned to Larson.

"If she," the blonde cocked her head in Lara's direction, "tries anything, *anything*, you shoot this one." She smiled at Sam. "In the head."

So much for any designs Lara had on lashing out with her piece of tile.

Like a robot, the blonde brute immediately tugged his revolver from its holster and pressed it to the top of Sam's skull.

Sam glared at Natla. "What the fuck?"

"Just a precaution, my dear. You're proving massively useful in your own right. I don't want to lose you if I don't have to."

What did that mean?

Lara remained limp while Natla's mercenaries unbuckled her. Once that process was complete, one man grabbed her under the arms like a child and hauled her over the side of the bed. She sagged embarrassingly against him.

She couldn't stand. She wasn't sure if it was the concussion or the painkillers, or the fact that she hadn't really eaten anything since a couple of canapés at the museum commemoration, but she had no strength in her legs.

Both men helped her upright, supporting her weight while she planted her feet and locked out her knees. It was a start.

Natla called, "There are some fresh work clothes for you on the chair over there."

The men released her, and for a moment Lara had to grip the bed frame to stop herself from collapsing. With a deep breath to steady herself, she took a tentative step. She swayed for a second and then found her balance. But she hurt all over. Each movement sent a pulse of pain through her body, from toe to crown. Her back ached especially from being thrown against the bathroom wall. It felt like she had severe whiplash after a car accident. Or that she had aged half a century overnight.

Somehow she reached the chair. She clung to it while she assessed the clothing laid out for her.

Then she realised there was nothing; no curtain, no smaller room for her to change. She was only wearing knickers under her gown. "You're going to watch me dress?"

Natla simply smiled. "These days I take my pleasures wherever I can get them."

Fine.

Lara picked up the sports bra and shirt.

The top was a simple fitted T-shirt in some shade muddled between turquoise and grey. It was made of the same light, synthetic fabric that she favoured for running given how well it breathed and wicked away sweat. The bottoms though...

Lara held up a pair of black shorts that barely covered her hands. They were nothing more than hotpants.

She arched an eyebrow at Natla. "And these?"

"Just tolerate the whims of a dying woman."

Lara turned her back to her audience. She reached for the tie at the base of her neck, below her hairline, and let the hospital gown slip from her shoulders. She was sure she heard Sam gasp behind her, and not at all in a good way. Lara couldn't see the damage to her back, which she imagined was far worse, but the front of her torso was blotched with angry blue and purple bruises from Dupont's beating.

Getting into the tight bra and figure-hugging shirt was a challenge. She grimaced the whole time, fighting the exhaustion in her arms, and searing pain of her back whenever fabric brushed against another still-swollen contusion.

Afterwards she had to rest for a minute, bent double with her hands on her knees while her heartbeat settled. Shaken and sweaty, she simply stood there in a top and panties. She didn't even have the energy to care about it. How Natla could think she was fit for exploration and mystery solving she had no idea.

At least the rest of her outfit was easy enough to pull on: the skimpy shorts, lace-free combat boots that climbed almost to her knees, a belt strung with carabiners, and a pair of fingerless gloves. The gloves were difficult to get over her bandaged right hand but she knew she would be grateful for the extra layer of protection.

A hairbrush and elastic band had been laid out in a kidney dish on the chair, so she scooped her locks back into a ponytail.

For a moment she considered picking up the stainless steel bowl and backhanding the nearest mercenary with it. She resisted that urge, but not the one to study her reflection. Even distorted in polished metal she could recognise how damaged she looked, even with Stone's care.

The wound on her forehead had been taped up, but it looked raw and sore where it peeked through the dressing. Her right cheek was mottled pink-and-purple in addition to being badly swollen. And at some point she'd split her bottom lip.

She looked as grotty as she felt. *Lara Croft, sex symbol, my arse.*

Eventually she turned back to Natla. "Well?"

Her captor smiled. "Very nice. Now do we have to tie you up again, Lara, or will you behave?"

When the archaeologist didn't respond, Natla addressed her men again. "Cuff her."

At least this time her hands were bound in front of her, and there were a few extra millimetres of comfort space around her wrists. Lara and her two guards led the entourage out of the tent. She was still too slow and unsteady on her feet for Natla, though, and she ended up being seized by the elbows and carried down the earthen path that divided the campsite into two neat rows.

The place was heavily guarded. Lara estimated that, excluding Dupont and Larson, there were at least twenty of the nondescript men in black, armed and keeping an eye out. They weren't the Solarii, religious fanatics converted from desperate fishermen and merchant sailors. These men were well-trained and combat ready. The bumbling, terrified girl she'd been on Yamatai would have been dead within five minutes if she'd faced this crowd. Even now she didn't fancy the odds.

They stopped at the end of the camp, where a contingent of six men stood guard. Lara saw what they were protecting – an opening in the earth. Rope, harnesses and rappelling equipment lay on the ground next to the crevice. A pulley framework had been thrust into the rock and soil.

Lara turned to Natla. "What is this?"

"The first step in your consultation with the Oracle of Delphi."

At that, a pair of men stepped forward with a harness. Lara was forced to step into it and they began tightening the straps. To their credit, they didn't try to cop a feel; if it had been Dupont that probably wouldn't have been the case.

Still, the insanity was too much. Exasperated, exhausted and too spaced out for subtle disagreement, Lara yelled, "You consult with her, Natla."

"I would. But every one of the experts who helped me find this place has gone down there and not come back."

"And I'm to be the latest?"

"None of them was even half as brilliant as you, Lara." The blonde folded her arms. "If your father was alive, I would have recruited him. But he's not, so you remain the last repository of that famous Croft instinct. You trusted your gut and changed the world. I need you to do the same again. For me."

Lara frowned, "Where are we?"

The patch of earth where they stood was typical nondescript Central Greece: loads of exposed limestone and equally bleached earth, interspersed with patches of verdant flora that seemed to sprout without sustenance.

Natla may have been impatient, but she clearly enjoyed seeing Lara out of her depth. She explained, "Thanks to the endless infighting and instability of Greek politics, huge portions of the Valley of Phocis remain unexcavated. As usual, men don't have the willpower to overcome their egos and look beyond to the potential. They'd rather puff up and charge each other like inconsequential park pigeons than go down in the history books as the leaders who had the ambition and foresight to initiate a new era in archaeological discoveries."

When Lara just stared at her, Natla added, "The Oracle was too precious. Three Sacred Wars, earthquakes, fires, raids and political rivalries meant a back-up plan was needed for the sanctuary; a place where the Pythia was safe."

"That's here?"

"It's less grand, but yes; another Temple of Apollo, long forgotten as the earth pulled it under."

Lara shook her head. "That would be a spectacular find, but what do you want from me? To locate and throw the bones of some centuries-dead priestess? Because that's a bit outside of my skill set."

"She's alive."

"What? The Pythia has an Aegis too? Was there a 2 For 1 sale a few millennia ago?"

Lara half expected to be pistol-whipped at that comment, but Natla let it slide. There was no mistaking the flicker in the blonde's pupils when the artefact was mentioned though. She stated simply, "Apollo rewarded the most gifted and loyal of his oracles with immortality."

At that, Lara rolled her eyes. "I read that paper. Basil Panagakos, right? Really fond of any concept involving forever young girls. I believe that's why he's currently in prison."

"He isn't in prison." Natla's eyes travelled to the cleft.

Christ.

"I don't know why you're so surprised, Lara. You even met an immortal sorcerer queen."

Behind the blonde, Sam flinched at the mention.

The men were just about done fitting the archaeologist with a harness. They began attaching screw-lock carabiners and feeding ropes through the set-up. Lara noticed there were no belays or descenders. She was just going to be lowered; utterly at their mercy again.

Larson approached with a micro backpack. The Terminator actually spoke for once. "Water, first aid kit, emergency whistle, basic rations." He pointed to a small plastic casing on the right strap. "LED flashlight."

The men had to uncuff her to get the pack over her shoulders. Afterwards they left her arms free. Natla didn't seem to be concerned. There were enough guns pointed at Lara and, to the Englishwoman's disgust, still at Sam too.

Then she realised her former best friend was coming towards her.

Sam held an aluminium case in her hands. Directly in front of Lara, she opened it. Inside were several pieces of thumb-size electronics, each cushioned in tiny pockets cut out of the foam interior.

One of the mute mercenaries held the case while Sam clipped a black square to the other strap of Lara's backpack. She tapped the device and the Englishwoman heard a hum as it activated. A pinprick of green light glowed on the top.

"You picking that up?" Sam looked over her shoulder to a table Lara hadn't noticed before. It was set up with a couple of laptops, a snakes' nest of wiring, portable hard drives and assorted gadgetry that the archaeologist didn't recognise. Two mercs in black manned the workstation. One lifted his headphones from his ears and gave Sam the thumb's up.

The filmmaker actually smiled in response.

She should have kept her mouth shut but Lara snapped, "You're helping *her*?"

She expected Sam to scowl and verbally shove back, but instead the American just frowned. "What, Lara? I'm just supposed to sit locked up and wait for you to bust in, cause a bloodbath and save me again? The sooner this is over, the sooner she'll let us go home."

The truth stung. It didn't help when Natla jeered, "Trouble in paradise, Lara? Samantha practically volunteered to help me keep an eye on my pretty English *investment*."

Dupont joined her in laughing, and Lara's bloody fantasy replayed before her eyes. Except now she was standing over both the French thug and Southern businesswoman, their bodies contorted in death throes that couldn't be painful enough for the archaeologist.

Back in pure business mode, Sam retrieved an earpiece from the case and slipped it into place over Lara's right helix. The action meant the filmmaker had to tuck strands of hair behind her companion's ear. It was a fleeting caress, probably devoid of deeper meaning on Sam's part, but it triggered memories and dreams that couldn't have been more different from Lara's gruesome, grit-toothed fantasies. The abrupt change in emotional gears grated her, and she felt all too conscious of how unsettled she was, both mentally and physically.

Ignorant of Lara's weary, yearning gaze, Sam was still fiddling with the earpiece. And she'd started jabbering. Some things never changed; just like during their uni days, she'd start gushing whenever anything remotely related to her field came up.

"This is really high-end stuff. We're talking laparoscopic technology co-opted for surveillance use. The movement of the camera in its casing is pretty restricted but we still have some remote control from up here. The beauty of the system is that it's completely wireless. We just put a signal booster in your pack to help the comms relay. Hopefully that will be enough."

There was something about "Professional Sam." She was just so different from "Good Times Sam." Sometimes the transition between the two was literally blink and you'd miss it. "Professional Sam" was just so focused; a contemplative, even-tempered problem solver. It was such a contrast to her wild child alter ego.

It was also when she was most like Lara. Or, rather, like the Lara who was. Their passion for their respective fields had surprised the two college girls, and ultimately become something they bonded over. All those evenings spent plotting over pints and oily chip baskets how exactly they were going to make their mark.

Together...

A smile broadened on Sam's face as she rattled off the specs and features of the camera equipment. But before her grin could reach its full wattage, it started to dim again.

The filmmaker cocked her head, "You know, seven years ago, if someone had told me one day I'd be monitoring Lara-in-bed-with-a-book-by-9-Croft to make sure she didn't turn rogue and go on a rampage or something, I would have asked them what drugs they were on... and where I could get some."

An actual smile plucked at the corner of Lara's mouth. Regardless of a situation's severity, Sam had never been afraid to crack a joke. Then again, she had a lot more practice. Lara had come to the rebellious side of life a lot later than her best friend.

Natla cleared her throat. "Ladies, you can continue rekindling your sexual tension after Lady Croft has consulted with the Oracle. Think you can last that long before fondling each other again?"

Both Lara and Sam scowled at their captor.

Natla's men were already moving in to separate the two young women. The last thing Sam did was lay her hand on her companion's forearm. "Lara, be careful..."

Then she winked, "That's some very expensive camera equipment you've got there."

For the first time in what felt like days, the archaeologist produced a genuine laugh. It triggered an eye-stinging headache but the seconds of liberation it provided from Natla's delusional experiment were worth it.

Lara was prodded in the back with an assault rifle. She let herself be shepherded to the edge of the cleft. She looked down over 100 feet to a small patch of stone illuminated by glow sticks.

Natla, wisely, was nowhere near the hole. Standing far back, behind a wall of her men, she waved her hand. "You'll be supplied with a climbing axe and pistol once you're down there."

"What? No goat for me to sacrifice?"

Natla's smirk conveyed her response clearly enough. *YOU are the sacrificial goat.*

A merc grabbed Lara's tricep and flipped her around. Her boots scuffed over rock and gravel as she was forced backwards. Then there was nothing beneath her heels. Just the balls of her feet remained in contact with solid earth. Reflex self-preservation triggered, and she clutched at the rope where it attached to her harness.

God, this was really happening.

Her head shot up when Natla spoke again. "I know you're used to working for yourself, Lara, so perhaps you need a refresher about what it means to be employed by someone else. You've got KPIs to meet, or suffer severe penalties. Remember that."

"And if there's nothing down there? Natla, what do you want me to do?"

"You're a smart girl, you'll figure it out." She added, "Just remember, Samantha is counting on you."

Sam was already standing at the table of monitoring equipment. There was no more levity to be found in her facial expression. At least she didn't look away. The eyes of the former best friends remained locked as Lara braced her legs and stepped off into the abyss.

Chapter 21

Lara was still dangling about ten feet up in the air when the line went slack.

Limbs flailing, she plummeted.

Normally her reflexes would have been fast enough. She would have been able to break-fall and roll. But, concussed and drugged, she was off her game. At least a flash of sense triggered like an airbag. It stopped her from bracing out with her hands, and potentially snapping her wrists.

So it was her ribs and left hip that impacted first.

From those two points radiated white blinding pain. Magnesium meets oxygen.

She could hear Dupont laughing as Natla roared at him, their voices simultaneously in her earpiece and echoing down from the cavern entrance. She hadn't meant to cry out – she didn't want to give that French bastard the satisfaction – but she did, howling and hiccupping with pain.

She lay there on the stone, just like a voting offering with its throat freshly slit, twitching in a halo of glow sticks that might as well have been blood.

She was back on Yamatai. Drunk and disorientated with agony. Over and over. In that first cave with the rebar. In the wolf trap on the forest floor. In the Oni's slaughterhouse. In the foul-smelling shantytown. And finally in that rusted helicopter when she accepted the inevitability of what she had to do to herself.

She wasn't even sure why she did it, but she rolled. An instant later a climbing axe landed exactly where she'd been curled. It sparked as metal struck stone.

Again she rolled. Back towards the pick as a pistol dropped, and clattered directly next to her. Those Croft instincts meant she'd avoided a broken nose but they had also driven her back onto her injured side.

She fingered her ribs and yelled again. Broken, definitely broken. Her breath was shuddering with her entire body.

Sam's voice screeched into her earpiece, "Lara? Are you okay? Lara?!"

Lara could only grit her teeth. "Nnnngh."

Her former friend insisting to someone up top, "She's hurt."

"Bullshit," Dupont responded, the laughter leaked out of his voice. "She's faking."

Sam continued to argue. "For fuck sake, she's really hurt. Natla, we need to – "

There was a smack, a yelp from Sam and finally a thud.

Lara's eyes widened. Anxiety surged past agony on her emotional priority scale. "What's happening up there? Sam? Sam?!"

Natla's voice replied, ice cold, directly into the microphone. "I suggest you get up, Lara."

"What have you done to her? Sam?!"

Natla's was the only response. Again, "Get up."

Using her shaking arms, Lara pushed herself into a kneel. Straightening out her torso felt impossible, so she tried to delay the inevitable by drawing the pistol and axe to her. The latter she could attach to one of the carabiners on her belt. The former, well, she missed her thigh holsters. She tucked the Colt M1911 into her belt instead and began the struggle to detach her harness. Bent double, her hands trembling the whole time, she unscrewed and unclipped herself.

Eventually she let a roar drive her upright.

"I'm up, I'm up," she gasped.

When the only response was silence, she snarled, "Let me know she's alright. Fuck, Natla!"

Sam's voice. "Lara." Her voice sounded shaky and raspy. "'It's okay. I'm... good."

"Sa – "

Natla interrupted, cool and composed as usual. "Try not to die, Lara. You know what will happen to your girlfriend if that occurs."

With that warning, the communications from above severed.

Lara was left standing in the silence of the cavern. She realised she was still quivering. But it wasn't from the flame kindling her side. It stemmed from a combination of adrenalin and anger; an overwhelming sense of powerlessness. She was Natla's puppet. That woman and her men delighted in dancing Lara around, swinging her into the walls of the marionette theatre with curtains the same colour as her blood. Yet there was nothing she could do about it.

Damn them all to hell.

To fight a wave of prickly lightheadedness, she let her gaze settle on her feet. Her right knee was already scraped and bleeding; exactly why she would never choose such a ridiculous, impractical outfit for herself.

Scowling, she flicked on her backpack's flashlight and took her first step outside the reassuring glow of the circle.

The going was both easy and challenging.

Easy in that the route was relatively clear. She had to do a bit of clambering where the rock had shifted vertically over the centuries, but there was no confusion as to the direction she had to head. No side trails veering off the main path; no alcoves or clefts that she needed to investigate. This subterranean Sacred Way was disconcertingly unobstructed.

Her body though provided its own obstacles. Every breath she took was like expanding her ribcage into a brand. She wasn't drawing in enough air, and had to keep leaning against the nearest wall. Every so often she'd get too close and her side would connect with the stone. When that happened, she'd hiss and lose herself for a moment in a blistering haze.

Dr Stone's voice pierced through the agony. "Lara, listen, there are painkillers in your pack."

In a heartbeat, the Englishwoman had shrugged out of her backpack, and was rummaging inside. She ripped open the Velcro binding the medical kit. Bandages, ointment, waterproof Band-Aids, tablets and a couple of little metal cases.

It was like Stone was looking over her shoulder. "There, in the tin on the far right."

Lara opened it to find three white plastic tubes. Some kind of jet injector.

"What you need to do – "

Lara's body wouldn't wait. She popped the cap off a tube and jabbed the applicator into her thigh. She pushed a spongy button on the side. Within 30 seconds all discomfort had receded from her consciousness.

She slumped back against the rock. It was good stuff. She may even have moaned at the relief, she wasn't sure.

She wasn't sure of much actually. Stone was talking but her words weren't making any sense. It didn't matter. The most important thing was still clear in Lara's mind. Her task. Everything was swimming around her but she knew what she had to do.

She dismissed Stone with a slurred, "No," pulled her backpack on and righted herself.

She stumbled forward, down the path. There was nowhere else to go.

It was cool under the earth, to the point of chilly, but she felt hot. She was dimly aware of how damp her shirt was under her pack. When she reached up to wipe her face, her glove came away wet.

"Lara?" It was Sam. "Are you okay? What do you see? The visuals are starting to get really choppy up here."

"Nothing. I see nothing. Some shattered pottery, amphora, hydria; remnants of pillars, Doric, but nothing else. Just rock."

There was no sign of the other archaeologists who had come down before her. She strained her ears for any sound. There was only silence, and darkness beyond the reach of her flashlight.

She'd staggered a further dozen feet when the aural feed began to stutter and hiss in her ear.

"You're breaking up."

Sam responded in staccato. "La – La – can't hear – losing – La – "

The comms went dead.

"Sam? Natla?" The Englishwoman retreated several steps in case the signal would return. Nothing. She had to hope her walking corpse of an *employer* was sensible and wouldn't punish Sam for something beyond her control.

In the off chance they could still hear her, Lara muttered, "It's all good down here. I'm carrying on."

As she turned her head, something darted in the periphery of her vision.

She didn't even need to think about it. The Colt was instantly in her palm and pointed in the direction of the movement.

As she advanced towards the site of the disturbance, her free hand unclipped the climbing axe from her belt. She would have preferred a second pistol, but a close combat backup weapon was good too. She kept it clenched at her hip so she'd have momentum if she needed to swing it.

Except there was no threat. Lara progressed until the toe of her boot struck a wall. She was standing before a huge piece of stone; man-size, black and semiprecious she suspected, although her geology knowledge was nearly non-existent. Another thing to add to the Useful Skills for a Self-sufficient Loner list.

What she did know was that it was highly unusual. She'd never heard of anything like this in a Greek temple.

The stone had been polished to reflection quality. It was filthy though, coated in centuries of dust. Her flashlight had simply caught a segment where the filthy skin was marginally thinner.

Returning her pistol to her belt, she reached out and wiped a patch clean.

Her battered, ghost-white self gazed back at her as if it was trapped deep within the stone. She looked dazed; lost; completely off her game. The question was how much of it was the consequence of her concussion or simply her body's reaction to Natla keeping her drugged, neutered and complicit. Then again, how much of her lethargy was the after-effect of her misguided, draining encounter with Sam?

Something glinted at her from waist height and she rubbed her palm over the stone. It revealed a line of Ancient Greek letters shallowly carved. Her grasp of the language was rusty but she instantly recognised the inscription – one of three self-reflective sayings intended for those seeking an audience with the Pythia

Know thyself.

"I wish I still did," she murmured.

She pushed away from the stone and trudged down the path once more.

After another five minutes of trudging forward into nothingness, she solved one mystery at least.

There was no mistaking that smell. Dead flesh.

It wasn't as pungent as it had been on humid Yamatai, or any of the tropical destinations where she had encountered – or, more often than not, created – lifeless bodies. It was, however, still the scent of decay.

She had her pistol out again by the time her flashlight finally illuminated the corpse, curled legs bent against the bottom of a wall like the figure was nuzzling into it. It wasn't Basil Panagakos, but another man, also evidently Greek. Another of Natla's flunkies under duress, no doubt.

Lara realised why the man's body looked so oddly dark when she was only a few feet away. His throat had been sawn through to his spinal cord, sending a curtain of blood down his front to form a sticky puddle around him. It was horrendous.

Her advance down the passageway slowed dramatically then as she wondered what could have caused such an injury. A booby trap? Some kind of immortal guardian?

An image of weathered samurai armour flashed behind her eyes and she shuddered at the thought of the second option.

Please let it be a trap.

She found Basil Panagakos then.

The high ceilinged path terminated before a wall that stretched off into the shadows. The wall had been carved like a temple front, complete with columns, entablature, and a battered frieze and pediment, evidently depicting some of Apollo's greatest deeds. Except the building wasn't freestanding and assembled. It had been sculpted out of a single piece of stone; a cliff or mountain face. It was all simply decoration to mask the entrance to an unassuming natural cave.

Paedophile Panagakos lay splayed on the handful of rudimentary, cracked stylobate leading to the entrance.

Lara paused to examine his bloated corpse. Teeth clenched and eyes wide, he'd died in agony. Judging by his ruptured eye balls and heavily bruised throat, he'd been strangled.

Some kind of supernatural guardian was looking more and more likely. *Bollocks.*

She was wary of entering the cave with her flashlight on. It painted a bullseye for anyone watching her. But the alternative was stumbling straight into a crevice or spike pit. And no one was coming for her if that happened.

Tightening her grip on both weapons, she stepped inside.

It turned out she didn't need to worry about attack, at least not immediately anyway. The tunnel was just narrow enough for a single person. She had to turn sideways and bend to squeeze through some of the narrower points.

The further she progressed, the sweeter and heavier the air became. She felt her head start to swim all over again, and she clutched at the walls to either side of her. If the route hadn't been so confined she knew she would have become completely disorientated. She should have insisted on a gas mask before she descended.

She was busy trying to shake some sense back into her skull when she realised there was a soft glow ahead. She switched off her flashlight and crept closer.

The tunnel opened into a rectangular cavern about 60 foot in length. Again it was natural rock with a few man-made embellishments. Each side was studded with a half dozen openings, every one flanked by two Doric columns, carved out of the stone. Equidistant between each doorway was a burning brazier set on a marble pedestal. It was these that provided the room's subtle light source.

Of greatest concern to Lara were the side tunnels, disappearing into darkness. The rest of the space was open and empty. Except for the far side of the cavern. There, seated, was a single hunched figure, bare feet peeking out from the bottom of mottled grey robes.

"You can enter..." it announced in stilted English. "...Lara Croft."

After the hours of oppressive subterranean silence, the voice, a woman's, sounded too loud, too powerful for such a shrunken frame. It was as large as the cavern, and Lara, startled, cringed away from it.

"Lara Croft, come near," the voice repeated.

The Englishwoman didn't understand her body's reaction. Normally she could rely on herself to respond physically with steel confidence no matter what she was feeling. Right then, though, she was trembling. Could whatever was in the room have some kind of control over her? Could it pierce straight through the cool disdain and disinterest she had come to wear like armour?

Lara stepped out from the tunnel into the open space.

The earth was unsteady under her boots. Veined with cracks and fissures, it fragmented under her feet like eggshell with certain steps. And in random spots the ground was more significantly split. Pitch blackness gaped up at her.

While she navigated the terrain, the hooded figure repeated, "Draw closer."

The closer she got, the more Lara could discern of the figure. Bundled in a threadbare peplos, it held a branch of withered laurel leaves in one hand and a bowl of water in the other. Most noticeably, it – she – sat on a tripod directly in front of another yawning fissure. Lara could actually see the vapours snaking out of the cleft like hypnotised cobras, undulating and shimmering.

It was too easy to lose herself in observing the dance; the air was most intoxicating here – suffocating almost.

It was the figure that snapped her out of the trance. When the archaeologist was several feet away, it restated her name. "Lara Croft."

The oracle raised her head to reveal herself as a teenage girl, maybe fifteen. Her delicate features ensured that she would always be declared pretty, but the effect was offset by her red-ringed eyes and skin as corpse-white as the men outside the temple entrance. Her wavy black hair had once been set in a braid wound around her head and knotted at the back of her neck, in keeping with the common ancient style. Except part of it had tumbled out of the knot and hung loose and unbrushed over her shoulder.

This Pythia had seen better days.

"You seek my advice?" she asked, her facial expression completely neutral. Then her head jolted to the side. "*Ladybird.*"

Her father's nickname for her, spoken in her father's voice.

The effect shook Lara to her core like the earthquake that had swallowed this temple. A part of her control fractured, and from it, just like natural gasses, gushed anger, fear and even – she had to admit – exhilaration. *Dad.*

Wide-eyed, Lara advanced a step. "*What did you say?*"

The oracle started to trill in her own voice. It was heavily accented and too high pitched but Lara recognised what she was singing.

"Ladybird, ladybird, fly away home. Your house is on fire, your companions gone. All except one, her name is... Sam. She crept under the frying pan."

Was this all some kind of trick? Using her loved ones; her deepest desires to rattle her. What was this?

The oracle answered her. "I see the way you look at me, Lara Croft. I assure you this is all real, by the power of Apollo." The girl twitched and suddenly she was speaking in the Englishwoman's voice. "*The line between our myths and truth is fragile and blurry...*"

"Yes. Yes it is." Lara swallowed. She couldn't explain it, but this was really happening.

The Pythia remained stiff in her seat. "Why do you seek me, Lara Croft?"

"I – I need your help. I need to know where the Aegis of Athena is."

"You do not want to know when you are going to die?"

She almost laughed. "No."

"You receive one question; one answer. Do you not wish to know what you must do so that you and Sam can be together? How to make that possible?" She switched to Sam's voice, "*Lara, I love you so much. Babe, please...*"

Lara gritted her teeth. She couldn't handle these games right now. "No."

"What about your parents?"

The breath snagged in Lara's throat. As tense as she felt, her muscles tightened even further.

"Do you not wish to know the truth of their fate? That was your greatest desire once."

It was. All those years of clutching her pillow to her and trying to pretend she was snuggled in Amelia and Richard's arms – at bedtime and before dawn, when she inevitably woke heart-racing and wet-cheeked, either from sweat or tears. The loss of her parents had been the source of all her bad dreams until the nightmares of Yamatai superseded that particular torment.

She scowled, "It is too late for that. I seek only the Aegis." She added hastily, and considerably more politely, "Please."

Face still blank, the Pythia went silent.

A minute passed before she murmured, "Very well..."

Her gaze settled on Lara's weapons, still clenched in her fists. "Your intentions are peaceful?"

"Oh. Yes, of course. Sorry." She returned her pistol and axe to her hip. At the same time her eyes travelled to the side openings. Her hands continued to hover inches from her belt.

The oracle recognised her hesitancy. "You are safe here."

"Thank you."

"Approach, Ladybird."

Lara continued to advance across the room. Eventually only the fissure – three foot across – divided her from the Pythia.

There was another of those giant black mirror stones set right behind the girl. This one was in peak polished condition. The angle of the reflection made it look like Lara was standing directly behind the oracle. A loyal servant; to the girl, to Natla.

Just then, the Pythia spoke. "Like all supplicants, you must prove yourself worthy, Lara Croft."

"How do I do that?"

"*Know thyself.*"

"What does tha – ?"

Lara's mirror self raised its pistol.

Chapter 22

Her reflection raised its pistol.

Except it wasn't her reflection.

Lara had assumed the existence of another mirror stone behind the Pythia as soon as her likeness sauntered forward out of the blackness. But there was nothing solid behind the oracle; just the cavern disappearing into dark open space.

Following her double's lead – far slower and clumsier than her pseudo-reflection – Lara grabbed at her gun. She pointed the Colt back at her twin. "What is this? Who are you?"

The creature smirked, answering with her exact accent, "I'm you with all the flaws removed."

It was. This Lara stood straight-backed, cool; actually convincing in Natla's ridiculous costume. One of its eyebrows was arched as it assessed the battered, trembling woman before it. Even its skin was flawless. A copy that had surpassed the original in every way.

Right then it jeered, "Put that down." It cocked its head in the direction of Lara's gun; the way the black metal was shuddering in her palm. "You're embarrassing yourself."

No.

Lara clasped hold of the weapon with her other hand, steadying her grip. "Sod off, you arrogant bitch."

Her double burst out laughing. It was laughing so hard that it ended bent double, hands on its knees. An eye blink later it was crouched behind the Pythia on her tripod.

Did she really move like that when she was on form?

Lara yelled, "Get away from her."

Her doppelganger popped up to rest her chin on the oracle's shoulder. The girl didn't respond, but then she looked completely out of it. Her pupils had rolled back into her head and she was muttering something unintelligible. Evidently she had chased sense down the rabbit hole even as a duel flared dangerously around her.

Cheek to cheek with the oracle, the double taunted Lara. "Come on. One shot and you win."

One shot.

In principle it was easy. But between the painkiller and fumes, the Englishwoman was almost as high as the Pythia herself. She was trapped in a horrible cycle where reality kept subliming around her and then solidifying once more. She couldn't trust her senses. That realisation set her heart hammering and her hand shaking.

"Don't you trust your aim, Lara?" The double stepped out from behind its human shield and lifted its gun. "I do."

Lara was too slow. She turned, but still her cheek caught fire.

She clutched at her face, eyes and teeth clenched against the pain.

It was a cunning distraction. Her vision returned just as the doppelganger reached her. Having leapt over the fissure, it had built up enough momentum that when its shoulder connected with Lara's diaphragm, and its heel hooked behind hers, she went down instantly.

Limbs tangled – hers, its, she couldn't tell.

She punched and clawed and kicked, but the flurry ended with her breathless, bleeding and on her back. Her arms were flung out from her sides, pinned to the ground at the elbow and forearm by her double's shins. The creature was on top of her, straddling her chest. Lara was in the bizarre position of gazing up at herself.

And *herself* was looking very self-satisfied.

The doppelganger smiled, "Are you as turned on as I am right now? Because I have to admit I find this surprisingly kinky." She leaned over to tuck a lock of hair behind Lara's ear. As she did so, she murmured, "Heh. Maybe we don't need Sam after all."

The thought of this thing with Sam; its smug smile as it kissed down her body...

Lara planted her feet and bucked hard.

It was pointless though. The double simply lifted its own hips with every thrust so that Lara was battling against thin air. The creature's sense of balance, along with its prediction of her movements, was faultless.

The double seemed amused by Lara's impotent thrashing. The curve of its lips never wavered beneath its cold predator's eyes.

It teethed its bottom lip, "By the way..."

The creature's fist slammed straight down into Lara's mouth. Teeth cut into gum and tongue, but more troubling was the way the archaeologist's skull bounced against the stone beneath her. Her limbs went limp, and for several seconds the world shrunk down to just the doppelganger's face. In black and white. Scowling now.

"That's for interrupting the fun back at the hotel," it explained. "Five years we've been craving that; I *finally* engineer it and you muck it up."

It shook its head, almost pityingly. "When will you learn to just take what you want? *Tomb Raider*, remember? Live up to the name for God's sake instead of being such a miserable masochist all the time. You're not a nice person. Embrace it."

Through red-tinted teeth, Lara forced her response. "You - You talk too much to be me. Never bloody well shut up."

The doppelganger's face frosted over. Its eyes travelled to the left and Lara tracked its gaze to her own trapped right hand, where the pistol still rested in her palm, framed by useless, forgotten fingers.

The creature's hands clamped over Lara's, gluing her flesh to the metal. Then it began to bend her wrist so that the Colt pointed back at the archaeologist's head.

Lara tried to resist the motion, but her twin was so much stronger. She couldn't even throw the creature; its mount was technically perfect.

The Englishwoman watched helpless as her elbow was folded to match the angle of her wrist. Forced by the doppelganger, her arm curled until the gun barrel was hovering less than an inch from her eye. All her strength wasn't enough to dislodge it.

The double's index finger hooked Lara's over the trigger. Its grip was as icy and unyielding as the steel already against her palm. The creature began to squeeze.

"I'm walking out of here," it hissed.

Lara couldn't even beg for mercy. For five years she hadn't blinked when men pleaded for their life. Their attempts at bargaining were answered with bullets, delivered at point blank range. If this creature was her, her nature distilled into its purest form, then there would be no pity no matter what she said or did.

It wanted it though – it wanted to hear her whimper and beg. She recognised the callous delight dancing in its eyes as their combined grip tightened on the trigger.

A millimetre left.

Lara spat blood in the doppelganger's face.

"Fuck!" The creature jolted backwards as the gun fired.

The paralysing weight removed from her chest, Lara just managed to jerk her head sideways. Shards of stone and metal ricocheted against her skinned cheek, and she was instantly deaf in her right ear.

But she was still alive. If she could –

The doppelganger backhanded her so hard that was thrown onto her side. The pistol skittered out of her fist across the ground. It was easily forgotten as her broken ribs collided with stone.

"Hnnnghhh."

She curled reflexively into a ball, bracing for her double's boot, or knuckles or elbow.

When the beating didn't arrive, she opened her eyes.

The creature was crouched several feet away in the cavernous space. It straightened then, smirking at Lara. "Much better."

It had the archaeologist's pistol in its right fist, and its own Colt clenched in its left. It raised the weapons simultaneously, straight armed – clearly enjoying the irony of the additional mirror effect.

No.

Lara scrambled to her feet.

She was down to the use of one arm; her body wouldn't let her remove the other from her side, where it was supporting and shielding her ribs. Gingerly she unclipped her climbing axe. She didn't know what she hoped to accomplish. She was completely outmatched. Her breath was coming out ragged and her vision kept blurring. In her hand, the axe felt clumsy and heavy. It causing her to sag further. Even if she could muster the strength to chuck it at her twin – a mammoth *if* – the creature would still have time to empty both clips. And there was nothing for Lara to dart behind for cover.

The double scowled, "There's no fun in this." It lowered its weapons.

"I'm sorry to disappoint."

"The thrill of the hunt, the sport of it; you can't tell me you've never felt it."

"Of course I have." *It's pretty much all I have left.*

"Yet you're prepared to let it end like this?"

Lara blinked, "You're giving me a choice?"

"You have to be *given* a choice?" The doppelganger sneered. "You're even more of a disgrace than I thought."

It raised its right pistol and fired. The bullet cracked the ground at Lara's feet. She stared at the mark and then shifted her gaze back to her double. Its gun was pointed at the archaeologist's chest.

"Go," it muttered. "I'm gifting you with an opportunity to find your fighting spirit."

The creature advanced a step and fired again at Lara's boots. "Fine then. Do what you've always done without me. Run and hide."

Another step. Another shot just off target.

The double's eyes narrowed as it re-aimed at Lara's heart. "Last chance..."

Lara bolted for the nearest exit, one of the pillar-straddled clefts into the pitch black unknown.

Behind her she could hear the sure steps of the doppelganger echoing as it strode forward.

She could imagine the grin twisting its face.

The predator had its hunt.

Chapter 23

She barrelled down the tunnel, blind and breathless. Her instinct was to reach for the LED light on her pack so that she could see where she was going, but she yanked back her fingers at the last second. Turning it on would be the equivalent of painting a bullseye on her back. Her double had more than enough advantages as it was; she didn't want to give it another –

Her forehead connected with stone.

Her cry was as much from surprise as pain. It was also, of course, too loud. Another giveaway for that vile creature.

Lara's desperate speed meant the collision with the overhang was far worse than it should have been. Her skull bounced back against her shoulder blades at the same time her legs outran her body. She landed hard on her arse, sitting there limp and uncoordinated like a shelved ventriloquist's dummy.

Something warm and wet ran down her face, tracing the same path as tears. She knew what it was even before some of the fluid slipped between her lips and tickled her tongue. The collision must have blasted open the stitches from her mirror encounter back at the hotel.

God, when would this sadistic nightmare be over?

Her own voice was singing her name from far too near in the blackness. "Lara. Lara, I can hear you."

Sod it all to hell.

The Englishwoman forced herself upright. Her first steps were staggered and stiff but she soon refound her rhythm. Just in time too. Light darted across her cheek instants before a bullet cracked the rock next to her head.

Lara ran. This time waving her left palm defensively, an arm's length in front of her face.

It was then that the earth disappeared beneath her right foot. Her momentum thrust her in the same direction and she fell.

Tumbling, she lashed out with her climbing axe; clawed with her hand. Seeking anything. Finding nothing.

Over and over she hacked until the axe scraped against something, and finally hooked.

She swung into the rock face.

She just managed to clamp her mouth over a yell, but her broken ribs shrieked at her.

She could almost call it an old friend by now given how many times she'd been embraced by it, but the white fog of pain completely enfolded her then, erasing all her other senses. There was nothing else in the world.

For a split second her grip loosened on the axe. Somehow she managed to hold on. To the metal. To consciousness.

She hung there, one-armed, waiting for some clarity to burn through the haze.

Far above her a light bounded along the path, and vanished.

With that threat momentarily sidelined, Lara activated the LED on her pack and began hunting for hand and foot holds. The climb was slow-going. She was once again confident in her axe grip, but frantically groping at rock during her plunge had left the fingers on her other hand raw and bloody. With her broken bones she didn't even have her usual reach. Every time she overstretched, she wanted to vomit from the agony.

In the end, she made it. Even if, at the end of her 30 foot ascent, she had to drag herself over the ledge on her elbows. Shaking and sweating, she simply lay there for a bit; feeling, and no doubt looking, like road-kill.

There was no thought to it. Her hand sought out the side pocket of her pack where she'd stashed them. Dr Stone's painkillers. She rolled three of the applicator tubes around in her palm. She desperately wanted their promised relief.

She just couldn't afford it. A hit would smother the various grades of hurt blazing at different points of her body, but it would also destroy her reflexes. She'd be gift-wrapping herself for the doppelgänger. Take an analgesic and she might as well as well have let her double pull the trigger when it had the gun pressed to her head.

"There you are."

A full blast of light blinded her.

Lara dived sideways as a gunshot echoed in the passageway. She scrambled behind a rock, and curled into a ball for maximum cover. As an afterthought, she smacked at her own light source. Barring plunges into the abyss and head-splitting collisions, she was back in the safety of darkness, wearing it like a bulletproof vest.

The creature groaned. "Can we hurry this up please? I have a delightful piece of Asian arse waiting for me outside."

Obvious baiting. Lara could picture the spiteful smirk on her double's face as its flashlight tracked over the space where she was hiding. It gave the Englishwoman a chance to assess her cover options at least – several chunks of stone and stalagmites. If she was careful and timed her movements right, she should be able to sneak past her foe.

She seized a fist-sized chunk of rock and waited until the double's light had scanned as far from its prey as possible.

The taunting continued uninterrupted. "How much do you want to bet that your dear sweet Samantha doesn't even notice the difference?"

Lara chucked her missile as she darted diagonally behind another outcropping a few feet further down the tunnel.

She was horribly off-target; she knew that. She heard the stone bounce off stone, and the creature laugh. "Four points for effort, love."

The light was once more focused on the rock the archaeologist had first leapt behind. She could hear the smile in the doppelgänger's voice. "You know what your biggest problem is, Lara? You're too emotional. Your emotion makes you predictable."

The creature was advancing; its footsteps were silent but its sneering words grew ever louder.

"You need to learn to have a little fun; cut loose, enjoy yourself."

Pistol raised, the double rounded on the spot where Lara had crouched.

Its smooth, considered movements were those of a big cat. But even with its back chiefly turned to her, Lara recognised the minuscule flinch of surprise on finding the refuge deserted.

No time to savour it though.

The archaeologist lunged out from her hiding place. She stabbed all three injector tubes into the creature's vastus lateralis.

The doppelgänger howled.

It tried to lurch away but not before Lara clenched the release buttons, flooding the creature's system with painkillers. It got about two steps before collapsing. It sat there, clutching its thigh and trying to tug out the injectors with shaking, uncooperative hands.

"You bitch!" it hissed. "What have you done?"

Its fury was obvious, but so too was the panic in its eyes. Already it kept having to shake its head to maintain some sense of alertness.

Lara had to smile at the ridiculousness of the situation. Two Lady Crofts, both plonked undignified on the ground, bare legged and bleeding. On hands and knees – she'd depleted the last of her energy in the ambush – the Englishwoman crawled over to the seething creature.

Lara smirked, "Predictable, my arse."

Kneeling, she retrieved the pistol from where her double had dropped it.

"Impulsive, more like. Impetuous..." She flipped the Colt around her hand so that she was holding it by the barrel. She struck the doppelgänger in the face with the cold, hefty grip. "...Hot-headed and stupid."

Her twin's head lolled forward at the impact. Blood-tinted saliva trickled from between its lips. *Who's the rag-doll now?*

Lara wanted to enjoy the role reversal. It triggered the disturbing thought that perhaps a malicious desire for revenge was an innate part of her; as much her nature as it clearly was that of the creature before her. The storms of Yamatai had simply blasted aside all the societal norms she'd layered over her true self during the preceding decade. Much like an archaeology dig-site, her dark, spiteful core had been excavated and exposed during that fateful expedition.

The doppelgänger raised its head. "Cunt...", it slurred. But even as Lara watched, its facial expression transformed. Grogginess melted away. Blazing fury took its place instead.

At that same instant, the double's climbing axe came down on Lara's forearm. The archaeologist hadn't even seen it drawn. Fortunately the drugs had already had their intended effect and it was only the shaft that connected with Lara's wrist instead of the sharpened axe head. Still, the blow was strong enough for her to lose her grip on the Colt, which skittered away in the darkness of the cave.

Roaring, the double yanked its own pistol out of its holster. The creature pointed the barrel at the archaeologist's chest.

Lara flung herself sideways as the creature fired.

Scrambling in the gloom as her opponent shot wildly, the Englishwoman eventually found a slit in the passage wall. She had to turn sideways to fit but it was her only alternative to facing the furious one-woman firing squad.

She shook her head. Once more into the unknown of a pitch black tunnel, hoping for the best but knowing full well that – more likely that not – booby-traps awaited to crush her happiness. It was the story of her life.

Chapter 24

Gradually the sound of the creature's shrieks and gunshots dimmed as Lara sidled further down the tunnel.

It was cold down here. Lara would have said unnaturally so, but after her complete physical depletion by Natla and her flunkies, it was difficult to assess objectively. No matter the cause, she was shivering.

At least the passage began to widen, giving her a break from the oppressive sense of stone sandwiching her too fragile body. She found she still needed the support of the rock to stay upright though. Bracing one hand against it, she followed the wall. Its cool, hard tangibility was her guide; the only reliability she had in her pitch black wanderings. As her senses fluctuated under the influence of her injuries and the flickering efficiency of the painkillers, touch became the only thing she could trust – her only anchor to reality.

Her foot caught on something in the dark and she stumbled to her knees. *What now, seriously?*

She activated the light on her pack and turned to assess the obstacle.

Legs.

A body slumped against the side of the tunnel, its limbs stretched out before it. As Lara's eyes adjusted to the brightness of the LED illumination, she realised a second figure was propped against the first.

She scowled. How many archaeologists had Natla forced down this hell-hole, ramping Lara's profession up the Red List? It was another reason she had to outmanoeuvre her double and return to the surface; she wanted to be the one to put a much deserved bullet through the businesswoman's grin.

To prevent herself sinking further into the paralysing stickiness of her blood fantasies, the Englishwoman decided to more thoroughly examine the corpses. She could at least use the activity as justification for a break. Anything that gave her a clue as to what else was down –

No.

It was impossible.

She scrambled up to the bodies. They weren't victims of Natla's schemes; up close she could see that clearly. They had been down in the tunnel a long time. Not centuries but certainly decades. Skin was still attached to bone, but blackened and vacuum-packed onto the skeleton as fat and muscle melted away. The clothing was still intact too, but leached of colour by several dozen coats of dust that had no doubt filtered down between every fibre.

Still, there was enough discernible detail to provoke the chilling question.

"Mother?"

The words escaped her lips in a child's voice.

Lara recognised Amelia Croft's French braid. She knew and loved that fur-lined parka. And if the second figure was her mother, the lanky companion she huddled with had to be –

Trembling even harder, Lara reached out.

And then froze, staring at her hand.

It was a little girl's.

Her gaze dropped down her front. The same unbelievable sight. She was eleven years old again, back in her school uniform, complete with navy blazer.

Her common sense growled that it was all a trick; a lie designed to unsettle her. None of it was real.

It was impossible for her to be a child again.

More importantly, it was impossible for her parents to be here in Delphi, hundreds of feet under the earth. They vanished in the Himalayas. Her mother's plane went down; her father rushed into the same storm on a suicidal rescue mission, and shared her fate. That was where their corpses lay, mangled with rock and metal; artefacts themselves in an undiscovered, snow-walled tomb.

So why were the tears flowing?

She was on her knees in front of the figures, pawing at them, trying to snuggle between them – their bodies as hard and brittle as insect shells – as she sobbed.

It didn't matter that they were probably an illusion; yet another stage concocted in the Pythia's sick trial. Lara had craved their touch for so long. It was everything she'd refused to let herself dwell on the past fifteen years, and it was right in front of her. Tactile. She felt her denial crumbling as if she had just closed her fist around a branch left overnight in a bonfire; the last ash-scaled fragments flaking away at her fingertips.

Mother. Father.

She was still mewling when she felt a presence behind her. Breath snagged in her throat.

"There you are, you little shit."

A hand seized her blazer lapel and she was hauled off the ground. She found herself looking up at her adult self, frayed and furious.

The creature sneered, "You look different. Have you done something with your hair?"

The question was followed by a sharp backhand.

Lara sprawled face down in the dirt. Her cheek already stinging, her eyes followed suit.

The doppelgänger stood over her. It reached down and grabbed her ponytail, tugging her upright as it muttered, "My mistake. You're what you've always been – a pathetic, snivelling, stupid brat who I've had to carry her entire life."

There was no denying that.

Lara knew then that her shadow self hadn't been born on Yamatai. The island's unique mix of blood, dirt, suffering and violence had acted as nitrate-enriched compost for it, but the creature had been with her for much longer; she realised that now. For well over a decade its ice-cold practicality had guided her. When she was scared and lost, it pointed her in the right direction and forced her to put one foot haltingly forward at a time. Right then, the Englishwoman realised the exact moment the creature had been born; the first time she needed it.

The days that following her parents' disappearance were the worst of her life.

She couldn't sleep. She couldn't eat. She couldn't concentrate. Every time someone knocked on a classroom door to consult with the teacher, Lara's heartbeat accelerated with the hope that it was news of her mother and father. She'd strain forward in her seat, trying to listen to their conversation. Always, the result was disappointment.

It went on and on – punctuated by Roth's increasingly weary phone calls.

Days turned to weeks. People – especially the teachers – were nice to her, and understanding, but they were also instinctively drawing away from her. She had become an oddity overnight. No one knew what to say to her, so it became easier to avoid interacting with her. When she walked into the dining hall, the room would hush. She would sit among her peers, but never feel one of them. She ate all her meals in silence; eyes downcast so she wouldn't have to see them continually glancing at her and whispering behind their hands.

It got worse when one of the second years asked her flat out who would look after her if her parents were dead. Lara didn't know. She didn't have any other family. She'd never known her father's parents – they'd been gone long before she was born. Her mother's mother – an aspirant aristocrat intent on grooming Lara into the perfect young lady – had died two years previously, following her barrister husband to the grave.

Richard and Amelia Croft were both only children.

Lara had no one.

She was terrified. What if they put her in an orphanage? What if they sold off Croft Manor and all its contents while she was at school, and she never got to go home again?

When sleep did come it was just a series of nightmares, or dreams of rushing into her parents' arms. The latter was worse than the nightmares. Her chest ached when she woke.

She found out it was possible to worry yourself sick. Literally. She fell asleep in Geography class and only woke up two days later in the school's hospital wing when her fever broke.

They wanted to give her counselling. They wanted to put her on a sedative.

She wouldn't talk – *what was there to say? How would it help?*

She hid her pills.

After a while all she wanted was certainty. Confirmation that her parents were dead was better than the waiting; the not knowing.

Then one day she knew.

It had been almost four months since Richard and Amelia Croft vanished. As had become habit for her, Lara woke in the darkness of her dorm room. It was just after 5am. She knew she wouldn't fall back to sleep again so she just lay there, waiting for her heartbeat to slow and the perspiration to evaporate off her skin.

As her body calmed itself, her brain sloughed off the night's reunification dream. Despite how badly it slashed at her heart, she still wanted to clasp onto everything about it – like a toddler intent on holding a bad-tempered cat. But every second of consciousness that passed, more detail sublimed. What was left was blurred disappointment; a once intricate carving blasted by the elements into nondescript meaninglessness. All that lingered was the craving for her parents; a sense of hollowness like a part of her had been ripped out.

That pre-dawn morning, in the midst of her new, unwanted routine, logic intruded. Its voice was cool, but enticingly calm and clear.

Her parents were never coming back.

There were two explanations for their absence. One: They didn't actually care about their daughter and couldn't be bothered to return. Two: They were dead.

Lara didn't believe the first reason. Her parents loved her more than anything. They always told her that meeting her, watching her grow every day was the greatest discovery they could ever make. She knew that if there was any way for them to return, they would pursue it, regardless of the risks. There was nothing they wouldn't do to get back to her. The fact that it had been four months with no word from them...

It meant that they were gone forever.

Despite the gaping hole their loss left in her, she had to carry on without them.

That morning, her hands were steady for the first time in weeks while she buttoned her shirt and tied up her hair. The girl looking back at her in the mirror was as calm and coolly insistent as the voice in her head.

Lara caught her double gazing down at the bodies. Its jaw was clenched but she could see something in its eyes other than rage. She didn't have time to identify the emotion though. The creature caught her staring, and exploded.

"Stop that!"

It slapped her again. Then, suddenly fixated on the tears still marking Lara's cheeks, it shook her hard. "Stop crying, right now."

The creature tightened its grip on Lara's ponytail and snarled, "You know what? Enough. I'm sick of this." It jerked hard, hauling the girl to her feet. Wincing, Lara groped at the double's hand, trying but failing to loosen the painful tugging on her scalp.

"Move it!"

The creature drove her before it.

Limping and staggering respectively, the two Laras eventually emerged back into the Pythia's cavern. The oracle still sat there on her tripod, her head thrown back as she mumbled to herself.

The doppelgänger shoved Lara down on the ground and immediately pointed the Colt at her. Rolling onto her back, Lara looked up at her icy adult self behind the barrel.

The end game.

The schoolgirl began to shudder. She didn't know what to do. She was dangerously close to crying again.

The creature noticed.

"Look at you," it spat. "A stupid, over-trusting orphan who's been afraid her whole life. Afraid to take what she wants, afraid of who she is, afraid of what others think. Ashamed. You're pathetic. A disgrace. Crofts *act*. You? The only action you're ever capable of is turning and running in the opposite direction."

Words of denial snagged in Lara's throat. It – It wasn't wrong.

The creature seemed to read her mind. "I'm sorry. Was this supposed to be the point that you blame me for everything that's gone wrong in your life?"

It lowered its pistol and crouched down, elbows on its haunches, so it was on the girl's level. "Quite the contrary. I saved you. I saved Sam on Yamatai. You're the one who fucked her and ran. *Twice*." The creature flicked Lara's nose. "You got all those people killed on the island – the Endurance crew, the rescue pilots, Grim, Alex, Roth. *You*. Your lack of conviction; your inability to act when it mattered most cost them their lives. Me? I just rid the world of a few murderers."

The creature sounded almost reasonable after its earlier fury. "Are you ashamed? I would be."

Shaking its head, the doppelgänger straightened. It examined its gun before pointing the barrel back at Lara. It sighed, "Shall we end this?"

Yes. It was time.

Lara cleared her throat. "This – " She realised she was back in her adult body. She gestured at her climbing axe, and then the creature's Colt. "This isn't a fair fight."

The doppelgänger face hardened. Its words were bitter. "What do we know about fair? Everyone we loved, who loved us, ripped away. Completely alone in the world from 21. The one person we fall in love with is our best friend, and we wrecked that forever when we broke her heart."

Lara swallowed. "You're right. I am responsible. For everything."

The creature smiled at the admission. "Book smart but so bloody stupid."

"But I realised something else."

"Oh?" After her prey's alternating silence and sobs, Lara's double arched a brow at the sudden desire for dialogue.

Lara murmured, "I realised you're me."

We. We broke her heart.

The creature scowled, "I told you, I'm better than you." It took a step towards her. "I thought that was clear?"

"No, we're the same. You're still me."

End game.

Planting both feet, Lara bucked her hips. It gave her just enough of the reach she needed. The heel of her boot connected with her target – the flesh just above the doppelgänger's left hip. Its Achilles' heel, just like her own.

The creature howled.

Instantly it crumpled. Curled in a ball. Cringing. Crying.

Lara tore a piece of rock out of the fractured ground. Clenched in her hand, she smashed it into her double's temple.

The creature sprawled, limp.

Lara dropped her weapon. She threw herself at her foe. Over and over she brought down her fist on its face. Between blows she could see her fingers flickering between their adult and child form but she didn't stop.

Everything Natla and Dupont had put her through. Vladimir and his brothers. Mathias. Himiko. Her helplessness. Her culpability. It all funnelled into this tantrum. She was tired of cowering down, feeling ashamed because of her weakness and feeling ashamed because of her dark side.

This thing didn't control her. The reality was that she used it; she drew on it. It did evil, but it also did good. It helped Lara accomplish great things. It also simply watched on, hands behind its back as she hurt others. She, *her true self* – if she could even say that? The creature was easy to hate; it was easy to scapegoat. But ultimately it was just a part of her. It was her.

Lara's knuckles were torn and bloody before she stopped.

Rasping, drunk with exhaustion, she reached over and retrieved the discarded pistol. Finally she had it in her hand. As she pointed it at the creature, a bloodshot eye half-opened in the

mess that Lara had made of its face. The gaze was resigned as it passed from the gun to Lara. Then the lid descended again.

So much fear in her life. So much anger – particularly during the past five years. Anger directed at the world. Anger directed especially at herself.

She'd hated herself for so long.

She honestly still did.

She wanted to pull the trigger.

It just wasn't a solution.

It was simply the pinnacle of self-loathing; a final act that would bleed out the last bit of self-contentment she was capable of feeling. Fire that bullet and she would be completely hollow. The creature, with all its cruelty and selfish desires, would be gone. But so too would be its steel determination, instinct and courage. *Her* determination, instinct and courage.

She lowered the gun.

"I'm sorry."

She holstered the pistol instead. When she looked up again, the patch of ground was empty.

End game.

Somehow Lara got to her feet. She staggered towards the oracle.

All politeness forgotten, she spat, "Are you happy? Have I proven myself? Is there anything more you want?"

Her legs gave out on her and she stumbled back to her hands and knees. The position exacerbated her fatigue-triggered dizziness, and she grimaced.

God, I just want to sleep.

Fighting a fresh wave of nausea and trying to fend off the resurged blaze in her side, she murmured her question. "Where is the Aegis?"

She asked it so quietly she wasn't even sure if the Pythia had heard her until the girl slid from her tripod. She padded over to where Lara was kneeling, silent even while making the leap across the three foot wide fissure.

The archaeologist tried to raise her head to watch the girl's approach but it felt like her entire body had hardened into lead. She was left staring at the cracked earth beneath her.

It was only when dirty, bare feet appeared in her small square of vision that Lara was finally able to summon the strength to look up.

Standing before her, the girl was far shorter than Lara expected. Her facial expression remained impassive as she gazed down on the archaeologist.

Lara tried to recover her manners. "Please."

The Pythia knelt down. Gently, she took Lara's head in her hands.

After so much abuse, the caress was welcome. Lara almost purred at the touch.

"Ladybird," the oracle whispered.

She pressed her mouth to the archaeologist's.

Soft, eerily cold lips weren't at all what Lara was expecting. It made her think of Sam, and the contrast of her kisses: so warm and moist, always with the barely perceptible taste of berry lip-gloss.

Lara seized the oracle's wrists, but that was as far as she got with her protest. She felt her eyes roll back as sense drained from her, straight into the oracle's mouth.

Chapter 25

The sense of touch returned to her first.

Her limbs draped with crisp, cool cotton. Something warm and soft in her hand.

She fought against her weighted eyelids, won and found herself lying in a dimly lit space. She looked down her body.

Fingers interlaced with her own.

Lara let her gaze track across the owner's hand and along their forearm. Resting there on the crook of their elbow was a bob of fine black hair, splayed over both skin and mattress.

Oh, back here again.

In theory she should have rallied against the fantasy, but as far as dreams went, this one was far from terrible. So far, anyway. And after her ordeal of the past few days, she didn't think there was anything wrong with a few minutes of escapist self-delusion foisted on her by her subconscious. No doubt there was more horror waiting for her in reality. She was entitled to a break.

And it was nice here in her fantasy. No pain. Just soothing quiet; a cotton wool haze masking every perception. Everything so soft and beautiful. Especially Sam.

Lara smiled. She was seized by an unsuppressable desire to run her fingertips through her companion's hair.

She flexed her digits in the first step of an attempt to free them.

Sam's head shot up. "Lara?"

"Hey."

In her skull, the response sounded stronger than the croak that dribbled out from between her lips.

Not that it seemed to concern the filmmaker. An eye blink later, she had Lara's cheeks sandwiched between her palms and her mouth against the archaeologist's. The kiss was forceful enough that it pressed the Englishwoman's head back into her pillow.

Lara wasn't complaining, though. After the creepily cold, death-tainted kisses of the Pythia and Natla, Sam's lips were life embodied – warm to the touch, but drawing their heat from a deeper heart-pumping fire that neither of the other women possessed. It was one of the things Lara had always admired, and then loved, about her one-time best friend.

As their mouths moved against each other, the Englishwoman heard a voice – her own – murmur at the back of her mind, "You're getting a helluva lot of action these days, Croft." It made her smile mid-kiss.

Suddenly Sam pulled back. "Shit, I'm sorry." She wiped the back of her hand across her nose. "I shouldn't have done that."

She wouldn't meet Lara's eyes, but the archaeologist could see that she'd been crying. Even with her nostrils pink-tinged and her eyelids slightly puffy, she was still beautiful.

Regardless of how right it was, Lara's single thought was *"Fuck it."*

She seized Sam's shirt by the neckline and drew her down into another kiss.

I love you so very much. I wish I could be the one showing you every day.

Lara released her companion, and slumped back amongst her bedding.

"Mmmmm, I like this dream," she half-chuckled, half-whispered.

She let her fingertips wander back to Sam's face; over her lips and soft, slightly mottled cheeks. It just felt so incredibly real.

Sam continued to stare at her, mouth agape.

Lara frowned, "What?"

"Don't you remember anything?"

"Remember what?"

The tidal wave of adrenalin seemed to recede then, along with her contented smile. She suddenly felt like she was lying stranded on a beach post-shipwreck, completely exposed to exhaustion as if it was the tropical sun beating down on her.

In addition, she was suddenly aware of the IV line entering her body through her right inner elbow, and sticky patches under her shirt where something was attached to her chest.

"What happened?" she asked.

Sam swallowed but it didn't flush the shakiness from her voice. "Lara, you – you died."

"Huh?"

"Your heart stopped. Twice."

"I don't understand."

"Doctor Stone thought you might be brain damaged. She wasn't sure if you'd wake up."

"What are you talking about?"

Sam exhaled slowly. "Perhaps it's better if I show you?"

She turned and from somewhere behind her hauled out a Macbook.

She helped Lara sit upright then and climbed onto the mattress alongside her companion.

An instant later the filmmaker jolted away. "Oh," she winced. "Me sitting here; it doesn't hurt, does it?"

"No."

Strangely it didn't. At least not in the obvious way. What it did was remind Lara of the girls' college days; lying side by side as they watched DVDs in bed on the laptop. Lara in her flannel pyjama bottoms and an overstretched T-shirt; Sam in skimpy sleep shorts and a vest that left little to the imagination.

The combination of her Japanese heritage and outgoing American upbringing meant that Sam had always been more physically affectionate than her flatmate. But even she didn't miss an opportunity to make innuendo-slathered comments about how their movie nights started like a cheesy lesbian porno.

At the time, Lara had tittered politely in response; all the while sneaking sniffs of her best friend's hair and, when Sam was most absorbed in the film, letting her gaze travel over the American girl's exposed breastbone. Lara always felt like a heel after such evenings and lazy Sundays together. In a way it was worse than knowing Sam was out partying and probably shagging some random hook-up.

Back in the present, Sam opened up a video editing suite. She enlarged the preview screen.

Lara glanced from it to her former friend. She was genuinely surprised. "You've been working?"

Sam looked a little guilty about it. "It's been two days, Lara. Just sitting here, looking at you in – I don't know – a coma, I had to do something or I was gonna go crazy."

Two days.

Lara stared at the scene before her. The camera was trained on the patch of earth and rock that marked the entrance to Apollo's lost temple. Natla's personal army was standing about, some with assault rifles aimed at the crevice; others facing away as they scanned the surrounding landscape with its scattered boulders and scrub.

Apart from the sound of a breeze intermittently buffeting the camera's microphone, there was silence. Until Sam's voice broke it. "It's been almost four hours with no contact. Shouldn't you send someone down there?"

Natla sniped back, "The only one who needs to be worried is you. If Lara doesn't come back, it's not in my interest to let you go."

Even removed from the events by time and a computer screen, Lara felt rage stiffen her limbs. Evidently Sam felt it too. She laid a hand over Lara's fist.

"Just keep watching," she murmured.

Time leapt forward in the video. The sun had almost set, casting the mountains' bruise-purple shadows over everything in the valley.

The clip cut to choppy footage of bush and rock. Even before her bloody, raw hands came into the shot, Lara recognised her voice. Incoherent mumbling interspersed with shallow, throat-shredding rasps.

Looking at the video, she could have been watching a low-budget zombie movie she was that disconnected from events on-screen. She didn't recall any of it. It was only through logic that she was able to place the camera as the one attached to her backpack strap.

Sam's voice yelped in the recording, "Oh my God! Natla, the feed's back. I..." The excitement in her voice faded. "I don't know where that is."

She immediately switched her address to her former friend. "Lara? Lara, can you hear me?"

There was no opportunity for the archaeologist's past self to respond.

The film jumped back to the open expanse as one of Natla's lackeys barked, "Over there!" Instantly his rifle was at shoulder height.

There was movement in the right corner of the screen. The camera zoomed in to capture Lara as she lumbered into the clearing.

Lying in bed, staring at herself, the archaeologist gasped, "Christ."

Even that response didn't seem strong enough.

Sam nodded, "And I thought you looked bad on the rescue ship after Yamatai."

Lara in the video was streaked in blood and dirt. Her flesh was almost as grey as the coat of dust draped over her hair and shoulders. If she sounded like a zombie in the previous clip, she was the walking dead embodied in this one. She staggered stiffly from leg to leg; her left arm swinging limp with every step. In her right hand, her pistol rested forgotten. She was trembling violently and had switched to expelling a horrible keening sound with every wheezed breath.

The worst was her face. Terrified eyes darted around ceaselessly; blind but searching. They stood in stark contrast to her skin. The latter was smeared and filthy, glistening with sweat and barely coagulated blood that had trickled down from the reopened tear on her forehead. Whatever she had been through underground had left the wound looking ominously black and unhealthy.

But there was no TLC to be had from Natla's personal army. Two soldiers had rounded on Lara and were yelling commands.

"Hold it right there!"

The Englishwoman shuddered to a stop. But that was where the obedience ended. She raised her pistol at the same time a rivulet of blood snaked out her left nostril and over her quivering lips.

"Put your weapon down," the merc demanded.

His squad mate added, "Drop it or we'll shoot."

Lara, the wounded leopard, growled back from between clenched teeth. Other men were advancing, essentially cornering her. As disorientated as she was, some part of her recognised the escalating threat. Eyes wide, dilated pupils entirely circled by white, she began waving around the gun, pointing at each of them in turn.

"We're warning you," the first soldier threatened. "Put. It. Down!"

"You have 'til the count of three."

The video cut to Lara's personal camera. The edit triggered a shift in audio, and for the first time a word sifted out of the garbled nonsense rolling around in her mouth. She recognised it as Archaic Greek. "Anax..." *King*.

"One..." The guard shouted. "Two..."

He nodded towards his team, and they all settled their rifle butts against their shoulders; steadying them in preparation to fire.

"Thr –"

"NO!"

Sam leapt into the space between the men and Lara.

The American woman stood centred in the frame, arms flung out as a simultaneous barrier and truce gesture.

Somewhere off camera, Pierre Dupont groaned, "This is another of their games; some bullshit trick. You should have them both taken out. Spare yourself more trouble."

Natla snorted in response and promptly called out, "Get out of there, Miss Nishimura."

"Please." Sam grimaced. She looked behind her at Lara. "She's clearly not herself, but I can fix this. Just get these guys to back off a bit and let me talk to her."

"You have one minute."

"Right, okay."

The mercs lowered their weapons as Sam took a step towards her former best friend.

Lara watched in horror as her past self, still snarling, trained her Colt on Sam. In her frantic, feverish state, there was no distinguishing friend from foe.

The archaeologist glanced at her companion propped up beside her in the hospital bed.

Sam was looking back at her, sadly. "You really don't you remember any of this?"

"No."

"Lara, seriously, you were tripping off your tits. I've never seen you like that before. It was beyond terrible."

The Englishwoman frowned. "I could have shot you."

"They could have shot *you*." Sam shrugged, "Just chalk it up as the one time I wasn't completely useless and I got to save you for once... You know, cancelling one of the, like, twenty-five life debts I owe you."

That was such an awful way of looking at herself.

"Sam..."

Eyes on her chest bone, the filmmaker shook her head, "Just keep watching, okay?"

In the video, Sam was desperately trying to reassure Lara. They both were clearly terrified. Sam's raised hands were trembling as much as the pistol in Lara's fist.

Her voice was shaky too, with the cheerfulness in it as forced as her smile. "Hey, Lara. It's Sam. Do you remember, sweetie? Sam. Best friend, flatmate, travel buddy, smokin' hot camera freak, all that. Sam."

She tested another step.

In response, Lara's second hand closed over the pistol grip. Her ramblings increased in volume and intensity.

Sam's grin wavered. "It's alright, Lara, it's alright. No one's going to hurt you, I promise. But I need you to put your gun down, okay? Can you do that for me, babe? For Sam. Please."

The Englishwoman's breathing had become shallow gulps. She didn't move.

Sam mimed the action of lowering a gun. "Please, Lara."

Slowly the Englishwoman's fingers loosened their hold on her weapon.

Even slower, her arm began its return to her side.

Sam beamed at her. "That's it. That's my girl."

The video cut back to show the entire clearing.

Lara was smiling at Sam, her eyes for a brief moment actually focused.

Then her pupils rolled skywards. Her head followed suit. She could have been examining the clouds, she seemed that absorbed in what was above her.

While she was still staring – her skull thrown back, her mouth gaping in wonder – her body toppled sideways.

Her right shoulder struck the ground first. Her head bounced next.

She started twitching then, her body convulsing as if she was being subjected to multiple electric prods. Eyes clenched shut; her hands were claws; knees drawn up to her chest.

As soon as it started, Sam began running towards the archaeologist.

Natla's voice warned, "Stay back."

Midstride, Sam glared over her shoulder. "Fuck you," she spat, and continued dashing towards Lara.

By the time she dropped to her knees next to her former friend, the seizure was over. Lara lay loose-limbed and serene-looking. To the casual observer, she could have been having a nap. She made no movement; nor sound for that matter.

The video jumped to footage from the archaeologist's earpiece camera.

Sam's worried face was in close-up.

"Lara?"

Taking the Englishwoman by the shoulder, Sam rolled Lara onto her back. She shook the limp form more insistently. "Lara?! Hey! "

Sam frowned at her companion for a second, before her expression melted into open-mouthed horror.

"Oh shit!"

The documentary maker lifted her head and yelled across the clearing. "She's not breathing. Natla, do something! Please! She's turning blue."

There was a scuffling noise off camera and Natla's voice added coolly, "Stay where you are, Doctor."

Sam swallowed hard. "Lara..." Her voice quivered as she addressed the body alongside her. "I need you to come back to me, okay?"

Gingerly, Sam placed her palm against her companion's breastbone. She pressed her other hand over it, weaving her fingers together. With arms locked out, she pushed down hard on Lara's chest. Five compressions later, she pinched Lara's nose closed, tilted her chin and breathed into her mouth.

The archaeologist's chest rose once and then deflated. She remained still.

Sam disengaged their lips. She looked on the verge of tears. "Fuck, I don't know what I'm doing."

Panic overwhelmed her. She shook her companion hard. "Lara, don't do this. Come on. Wake up! I need you." She turned then and screeched, "Natla, *pleeeeeease!*"

The businesswoman and Dupont were still arguing over the possibility of the two young women setting up some sort of trap. Ultimately the employer won out over the employee, ending the discussion with a sneered "Samantha may be a drama queen but she's not that good an actress." She added brusquely, "Stone, go."

Moments later, the red-haired doctor was kneeling across from Sam, medikit in hand. As weary as she always looked, that same demeanour was oddly reassuring in a crisis. Especially when her unflappability was counterpoised with Sam's fluster.

This was Stone's element, and she worked quickly and decisively. Natla only hired – or enslaved – the best. Watching her in action proved Stone was no exception to the rule.

A split-second assessment of Lara had the doctor muttering, "She's gone into v-fib."

She immediately tore open Lara's shirt and sports bra. She was busy cutting through the backpack strap, when a panicked Sam finally found her words. "V-fib? What does that mean?"

"Her heart's lost a healthy rhythm. It can't pump blood."

"What do w– ? "

Stone started a fresh set of compressions on Lara's chest. While she pumped, counting to thirty, she muttered, "In the bag, get the AED. We need to reset her heart."

Sam rummaged in the medikit and hauled out a red box with a heart icon and AED acronym marked in white on the lid.

"Switch it on. Follow the instructions."

Stone continued CPR while Sam obeyed the defibrillator's audio commands. Despite her trembling hands, she managed to plug the two electrode pads into the device, and attach them to the left side of Lara's rib cage and the right side of her breast bone respectively.

Immediately Stone took over operation as the device stated simply, "Shock advised".

"Stay back," the doctor yelled.

The AED counted down and Stone initiated the jolt. Lara twitched slightly – nothing as dramatic as on television – but continued to lie unresponsive.

Stone started a new round of CPR. By now there were several faces looking down on the resuscitation efforts. Natla hung back but Dupont, Larson and a handful of mercs were watching up close. Most were simply impassive observers. Some, like the giant pseudo-lumberjack, stood with knitted brows. A couple – including Dupont, of course – seemed to be relishing the sight of Lara bare breasted.

She couldn't imagine there was anything arousing about her battered ashen flesh but then she still didn't really understand men when it came to base wants. Time and again, she'd seen their lust for wealth, power and sex overwhelm sense at moments when they needed their full wits about them.

The results were always detrimental to their well-being and, in turn, beneficial to Lara, whose only real desire was for answers. Or Sam, she was forced to admit whenever she let herself brood over her greatest longings.

It felt completely surreal to Lara to be witnessing her own waltz with death. She was conscious of her mortality; she'd had enough near-fatal encounters with dangerous men, creatures and environments to alert her to her risky flirtation.

When you sat for hours hiding from furious armed thugs or waiting for bleeding to stop, you had a lot of time to think about luck and destiny and how much longer you could realistically outrun the Reaper. For the past five years it had felt like she was frequently balancing on a tightrope, taunting Death to follow her out over the abyss.

She just never got to see it like this – in glorious full-colour HD.

Sam's video gave the archaeologist a front row seat to the morbid spectacle. Everyone looking down on her lifeless body made her feel like she was lying in the casket at her own funeral. She felt a chill skitter over her arms and up the nape of her neck in an unwanted caress.

Onscreen, the AED emitted a wail. "Flatline. Flatline."

Stone's eyes darted to the men around her. "We need to get her to the medical tent. NOW!"

It was Larson who scooped Lara up in his arms. He sprinted for Stone's chambers, tailed right behind by the doctor and Sam.

One corner of the tent was set up like an emergency room, complete with hospital trolley. "Lie her there," Stone ordered.

Lara was deposited on the trolley. Lying like that on her back, the camera remained pointed at the ceiling. Still, faces kept appearing above her.

Stone uncapped a needle. While she administered the shot into Lara's left arm, she murmured, "Sam, I need you to carry on with CPR."

"But I don't know what – "

"Thirty reps, exactly like you were doing before. Larson, wheel over that cart."

The trio worked steadily; Stone slapping electrocardiogram leads to strategic spots on Lara's chest while Sam pumped at the archaeologist's heart.

It was on the third round of compressions that a jagged set of waves appeared on the ECG monitor. Still, the machine's shrill alarm never stopped.

"Right," Stone exhaled. "We've got something to work with."

She reached for a pair of resuscitation paddles from the crash cart. "Clear." She applied them to Lara's chest.

In response, every wave on the monitor collapsed.

For three seconds, there was nothing but a perfectly flat line, as ominous as the shoreline before a tsunami. Then the chaos of roiling, irregular waves returned to accompany the device's shriek.

Even louder was Sam's voice. As pale as her former friend, she was bawling right next to the Englishwoman's face. "No! Fucking *NO!*, Lara, you can't do this!"

"Stand back."

Stone shocked Lara again.

The same dead calm.

The same hysterical screaming from Sam. "Goddammit, Lara! Come back! Please, come back."

Stone had her palms on Lara's chest, pumping hard once more, when the ECG beeped. The doctor's gaze travelled from her patient to the monitor and then to an equally surprised Sam.

"Rhythm," Stone explained. "We've got a stable rhythm."

The video stopped abruptly there, with the camera focused on the filmmaker's desperately relieved face.

Lara realised Sam was squeezing her hand. She turned to examine her companion. She didn't have the energy for more of a response so she just winked, "I suppose that counts as a happy ending."

Sam wouldn't look at her former friend. She frowned instead at the women's interlaced fingers. "You crashed a few hours later again. It took a really long time to bring you back. Doctor Stone almost gave up."

Lara had a pretty good idea what persuaded Stone to keep trying. And for once it wasn't Natla's vicious bullying.

"Thank you. For not giving up on me."

Sam continued to address their hands. "Seeing you like that was the scariest thing I've ever experienced. And I've been soul-sucked by an evil sorcerer queen."

She swung her face towards Lara. "You've been out cold for two days. I was worried if it went on much longer. I wouldn't put it past Natla to smother you in your bed, and then put a bullet through my head."

Lara rested her free palm on top of Sam's hand. "I'm sorry for putting you through that." Then she leaned in and pressed her mouth against the filmmaker's.

Almost immediately Sam's lips parted, allowing Lara deeper access. But as soon as the tips of their tongues met, she disengaged from the kiss.

The filmmaker frowned, "You seem different. And not the usual shell-shocked, banged-up *different* for you."

Lara could see a vastly different version of herself sauntering out of that cave; sitting next to Sam right now and worming into her heart with feigned sincerity and secret lust. The thought nauseated her.

Sam asked, "What happened to you down there?"

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

"Try me. I think I'm better equipped than anyone else in this place to believe you."

Lara let the corner of her mouth twitch into a smile. "You're probably right."

It was the archaeologist's turn to stare at her hands. "I was forced to see myself as I really am. I – I faced some harsh truths."

"Like?"

"How I can't compartmentalise who I am any more. Every desire, every action; I'm entirely culpable for the outcome, good or bad. I can't blame anyone or anything else. And I realised I've made so many mistakes as I fought this truth; how much I hurt myself and others as I pitted these different parts of myself against each other."

She looked up at Sam. Her companion's mouth was shaped in a perfect o; her brow creased.

Suddenly Lara was self-conscious about her epiphany.

"Does – does that make sense?"

Did it even really happen?

For an eye blink Sam stared at her. Then she seized Lara in a hug.

The embrace... It felt so good to be in her arms – to simply be held for the first time in half a decade – that tears sparked.

Lara murmured, "Am I dreaming again?"

The whispered response. "I almost lost you."

The archaeologist tried to steady her voice. "I thought you hated me. I thought that you'd never forgive me."

"I thought I did hate you. But I don't know how I feel anymore, Lara. You've hurt me so badly, but I owe you my life. And then I watched you die." Sam clung tighter to her companion. "Looking at you like that, all I could think was that we never settled anything. I still feel so much for you."

It felt alright to admit it. "I never stopped loving you, Sam. I just didn't know how to walk away without hurting us both."

Sam had started crying.

Lara detached herself from the embrace. She rested her forehead against Sam's instead, and ran her knuckles over the American woman's cheek as the latter whimpered, "I love you, Lara. I love Steven. I don't know what to do. I can't marry him if I feel this way about you. I'm so confused. I need time to figure this all out." She hiccupped, "I – I just want to go home."

"I'm going to get you home, I promise. Then we'll figure this out toge– "

She was interrupted by another voice, drawling from across the room. "Aaaw, will you look at the adorable baby lesbians."

Chapter 26

Natla stood in the doorway. She was flanked by two rifle-toting mercenaries. Behind her, Dupont and Larson peered over each shoulder, forming a new, unholy trinity with the businesswoman.

Lara noticed her captor was looking worse than the last time she'd seen her. Everything about Natla was a little dimmer. A casual observer probably wouldn't have noticed the difference but her shoulders were a fraction more hunched; her eyes almost as wan and yellowed as her skin. Lara's realisation was accompanied by the terrifying thought that with her deterioration, the woman's urgency would have ramped up several levels, along with her capacity for cruelty.

Recognising Lara's scrutiny of her, Natla's gaze and voice hardened simultaneously. "You got your little reunion. That was your reward. Now it's time to get back to business."

The men in black strode forward. They grabbed hold of Sam and hauled her off the hospital bed.

"Hey, stop it." The filmmaker elbowed and yelped and jerked her weight around to no avail.

"No!" Lara flung back her blanket and swung herself over the side of the mattress.

As soon as her feet touched the ground though, her legs buckled. She didn't even have time to grab for the bed railing. She felt the IV needle tear her flesh as the drip stand toppled with her.

Her chest connected with the cool floor first.

Winded, and disconcertingly woozy, she still tried to push her upper body off the deck. Except she realised in horror that she had no strength in her limbs. None whatsoever. Her arms were trembling with the impotent exertion.

Natla delighted at the shock on her face. "Now, now, Lara, cardiac arrest is incredibly serious. It'll take you some time to recover."

The businesswoman jerked her head in Dupont's direction. He stepped forward, a grin twisting his lips and moustache like the cape-twirling villain of a Victorian melodrama.

The Frenchman drove his boot down on Lara's back, right between her shoulder blades. Head twisted to the side, she was pinned to the polyethylene.

"French bastard," she managed to hiss, despite her cheek being squashed against the floor.

Natla sighed. It was difficult to tell whether it was with exhaustion or admiration. "You are a remarkable woman, Lara. Truly. Your tenacity... I actually think it's impossible to break you, let alone kill you."

Let's hope the opposite is true for you.

Not wanting to enrage her *employer*, Lara kept her opinion to herself.

Sam had never had that kind of self-control, however. She yelled, "Fuck you and the broomstick you rode in on, Natla!"

The blonde turned to smirk at her fellow American. She tittered at the sight of the young woman restrained by her biceps and standing between two soldiers with a foot's advantage over her in height and breadth.

Natla returned her gaze to Lara. All levity was gone. "You found her, didn't you? The oracle?"

"Yes."

Excitement sparked in the businesswoman's eyes – electricity in the pitch black void of her pupils. "Did she give you an answer? Did she say where it is?"

This wasn't going to go down well.

"I – I'm not sure."

Natla frowned, "I'm sorry?"

"I don't remember."

"You don't *remember*?" The businesswoman cocked her head.

Lara felt the weight on her back withdraw. But just as she was exhaling, Dupont stomped back down on her. Her chin bounced on the floor, clacking her teeth together violently.

Natla looked down impassively on the archaeologist. "Do you need another reminder? Perhaps one involving your girlfriend?"

Lara had tried polite complicity. Perhaps Sam's way was better after all. It certainly was more gratifying.

Lara snapped, "Don't be a stupid bloody cow, Natla. Why would I lie to you?"

"Because you want it for yourself."

Dupont may as well have stomped on Lara again, Natla's outburst so effectively expelled the air from her lungs. It took the archaeologist a few gulps before she could formulate her response.

"You're sick and you're desperate, I understand. But now you're being paranoid. I don't want the Aegis and I don't know where the blasted thing is. I found the Pythia, yes, I passed her test, but that's the last thing I remember. She didn't say anything."

"Oh, I think you do have the answer, Lara. You have it locked inside you. And if you won't give it to me, I'll have to get it out of you myself."

"Believe me, I'd tell you if I kn – "

Dupont ground his knuckles into Lara's ribs.

She was heavily medicated; she'd realised that shortly after waking. But this pierced straight through the thick wool blanket enveloping her body and smothering her senses. It was a dagger thrust into the miniscule armour gap at a knight's armpit.

Lara tried to deny Dupont the satisfaction. She mashed her molars against the agony, but it was its relentlessness that wore her down, that tore apart her lips. Short sharp bursts of pain, unleashed on her like a semi-automatic rifle, she could endure. But this was like stumbling into acid fog. What started as a blunt irritation sheared her skin. It scoured off her epidermis and melted straight through fat and muscle. It penetrated straight to the nerve roots.

Despite herself, Lara was screaming.

Despite herself, Lara was back inside the downed helicopter on Yamatai.

She had to do something. Anything. Her body was telling her that there was something desperately wrong. Every exertion had stabbed her after she pulled herself free of that rusty spike of rebar in that foul, candle-lit chamber. But this was something far worse. Burning, aching, bleeding – all together. She was drowning in sensation. It was too much. Alternating waves of nausea and darkness kept overwhelming her. She wasn't sure which one would finally push her under.

No matter how much she blinked, her eyesight was starting to fade from the peripheries. She was left with misty tunnel vision. Unable to focus on anything else, she found herself staring at her palms – staring at an arrowhead and the lighter she'd just pillaged from the dead pilot.

She knew what she had to do to survive.

While she writhed on the medical tent floor, Lara was dimly aware of three things.

Sam straining against her captors, yelling herself as she tried to get to her best friend.

Larson turning his back and striding from the tent.

Doctor Stone emerging pale-faced and furious in the giant's place. "What are you *doing*?"

Evidently Stone losing her temper was rare enough to stun even Dupont. He stopped his torment and removed his boot from Lara's back.

Natla, with her employer's advantage, was unfazed. She simply arched an eyebrow in response. "Rehabilitation, doctor. Lady Croft is feeling much better."

Lara tried to push herself upright again. And failed. Instead, she lay half-curved, quivering and rasping in her hospital gown. At least until hands grabbed her roughly under the arms and hauled her upright.

She was dumped in a wheelchair. Immediately, two of Natla's goons started binding her to it with cord – at the ankles, knees, waist and chest. Surprisingly, they left her arms free.

Natla must have noted her reaction because the blonde asked, "You won't try anything foolish, Lara? For your sake and Sam's."

The archaeologist didn't have the strength for snark. She simply extended her middle finger.

Natla chuckled at the feeble insolence. "Then again, I don't think we have to worry about that. You seem suitably neutered for the time being."

The businesswoman was still smirking when she turned to Stone. "No more painkillers for Lady Croft, doctor. They seem to be dulling her famously sharp intellect."

Stone's jaw clenched. She looked decidedly angry, not weary when she responded, "The drugs double as anti-inflammatories, Miss Natla." She practically spat the businesswoman's name.

There was no way that her employer would have missed the impudence, but Stone carried on, ignoring the possible retaliation. She approached Lara and righted the drip stand. Then she knelt down before the younger woman and tended to the bloody spot where the IV needle had been partially torn out of her arm.

While Stone worked, she studied Lara's face. Still, it was to Natla that she spoke. "Miss Croft's health is incredibly fragile right now. Do you want her to have a relapse?" The redhead actually turned and scowled, "Do you?"

Natla was barely holding her temper in check. "One more word and I cut your project. Then you can take your son home to die. Do *you* want that? Do you?"

Lara noticed a shudder pass through the doctor's shoulders. Then the woman straightened and returned to Natla's side – a shamed dog back with its master.

The businesswoman looked furious. She pointed at Lara. "You have two hours. I expect an answer after that, or we start investigating what other methods of motivation work for you."

She let her gaze travel ominously to Sam, and more specifically her chest.

Sam caught her captor scrutinising her, and immediately her frantic eyes sought out Lara's.

But there was nothing the archaeologist could do.

That either of the young women could do in their current situation.

In the end, Lara just watched Natla and her party stride from the tent.

The Englishwoman was alone – the naughty child left to think about what she'd done. Watching on from the other side of the space were two guards posted at the entrance.

Glaring at their stony faces was pointless. Instead, Lara stared at her fists. Or, rather, stared past them.

She could see Sam's strained face; her eyes wide with fear. She could hear her companion's whimpered question, "What do we do, Lara?"

I'm not sure.

Imprisonment really wasn't her element. Even without weapons, she didn't feel as despairingly powerless as she did when caged. She could be clinging by her fingertips to a mountain face while the constant battering of the wind made her ears ache and the earth dropped off dizzily below her. She could be a hundred feet below the earth, dragging herself through a space that the Vietcong would probably think twice about.

Always though, she was active; moving. It was this stasis, this confinement that she didn't know how to deal with.

What did she know how to deal with? What could the little rat still do?

Natla was right about one thing. Lara did have the answer locked inside her.

"Anax..."

The Pythia had kept her word. It was the Englishwoman who couldn't remember.

"Anax..."

Think, Lara.

She rolled the wheelchair over to her bed and retrieved the Macbook.

Sam's editing suite was still open.

For a minute Lara was paralysed by the complexity of the screen before her, with its various audio and visual streams, video clip folders and dual preview panels. Navigating the Labyrinth of Crete would be easier than working out how to use this program.

And Sam always insisted that she wasn't smart...

Looking at the display, Lara could picture herself hiring her own personal tech expert; someone she could keep on call for moments like this. It would be a wise investment. She was largely hopeless when it came to handling the latest gadgetry.

Still, she knew enough to find and navigate the playback bar. Over and over she watched the film segment where she'd been garbling at gunpoint. She just couldn't make sense of her mumblings. Her Ancient Greek was rusty as it was, and her words were further mottled by her ragged intermittent breaths and other background noise.

If only she could clear up the sound... but she had no idea how to do that. With so many settings and sliders, the capabilities of the programme were beyond her.

Lara ran her fingers through her hair. "Bollocks."

She was all too cognisant of how little time she had to solve the mystery and provide Natla with the information she craved.

The archaeologist was also all too cognisant of the painkillers fading from her system. Dupont's torture had shouldered open that particular door to unwanted feeling. Along with the flame kindling her ribs, dull pain had started to creep in and settle into almost every muscle and joint. She'd taken quite a battering the past week, and evidently her body could no longer ignore the effects.

With these unwanted guests came another squatter: fever. When she'd brushed back her hair, she'd found her forehead damp and definitely too warm. Her palms were already clammy, and it was only going to get worse.

She grimaced.

It was the last thing she wanted but she knew what she had to do to survive.

She lifted her head.

"You," she called out to one of the mercs. "Tell Natla I need something."

Chapter 27

"Lady Croft, actually asking for help...? Whoa, are you sure you're the real Lara? What have you done with her?"

"I'm sure."

The archaeologist must have looked especially earnest because Sam rolled her eyes. "Sweetie, I'm just teasing. You were always Miss Do It *All* Yourself even before Yamatai."

"I'm serious. I didn't want to involve you in this, but I had no other choice." She gestured at the Macbook. "I can't do this on my own."

That was the twinge-triggering truth. Lara had tried her hardest to extricate Sam from this nightmare. Over and over. And yet here her companion was, drawn in even deeper, right to the rotten, pustule-smattered heart of the matter.

Lara was also trying not to be distracted by the doubled guard at the door. The men were listening far more closely than she would have liked. Still, she had received what she wanted; what she needed. Natla had given her that.

Sam was talking. "Lara, seriously, can't you just make something up?"

The Englishwoman shook her head, and immediately regretted it as the action triggered a pounding in the right side of her skull. Lying wasn't an option. Natla would see straight through any deceit. There was no way she'd risen to her position in life if she didn't have a bloodhound's scent for the truth.

Besides, Lara had little doubt that the businesswoman would continue to hold both her and Sam prisoner as a guarantee until she had the Aegis in her hands. Misinformation would get them tortured and executed.

"The Oracle gave me the answer."

"Which you can't remember."

"She kissed me and – "

Sam made an indignant sound in her throat. "She *kissed* you?!"

Lara frowned in response, "Please don't tell me you're jealous? It's not like I enjoyed it. I felt bad enough that she looks fifteen."

"She's a teenager?"

"She – " Lara could see the Pythia padding towards her across the chamber, swaying from side to side, her limbs limp, her eyes as completely blank as her expression.

The archaeologist shuddered and blinked away the unnerving image. "Just help me, Sam. Please."

Fever and being tied into a wheelchair was making her irritable.

"I'm trying to, Lara. It's just..." The documentary maker dialled up the passive aggression in her voice for anyone listening. "Access to the Internet would make this a helluva lot easier."

"That won't happen."

Of course it wouldn't. Natla was far too intelligent to risk her prisoners sending a message for help. So instead Lara was stuck with a doorstep of an Ancient Greek dictionary, a half dozen encyclopaedia volumes and assorted maps of the region. It was Archaeology, old school-style.

Sam sighed alongside her, "A girl can wish... or whine." Then she scowled at the program open on her screen. "I'm sorry this is taking so long. I normally have a sound editor handling this stuff for me."

"It's great, Sam." On top of all her past mistakes, she really hadn't expressed her gratitude enough. "Thank you."

Her companion beamed at her. "I really missed this, you know. Us working together, as a team. That was always the plan, wasn't it?"

In another life, it had been. Lara could remember the infectious excitement of their college days, as graduation loomed. All the sparkling-eyed scheming as they plucked apart naan and slurped on lassi at their favourite curry place.

Sam's eyes were still sparkling in the present. "We could still do it, Lara. Just like this. You in the field, me providing tech support."

"Sam, you've scaled and shot around active volcanos. You really think you'd be happy being Lara Croft's stay-at-home sidekick?"

Sam pulled a face. "I don't see myself as a sidekick. I'd be your partner." She added, "In a perfect world, we'd be more... if you wanted it."

Lara's gaze drifted to Sam's lips. *There was no point in fighting it any longer.*

"Desperately."

Sam's palm found Lara's forearm. Her fingers traced a path down to the archaeologist's hand, leaving goose bumps in their wake. Sam ran her thumb over her companion's battered knuckles. Then she raised them to her lips.

"Hey!" one of the guards shouted. "No contact!"

Sam dropped Lara's hand with a hiss. She returned to her laptop.

Lara continued to stare at her knuckles. Sam caught her looking and winked, "How do they feel? All better?"

"Yes. Although I'm aching somewhere else now."

The American didn't miss a beat. "Do you want me to kiss that too?"

Lara had an equally saucy comeback. Somewhere. But while she ransacked her mind, her tongue tangled in her words and she ended up simply gaping until she remembered how the human jaw functions. Her cheeks suddenly felt extra hot, far beyond the usual effect of fever, and she caught Sam chuckling under her breath as she fiddled with onscreen sliders.

A second later, the filmmaker seemed to sober. "Okay, I've run some filters over the audio streams. Let's see if this helps."

Lara strained to listen to the clip. *Anax* remained the clearest but she began to syphon out other Greek words like gold flecks from a river bed.

Natla wouldn't give her a pen so she had to mouth and try to memorise her disjointed translation.

Birthplace of an empire. Birthplace of a king.

North. North. North of the gods. North of the god king.

Where the rays do not reach.

Sam interrupted her. "So which king is it?"

"I don't know. There are dozens and dozens of ancient kings; celebrated military leaders and rulers in both history and legend. The fact that we're hunting for the Aegis of Athena means we can't even rule out the sodding latter."

She groaned.

"Well, what about god kings? That's like Xerxes, right?"

Lara's eyes widened, "How on earth did you know th –?"

"300."

Oh. Of course.

The archaeologist picked at the plaster on her forehead while she pondered Sam's question. "That actually doesn't narrow it down. Kings and queens, emperors and empresses; around the world for centuries they always latched onto the concept of divine right to legitimise their rule and squash any dissention."

Lara pointed at the screen. "What else do you have there?"

Sam dragged another video into the main preview panel. It was the first clip, shot from Lara's point of view as she stumbled through the brush and over rocks.

The audio was even harder to decipher than the last. Her past self seemed to be speaking even as she inhaled. Lara focused on the shallow, broken rasps as she made Sam replay the clip over and over.

Land of feuds.

Claim a name, claim a legacy.

Great father surpassed by a greater child.

Shahanshah.

Sam muttered, "*Shahanshah*? That doesn't sound Greek."

"It's not. It's Persian. King of Kings."

A grin curved Sam's lips. "Xerxes. I called it."

"No." Lara frowned, "That makes no sense."

There was a logic to that solution, certainly. But her instincts were aggravating her, like a lone strand of hair trapped under her shirt, right against her skin. Something was *off* about that answer. At least if it wasn't simply her inflamed mind out to confuse her.

She tried to talk herself free of the riddle's tangle; find that one thought that when tugged would unravel every knot cleanly and simply.

"Xerxes had the title of Shahanshah. But he wasn't the only one to call himself that. So did..." She inhaled sharply. "Alexander."

Sam stared at her blankly.

"Alexander the Great."

Lara groped for the nearest map as her companion muttered, "That was such a shitty movie. One of Oliver Stone's worst. Great battle scenes but God, what a bore otherwise. And Angelina's accent, what the fuck...?"

While Lara fingered the map, she explained, "*Great father surpassed by a greater child*. Alexander shared his father's ambitions and accomplished far more."

Drawn away from her movie geek gripes by her companion's words, Sam smirked, "That sounds familiar."

"I hope not. Alexander was dead from fever at 32."

After everything she had been through, there was no place for gallows humour. But the way she was feeling at that moment...

She grimaced. She had to distance herself mentally from her body's intensifying complaints.

The archaeologist jabbed at the map of Greece. "Alexander was born in Pella. That's north of Mount Olympus. But this place – where the Aegis is hidden – is north of even that. *Where the rays do not reach...*"

Lara grabbed an encyclopaedia. She smiled when she found the entry she wanted. "The Vergina Sun was theorised to be the symbol of the Argead dynasty." She realised she was suddenly sounding as exclusionary as Sam when she started ranting about framing, lighting and depth of focus. "Uh, that's the royal house of which Alexander and his father Phillip were a part."

She returned to the map. "The seat of their throne was Macedonia in northern Greece. Which continues to be embroiled in naming disputes with the Republic of Macedonia, Greece's former Yugoslav neighbour to the north.

"Land of feuds. Claim a name, claim a legacy.

"Ha! It all fits." She felt quite chuffed with herself. And, exhilarated.

In an odd, and slightly embarrassing way, she had to admit that she found the puzzle-solving of her profession more breathlessly gratifying than sex. Always.

Sam's lips grazed the Englishwoman's ear, and Lara shivered.

Alright, almost always as gratifying...

Sam had leaned in and was gazing over the Englishwoman's shoulder at the map. "Christ, Lara, that's a big border they share. And Macedonia is huge for a European state. The Aegis could be anywhere."

"Maybe not. If we find a midpoint between Pella and Mount Olympus, and then run north on that longitude from the Greek-Macedonian border we could strike gold."

"*Could?* Do you think the Wicked Witch of the Southwest will buy that?"

"It's the best lead I could come up with." Then Lara added, "I'm going to get you home."

Sam surprisingly didn't share in her companion's glee. Her head dipped as she muttered, "*I, I...* Maybe you haven't changed."

The reaction was so unexpected that the archaeologist physically jolted as if she'd been backhanded.

Evidently Sam recognised her confusion. She exhaled slowly, "Okay, Lara, what I'm about to tell you may just explode your brain. So, please, brace yourself..." She took a deep breath. With all earnestness she murmured, "I'm not actually an ancient piece of pottery."

Even if she wasn't still struggling with the emotional gear shift, it was so absurd a statement that Lara was unable to clamp down on a laugh. *Was her fever worsening into full-blown delirium?*

Her mouth was still forming a bemused "What?" when Sam, frowning, offered her explanation.

"I'm not some vase that you can dust off, catalogue and stick on a shelf behind shatterproof glass. I'm a living, breathing human being. I can do things, I can contribute. I – I can make decisions in regards to myself. Even after all this, you still don't acknowledge that."

"I thought I was doing exactly that. With this, right now."

"For all of five minutes, and then – " Sam swallowed hard.

Lara's smile and stomach dropped simultaneously at the realisation her former best friend was fighting tears. The extra shimmer in her eyes gave her away.

"Sam?"

"I'm not useless, Lara."

"Of course you're not."

"Then give me some credit." Sam scrubbed at her increasingly mottled cheek with her knuckles. "I've been working really hard the past five years. With you gone, I realised that the only person who will ever save me is myself. If you taught me anything, it's that. So I had a lot of growing up to do."

Where had this come from?

"Sam!" Lara reached for her companion's hand.

"Hey!" one of the guards yelled. "We said no touching."

Lara shot back over her shoulder, "Just go tell Natla I know where her bloody artefact is!"

She said it forcefully enough that one of the men did actually stride from the tent.

When she turned back, Sam was gazing at her sadly. She no longer seemed to be about to cry, but that was even more distressing. Emotion had ebbed from her, leaving her grey and uncharacteristically subdued.

"Yamatai opened my eyes, it helped me realise how shallow and self-absorbed I was."

"You are neither of those things, Sam."

"*You* called me self-obsessed, selfish and superficial."

The penny dropped...

Oh God, that awful drunken night back in New York.

Lara had been so angry and frustrated with herself. And with the addition of alcohol her self-loathing had exploded outwards like an S-mine.

"Sam, I never meant those things."

"Of course you did. You wouldn't have said them if you hadn't been thinking them for a very long time." The filmmaker's shoulders slumped. "I did a lot of self-reflection after you left. I mean, if that's what my best friend thought of me, I really had to make some changes.

"And I know it's not true, but for a while I even thought your letter was a front; that you were being polite, typically you and making excuses when the real reason that whole night happened was because of me and my selfishness. You were upset and confused, and I took advantage of that. I jumped you because of what I wanted at that exact moment, impulsively like usual, and that frightened you away."

"No. Sam, Jesus, no! It was nothing like that."

Sam's voice had shrunk down to a whisper. "I know. It took me a while but I realised that. At the same time, I know what I'm like, Lara. People have been telling me my whole life. So I worked really hard to change that."

Lara stared at her companion. Guilt and grief had frozen her limbs. She no longer felt capable of reaching for her former best friend. She no longer felt she had any right to. She knew she had broken Sam's heart. She just had no idea that her actions, like shards of shrapnel, had pierced even deeper, shattering her best friend's conception of self and, with it, her sense of self-worth.

Lara Croft, you ARE a monster.

The archaeologist stuttered out her words. "I – I made you feel like that?"

"It doesn't matter. I just needed to get it out there, off my chest. At the end of the day you inspired me to be a better person." Sam winced, "It's just that when you still dismiss me; when you make decisions about me without even talking to me about it, you have no idea how much that hurts. It's like everything I've done was pointless."

"No. What that shows is how little I've changed. You moved on and forward, when all my running was in circles."

And while flinging out caltrops the whole time, evidently.

"I am so sorry, Sam."

She still felt hesitant about reaching for companion. But it was Sam who ignored the guards and bridged the gap. Her palm sought out Lara's cheek.

"It's okay, sweetie. I never should have expected things to be fixed overnight. We got here. We – " She looked down at her left hand as she thumbed at her engagement ring. "We still have a long way to go. But that's fine. It's real progress. It's the next best thing to a completely fresh start."

She gritted her teeth then. "Jesus, I'm sounding like my therapist."

The two women smiled weakly at each other.

Lara turned her head so that she could nuzzle against Sam's hand with her lips. She purred, "I will make everything up to you, I swear."

"Lara, jeez, you're really ho – "

Sam was cut off by a familiar, stomach-dropping voice behind her.

"Well? Where is it?"

Natla stood, arms crossed, between her men. Dr Stone was her shadow, but fortunately neither Dupont nor Larson were present this time, which meant a new round of manhandling was unlikely for Lara.

That was a good thing given how fragile she was feeling – physically and psychologically.

Not that she and Sam were really safe. Trailing out of Natla's arms, Lara noticed, was an IV line. It terminated in a bag of milky fluid held by Stone. The businesswoman's health was failing swiftly.

Knowing that Natla wouldn't risk approach, Lara groped for the map she'd been studying. She raised it and trailed her finger along the area she'd identified earlier. "The Aegis is somewhere here. Within the Macedonian Republic."

Natla looked on, impassive. "How do I know you're not lying to me?"

"It's all a riddle. Sam's cleaned-up video is your proof. Believe it or not, I don't have a vested interest in lying to you."

"Mmmm." The blonde sighed, "Macedonia? That's really what you've narrowed the search down to?"

"No. I think I can take you in closer than that. "I, I mean we..." she glanced at Sam and recognised a pleased twitch to her lips. "We suspect that if you find the geographic midpoint between Mount Olympus and the city of Pella, and follow that same line of longitude within the boundaries of Macedonia, you'll find the hiding place."

In her mind's eye she was still turning the puzzle piece over and over in her hands, even as she turned the words over and over in her mouth.

"Vergina Sun. *Where the rays do not reach...*

"*Rays do not reach* could have a double meaning. Literal and figurative. We should be looking in an area with thick forest."

Natla was clearly a hard-to-please employer, leaving her staff to scuttle after praise like starving dogs after a single sinewy scrap dispensed daily.

Unblinking, she muttered, "Impressive."

"You told me to use those Croft instincts."

"And you have. Your assets are many, Lara..." The blonde's gaze slipped south and that finally teased a smile to her mouth. "That said, your instincts are truly your greatest treasure."

Natla glanced at one of her guard. "You. You can relay Miss Croft's instructions to the Ops tent."

The soldier darted off as two of his squad mates moved forward and corralled Sam with their assault rifles. They separated her far from Lara. The filmmaker looked on, pained, but she had the sense not to cause a scene.

"Lara, listen to me." Natla stood before the archaeologist, but still safely beyond lunging distance from the wheelchair.

"You have one final task before this is over. You seem to have located the Aegis. Now you're going to get it for me."

Chapter 28

Alexander the Great, dead from fever at 32...

Thanks for reminding me, Sam.

Although it wasn't so much her mortality that Lara felt like she was facing just then. This... This was what it was to go mad.

Words, ideas, imagery swirled around in her skull. She couldn't switch off her thoughts. Behind her eyelids they took form, like clay being shaped by invisible fingers. Then they spun and spun, cycled over and over, making her nauseous.

She wanted to vomit, but that *would* probably kill her. Alone in the dark of the medical tent, she was on her back, strapped once more into a hospital bed by her wrists and ankles. If she choked, there would be no one to save her. Stone hadn't even left her with a call button.

Lara growled in teeth-gritted frustration.

She'd become a warped conservation project: a big cat reared in a rehabilitation facility, then doped and tossed in a crate, all in preparation for shipping back to the wild.

Natla at least had relented on her torment. She wanted her prisoner functional and capable for what was to come. Sense had won out over her malice for once. So in addition to being fed intravenously to bolster her strength, Lara was back on painkillers and pumped full of Schedule II sedative.

Yet her body and mind refused to accept the invitation of the void. Instead of curling up in the blissful blackness, treating it like a blanket on a Winter's evening, she had chosen to snuggle with an open flame.

The blaze in her left side competed with the old rebar pain above her hip, resurgent as if she had just cauterised the puncture all over again. If she could, she would have writhed against the agony, rolling to extinguish the fire.

Instead, she lay there, paralysed. Burning.

She could feel the sweat beading on her chest bone, before it trickled down between her breasts, over her ribs and onto the mattress.

"Blast it to Hell," she hissed.

She could hear muffled footsteps. Something was moving in the darkness of the tent. Her breathing, already shaky, began to shudder harder in her chest.

If Dupont or one of his men wanted to have some fun with her, this was their opportunity. Restrained as she was, there would be little she could do to stop them.

"Who's there?"

Letting them know they didn't have the advantage of surprise could fracture their nerve.

"I can hear –"

A skeleton's leer appeared at Lara's bedside.

The Englishwoman exhaled with relief. Well, some relief anyway. "Oh, I thought you might be the Grim Reaper."

For a heartbeat Natla simply blinked at her prisoner. Then she chuckled, "You never fail to amuse me, Lara." She cocked her head. "If I could clone you, I would. Maybe I'll get Dr Stone to take blood and tissue samples. Just make sure that when we replicate you, we strip out that stubborn streak of defiance... Or maybe not. I confess that with all the sycophantism I deal with every day, I find your insolence very, very exciting."

Lara felt fingers trail up her calf and then tickle her inner thigh. Glaring at the ceiling, she muttered, "Could you be any more despicable?"

"I could instruct Dupont to enter Miss Nishimura's quarters right now. She's not restrained but I doubt she could fight him off for long."

"There you go. Even more reprehensible."

Natla chuckled. "Come now, I'm only joking."

"Charming. What do you want, Natla?"

"Nothing in particular. I just wanted to check in with my latest talent acquisition; see how she is doing."

Lara swallowed down a fresh mouthful of nausea. "I regret to inform you that I will be tendering my resignation. I've given it a great deal of thought and I don't believe I am a good fit for Natla Technologies."

Natla laughed heartily. "You Brits and your wonderful dry wit."

"I'm glad I amu —" Something sparked deep in Lara's ribs, and she winced.

Her reaction wasn't missed by Natla. The businesswoman murmured, "Living in permanent agony..." Her gaze travelled between Lara and her own drip stand, which was feeding a milky cocktail into her withered frame. "You see again how alike we are."

Lara grimaced, "No. I'm in pain because of you; not because I'm like you."

Natla was no longer smiling. She hadn't been since she fixated on her IV bag.

The woman's gaze returned to her captive. "I admire you, Lara. Truly. I had hoped that we could establish a civil working relationship."

"And that failure is my fault, so I'm being punished."

"I am sorry that it had to come to this. But I had no other choice." Natla reached up to tuck a lock of hair behind her ear. As she did so, her entire bob shifted. A split-second later, she tugged it back into perfect place.

Lara was parting her lips to speak when Natla clamped her hand over the Englishwoman's forearm.

The American growled, "I would take all of this from you, girl, in a heartbeat. If I could. All of it. Your vitality. Your youth. Your beauty. So don't fucking pity me. You and everyone else. When you get me the Aegis, I will be well again and everyone will remember what it is to respect me."

Lara scowled. So it didn't only end with the artefact's healing properties?

The women's glares clashed. Almost immediately though, Natla's mettle seemed to fail. She turned her back.

"I expect you to honour our mutually beneficial arrangement..." Her voice trailed off. Then from the gloom – from her shoulder-hunched figure – came a rasped, "...*Rara Croft*."

Except it wasn't Natla's voice. And when she turned back to the archaeologist it wasn't the businesswoman's face either.

Lara jolted in her restraints.

No. It wasn't possible.

"Himiko?"

But it was.

The Sun Queen smiled at her through a cracked layer of oshiroi. Her eyes had been thickly lined with haizumi, but time had smeared and streaked the black down her cheeks, creating a grey, corpse-like effect.

"Rara Croft," she repeated.

Lara blinked and Natla's 21st Century business attire was gone. Himiko was instantly clad in her mottled kimono from the island. Also returned was her ornate headdress, with golden kanzashi pins jutting out from her hair in a spectacular solar spread. *The Sun Queen, resurgent.*

Himiko leaned over her captive, cackling from the back of her throat. Her grin widened, as much a skeleton's leer as Natla's.

Lara glowered at her. "You're dead. This is only a nightmare. A fever dream."

The response was in archaic Japanese. "Believe what you want, but I have never left you, Rara-san. You escaped my island, but you did not escape me... My Chosen One."

Lara had already decided that she wasn't going to engage at all with the figment before her – a construct of her inflamed mind and body. But Himiko had found the button that flooded her system with adrenalin.

Lara kept her voice steady but she was suddenly trembling. "What?"

"You were as much a part of the Ascension Ritual as the Nishimura girl. I am inside you as I am inside her."

"No. I killed you."

"Your rage the past five years. The storm within you..." Malicious delight flashed in Himiko's eyes. "I swapped one bodily prison for another that day. But soon I will be free again."

The Sun Queen reached out and trailed the back of her index finger along Lara's cheekbone. "On Yamatai I was mistaken. You and my descendent both stood upon the altar during my Ritual of Flames. Nishimura was suitable, yes, but you were the superior choice. Your determination. Your resilience. Your intelligence. Your beauty. Your bloodline. All fit for a queen, and qualities fit for this unfamiliar age. It pleases me."

"I won't help you."

"You already have, my Chosen One. I am inside you. I am inside Nishimura too but you are the one who has nourished me with your enemies' blood, strengthened me with your anger..."

Himiko stepped back; straightening to her full height. "What need have I for a Storm Guard to protect me when I can reign as an unstoppable Warrior Queen?"

Lara watched as the sorceress's robes melted like wax, and reshaped into a suit of samurai armour. Her features too swirled, and resettled. Into Lara's own face, smug under the layer of white paint; her lips as blood-red as her breast-plate.

Dear God, no.

Himiko spoke in the Englishwoman's voice as well. Her words were as icy as her expression was self-satisfied. "With the Aegis, we will be invincible. Together we will rule the world; have anything... and anyone we want."

The figure morphed into Sam, also white-faced, in ornate court dress. Uncharacteristically demure, eyes downcast, she approached Lara's bedside. "You can keep me as your handmaiden if you like." She pressed her fingertips to the archaeologist's lips, stroking across the soft pillows of flesh. "They exist to serve their Queen. Provide Her with whatever She desires."

No. The last thing Lara would ever want was Sam like that.

The Englishwoman jerked her head away from the caress. "Don't touch me."

"I love you, Lara."

Sam's figure flickered, and the Pythia stood in her place. She continued to speak in Sam's voice. "I love you so very much. This is how we can be together. The only real way."

Lara clenched her eyes shut. "Take your lies and get out of my head!"

She felt a hand settle on her forehead, and a fingers close around her forearm. "Let. Go. I said don't fucking touch me!"

"Lara..."

That soft, soothing voice...

"Lara..."

The archaeologist opened her eyes. Doctor Stone was bent over her in the brightly lit tent.

"Lara. It's almost time to go."

Chapter 29

Stone unbuckled Lara's leg restraints, adjusted the head of the bed and helped the younger woman to sit up.

The action scattered flame through Lara's muscles like someone kicking at the last ash-crusted log smouldering in a fire pit. She slumped back against the pillows, waiting for the pain and the nausea and the suffocating sense of dread to dissipate.

Immediately the doctor began her examination. A thermometer inserted into Lara's ear. A stethoscope against her chest and back. Gentle prodding at her neck glands and ribs.

The archaeologist expected the process to be entirely mute but Stone began murmuring her findings.

"Well, it looks like the inflammation is down a bit and your temperature isn't as elevated as it was. Your healing rate is quite phenomenal."

"Genetics," Lara croaked. "Crofts have been getting into scraps for generations."

Stone shone a penlight in Lara's eyes, darting it from pupil to pupil. "How do you feel?"

"Grotty."

"Did you sleep at all last night?"

Himiko's face flickered before Lara. She grimaced in an attempt to flush away the image. That simply replaced the Sun Queen's visage with her own, smiling coldly. "It doesn't feel like it."

Stone set about removing the drip from Lara's still restrained arm. As she applied pressure to stem the immediate well of blood, she sighed, "I'd prefer it if you could spend a day or two in bed, simply resting. That would really help your recovery."

"What would really help my recovery is if you let me go."

Stone diplomatically ignored her. "Sadly, we're moving out today. Natla's orders. She's already gone on ahead with some of the others. Her men will be here shortly to load you in a transport."

Lara winced; a simultaneous reaction to the news and the throb in her forearm. "Something to look forward to then."

Though impassive as always, Stone was being uncharacteristically chatty as she applied a water resistant dressing to the puncture. "There are other reasons for our departure as well. The press is in a frenzy over the kidnapping of Lara Croft and the daughter of media mogul Takahiro Nishimura. Some tabloid journalist got the story out immediately. There's a massive search underway, and it's only a matter of time before the authorities pitch up here."

Now that was something to smile about. *Mo, you slimy, beautiful bastard.*

Stone wasn't smiling of course. She never did. But right then she was studying Lara's face intently. The Englishwoman presumed she was being assessed in some form she didn't understand. But then the doctor spoke.

"Lara, what I said earlier about giving her what she wants... Forget it."

The archaeologist frowned. The obvious question had already pursed her lips but she didn't get a chance to ask it.

Stone interrupted, "I have little doubt she will kill you both after she gets what she wants. Even after everything she's put you through." The woman straightened. "I've done enough. I don't want that on my conscience too."

Natla's spiteful sentiment wasn't a surprise. Lara had said and done enough already to earn her captor's loathing. What was surprising was Stone's sudden change in attitude.

"But I thought –" The mystery had been bugging Lara. "Natla mentioned your son. Is that what she holds over you?"

"Yes."

"He's ill too?"

"Stage 4 Non-Hodgkin Lymphoma."

And yet here she was at Natla's beck and call, instead of being at her boy's side. No doubt she didn't have a choice in the matter.

Lara couldn't think of what else to say. She frowned, "I'm sorry."

Stone shrugged, no doubt weary of hearing the platitude. She returned to her tray of medical implements a few feet from the bed, and began listlessly straightening and reordering the tools.

"Cruel irony for a cancer researcher," the redhead sighed. "Of course Natla found out about my work and made me a deal. As long as she lives, my project stays privately funded by her company and I buy Tristan more time with the same experimental treatment. But I – I just can't do this anymore."

She looked up at Lara and the blank mask slipped. There was fatigue there, muddled with anger. "Having that power over life and death... She gets off on it. Sick or healthy, she's an odious woman."

Lara couldn't agree more. "She needs to die."

"I don't believe in this magical miracle cure of hers. But anything that helps her... that can't happen."

"And what exactly do you expect me to do," Lara flexed impotently in her wrist straps, "like this?"

"I laid out your *belongings* with your clothes."

That was still a long shot. A very long shot.

Stone eyed her. "You have a reputation for resourcefulness, Lara. Do what you need to. Just don't give her what she wan—"

The sound of voices and crunched footsteps outside.

Stone grumbled, "They're here."

Before the men could enter, Lara murmured, "What will you do, Doctor?"

"Don't worry about me. Just keep her distracted."

The conversation ended then with the arrival of an audience: three assault rifle-wielding mercs. One handed his gun to his squad mates before approaching to unbuckle Lara. *Smart man.*

Like before, she had to dress in front of them. Like before, the task left her breathless, quivering and white-faced depleted. She was so weak she had to lean on Stone while the doctor helped her pull on her trousers and shoes.

Lara felt anxious-ill. She forced down an upwell of bile. She could barely stand. How could she think herself capable of pulling this off? Natla couldn't get her claws into the Aegis. And after her dreams the previous night, Lara wasn't sure she could trust herself with it either.

The one plus was that she was at least back wearing something she felt more comfortable in after Natla's ridiculous fetishizing wardrobe: brown cargo pants, hiking boots and a polo neck in navy.

As she helped Lara stand upright once more, Stone slipped the illicit shard of tile into the archaeologist's back pocket.

Lara tried to cover up the action with a verbal diversion. She leaned heavily on Stone, though the motion was more out of necessity than subterfuge. "Doctor, thank you. You saved my life."

The woman's response was whispered, grim-faced. "Now save yourself, Lara."

Stone handed Lara over to her armed escort.

The Englishwoman immediately drew her arms behind her back. She had to hope that Natla's impatience translated into a sloppy state of urgency afflicting the entire camp.

Her theory proved correct.

If Natla or Dupont were present they probably would have been suspicious of Lara's complicity; her willingness to be trussed in the most uncomfortable fashion. But they weren't. The guards monitoring the notorious Tomb Raider were just goons for hire, men doing their job... and like any low-level employee, appreciative of anything that made their task easier.

Lara's wrists were bound with cord. Flanked, she was hauled outside by her triceps into the early morning light. The sun shone down bright, white but cold, incapable of warming the crisp mountain air.

Eyes watering, and forehead throbbing once more, Lara blinked at the chaos around her.

The camp was in disarray. Evidently half the men had already moved off, and with their departure tents had been dismantled, leaving gaping spots in the camp.

Mercs were scurrying around, hauling weapons and hard-shell shipping cases.

Sam. Where was Sam?

There was no escape if she couldn't ensure Sam's safety.

But there was no sign of her in the bustle. Natla had probably already had her prisoner sent on to the next destination – knowing Lara would follow like a domesticated cheetah chasing after a truck-dragged chunk of flesh.

The Englishwoman reached into her pocket for the physical reassurance of the shard. She curled her fingers over the bottom and drew it up into her palm, testing the sharpness on all sides with her own flesh. At least one side would likely be able to slice through the cord. If she could –

The tile slipped over the lip of her pocket and tumbled from between her unexpected digits.

Dammit, Lara, you gormless twat!

Immediately, a man's voice boomed behind her in a strong American accent. "Stop."

Lara was forced by her guard to halt.

She felt something monstrous approaching from behind. She didn't have to turn; the physical presence towered over her and prickled her skin even without line of sight. She was reminded of her early, heart-clattering brushes with the Somali and Oni Stalker. When they had just been shadows around the corner.

This was no shadow though.

This was over 6' 5" of muscle. Directly behind her. So close that she was within the aura of his body heat.

Smoothing out the horror of her expression, she looked over her shoulder. Larson's eyes were waiting to lock with hers. The two killers simply gazed at each other, waiting for their rival's tell to reveal itself. Neither faltered; their masks held fast.

Larson sank into a crouch, disappearing into Lara's blind spot. She faced forward once more, trying to keep her intake of air steady; pretending that she hadn't just fumbled her trump card and revealed it too early to every player at the table.

She felt Larson straighten behind her. As he did so, fingers drove deeply into her back pocket. She tried not to express surprise but she still startled – her lips parting breathlessly – when his mouth brushed her ear. "I didn't sign up for torturing girls."

She turned to gape at him but he was no longer paying her attention. Instead, he addressed her escort, "Hurry up and get her out of here. Natla will be waiting."

He pointed to a nearby car. The iron-grey van from the night of her kidnapping had been replaced with a compact delivery vehicle typical to mainland Europe. White and splashed in blue abattoir branding – not without irony – it was far less likely to draw attention than the original panel van, which blasted a *We're up to no good* message as clearly as if it was fitted with a megaphone.

If the paperwork was in order, no border authority or police officer would blink twice at this diminutive transport. Even the driver and his pistol-packing front-seat companion were in matching company livery as they lounged outside, waiting for their next order.

They leapt to attention as Larson, Lara and the other men approached.

The giant grumbled, "You ready to move out?"

The driver responded. "Just waiting for Dupont's order."

"Well, now you have mine..." Larson turned to Lara's escort, "Put her in the back."

The men started leading Lara in the direction of the rear loading doors.

The driver frowned. "Sir? Is that, uh, wise? I mean –"

He wasn't getting his words out easily. No doubt the temper of his employer had infected every member of the camp like a close quarters flu outbreak. Expressing dissent wasn't accepted.

And there was Lara with her bothersome immunity.

"What?" Larson muttered.

"Sir," the man grimaced. "Together?"

Together?

Lara's guard opened the van doors.

From inside the windowless space, Sam face swung in the direction of the light. On spotting Lara, her expression flash froze in a brow-jumped *oh*.

Lara had only a second to assess that her companion was bound at the wrist too; her hands on her lap. Then the archaeologist was shoved into the dark, cramped interior opposite her friend. There she was sandwiched between the back wall and the two mercs who followed her inside.

"No talking," the two women were warned with rifles pointed at them.

Lara was barely listening. She was concentrating on Larson's voice outside. "We don't have time. Natla's impatient. You have the coordinates. Just get to the rendezvous point."

Lara swallowed. This was it. No matter how she felt, this was her chance.

Chapter 30

The delivery van careened along the windy mountain roads of Northern Greece.

For Lara, the experience was a double-edged sword in her clumsy hands – aiding her escape as much as it pierced her flesh.

Literally.

The abrupt corners and relentless bumpiness of the rural track meant she was jolted around, providing her with plenty of opportunity to saw at her restraints with no suspicion from the men guarding her. It made an excellent cover, that is, when the same jolts weren't driving the tile into her wrists instead of the cord binding them.

She'd evidently drawn blood at least twice with her misguided thrusts. Her palms were slick and sticky, and it had become increasingly difficult to maintain a grip on the shard.

It was only slightly more difficult than maintaining a grip on her situation.

Without windows in the back of the van, she felt completely lost in space and time. Where were they? Had they crossed the border into Macedonia already, sneaking through on some overlooked, ill-maintained route? How long had they been driving for?

Her head was swirling, and so was her stomach. Embarrassingly she had almost thrown up, going so far as to convulse with dry heaves until the glares of her escort convinced her that upending her guts in the confined space wouldn't be without consequence.

At least it meant her winces when she stabbed herself were dismissed as a desperate battle with nausea. The mercs rarely took their eyes off her in the cramped space, but mentally they had checked out. Pale and in perpetual pain, she was no threat as far as they were concerned.

Sam though, wouldn't stop staring at her. Waiting or worried – or a combination of the two – Lara couldn't interpret the emotion responsible for her companion's frown.

Sam had been keyed to expect something at least. Early on in the journey, when their guard was barking instructions at the van's driver, Lara was able to mouth "Trust me" unnoticed.

A single jaw-clenched nod had been the response.

By the time she severed the last strands of fibre, Lara's hands had bear-clawed. With micro-flexes, she tried to work the cramp out of her fingers and restore some semblance of circulation. That flooded feeling back through her raw, bleeding wrists. She grimaced.

How was she really going to pull this off? Roth would have known. There was only ever one tight spot that he hadn't been able to get out of. And that had been Lara's fault of course.

Sam was trying to decipher her friend's expression in turn. "Lara?"

"Hey," snapped one of the mercs. "No talking."

Time to channel those mandatory school drama classes into a BAFTA-winning performance.

Lara swung her head in the direction of the guard. "Please?" She licked her lips, amplifying her pitiful puppy dog look. "I need some water."

The man's sidekick began reaching for the bottle clipped to his belt. Not only was he younger and smooth-cheeked by comparison, but he was evidently the soft touch of the pair as well.

Mr Grizzled-and-Snappy glared at his squad mate's poised hand. He looked ready to swat it away from the plastic container. "No," he growled.

"Please," the Englishwoman whined. "I don't fee—"

She closed her eyes and let herself topple sideways.

The van was much smaller inside than the vehicle they'd initially been kidnapped in. There was just enough space between Sam and the men for her to hit the deck and lie there; limp, with her arms still locked behind her back.

"Lara?" Sam yelped. Then she yelled, "Lara?! Something's wrong. Help her!"

The Englishwoman heard a whisper of plexiglass against metal as the blacked-out window in the bulkhead slid open. It was followed by the driver's strident voice, "What's going on back there?"

Sam's hysteria was mounting, and clearly contagious. Lara couldn't even tell if it was feigned or not; one of the two former flatmates was evidently a bloody good actress.

"Please!" the filmmaker begged. "Do something. She's not moving. She—"

"*Goddammit!* Alright." It was the senior soldier taking command again. "You," he snarled at Sam, "Shut up!"

The rest of his instructions were to the mercs up front. "Keep driving. I'll check what's up."

She could hear him shuffling forward through the van's interior, trying to keep his balance as the vehicle bounced and shuddered on the raw track outside.

She felt a boot nudge her thigh. Even with her heart starting to thud against her sternum, she remained completely still, eyes shut.

Another tap delivered with hardened leather. "Hey."

After a third prod went without response, the merc muttered, "Aw, shit. She's gonna kill us..."

There was a rustle of fabric, and the unmistakable sensation of another human body pushing into Lara's personal space; kneeling over her.

Fingers sought out the pulse point on her throat.

Sam gasped, "Is she okay?"

"I said shut u–"

Now.

Lara opened her eyes at the same instant she punched out with her fist. The tile sank deep into her captor's neck.

She had to do it left-handed but she had enough momentum behind the blow to bound over the coordination handicap. Harder was tugging out the shard and stabbing it into the merc's flesh again. And again. And again. And again.

The attack triggered something in Lara. It didn't matter how depleted and disorientated she'd felt until that moment.

Self-defence and dark desires muddled in a heady cocktail. Irresistible, she drank deep like she always did – and waited for the disconnect between her pathetic, fallible body and her purest state of being.

Taking action against her captors... It was like that first sip of steaming tea in the morning; that first jab at a punching bag after a long day; that first jet of scalding shower water to pummel her knotted shoulders after a week of hiking, camping and climbing in a forgotten portion of the planet.

That glorious, cathartic spray...

Hot against her skin.

Salty as it sneaked between her lips.

A cascade of sticky red.

She heard her own voice asking faintly, sadly, *What happened to you, Lara? What have you become?*

She had the answer. *Exactly what I need to be.*

Her perception had fragmented into a series of moments in lurid, high definition detail.

The man gurgling and grabbing at his throat as he collapsed on top of her.

The other backseat merc yelling, "Shit! Shit!"

Lara's own snarls...

Out of the corner of her eye she saw the screamer fumbling with his weapon.

She was faster.

She grabbed the assault rifle of the man flailing on top of her. It was still strung across his body but she managed to tug enough leeway on the strap to gain control. Directing the barrel with one hand, she pointed it at the younger merc as her other hand clamped around the grip. Finding the trigger was instinctual. She pulled it.

The rifle burst in their metal box was deafening. To her right, Sam had her head in her lap, hands over her ears; trying to curl up as tightly as possible. She was squirming as much the goon Lara was still unloading an ammo clip into.

The Englishwoman made these observations about her environment as coolly as if she was reading a police report two weeks after the fact. The truth was that she didn't feel anything. Adrenalin had taken hold. She was used to the sensation by now. And it was heavenly. This is what it was to be a god. Beyond hurt. Beyond care. All there was, was *Do*.

She let her finger on the trigger go slack as she arced the rifle across Sam. The second the barrel was pointed at the bulkhead, though, she clenched down hard again. As hard as she clenched her teeth.

She raked the bullets across the steel partition.

It was wild and aimless...

And stupid. *So Goddamn stupid!*

She realised it too late.

"No!" she gasped, staring through the still-open window into the cab.

The driver and his passenger sagged in their seats. Only their safety belts kept their corpses upright. Beyond them, the windscreen was blood-splattered and bullet-shattered. Beyond that lay the curve of a hillside road. A curve that the vehicle was about to bisect.

How had she described herself to the doppelganger? *Impulsive. Impetuous. Hot-headed and stupid...*

The truth was exactly that.

"Lara?!" Sam wailed, reacting to the horror on her companion's face.

There was no time for anything else.

The archaeologist scrambled out from under the merc and flung herself at Sam.

Lara formed a cage around the filmmaker with her limbs. She tucked Sam's head under her chin just as the van tipped over the edge.

Lara closed her eyes.

An instant of buoyancy as the vehicle plunged. Then a balance-destroying bounce as it hit the slope. Lara was thrown sideways into the wall, instantly bruising her shoulder – but she had taken the entirety of the blow. Sam was shielded.

"It's okay," the archaeologist tried to murmur as the van began racing down the hillside at a sickening 60 degrees. She felt her stomach lurch as their mobile prison picked up speed.

Five heartbeats later the acceleration terminated abruptly as the front wheels locked. The vehicle skidded perpendicular to the slope and flipped.

Lara's equilibrium was gone.

A boot heel struck her cheek.

The butt of an assault rifle slammed into her back.

Something clipped her temple but she held on to consciousness.

Limbs and metal hit her from every direction. She supposed it should have hurt more than it actually it.

The van kept rolling. Crushing gravity alternated with liberating weightlessness. Jupiter to Pluto in a single revolution.

The motion was relentless. It was worse than any of the awful rollercoasters Sam had made them ride during their college era misadventures.

Sam, who at that moment was howling into her protector's chest bone. Lara clung to her tighter.

Then something collided with the archaeologist's ribs and she was suffocated in white. She saw it and felt it simultaneously; swelling up through her torso, stiffening her neck and filling her skull. It sparkled behind her eyelids, beautiful like an undisturbed field of snow in the sunlight.

She expelled a breath in appreciative wonder.

And then all light was extinguished from the world.

Chapter 31

Her sense of hearing returned first. Rasped breaths rushed at her out of the darkness. Her own, she gauged by the dryness tearing at her throat and the back of her mouth. It was the only thing her paralysed body could feel. Every other sensation was muffled.

Even the sound of a second voice. It was so smothered that Lara couldn't even determine the sex of the speaker.

She tried to concentrate on the roiling, syllable-less nonsense, and eventually the words sifted out, like gold flecks in a pan.

"Lara... Lara... Lara..."

Her name. Someone was calling her name.

Above her, out of the blackness, Sam's face took shape. She was looking down on the Englishwoman, wide-eyed and smeared in red.

Lara was instantly sitting upright. She seized Sam's face in her hands. "Are you hurt?"

God, there was so much blood.

Panicked, she practically yelled, "Sam, are you hurt?"

Her companion grabbed her wrists, halting the examination. "I'm okay."

"But –?"

"I'm okay, Lara. The blood..." The filmmaker winced. "The blood is yours, or his, I'm not sure." Her gaze travelled to a lump of dead merc lying partially across Lara's legs. The archaeologist's pupils tracked the same path to the bulky body. No wonder she couldn't move.

The man's head was turned towards them. His eyes were open but it wasn't his corpse's stare that mesmerised Lara. It was the half dozen wounds in his neck – evil little smirks still drooling a dark stickiness.

It was the same substance all over Lara's palms, her torso and no doubt her own face.

Another voice whispered in her skull, *Look at what you've done.*

It sounded too much like Himiko for the archaeologist's liking.

Lara kicked herself free of the corpse and leapt up. "We need to go."

Sam was still crouched, her hands cupping thin air. She looked up at Lara. Her expression was shell-shocked but there was a half-chuckle to her words when she said, "Lara, are you even human?"

The Englishwoman didn't respond. She was busy assessing their surroundings. They were still inside the van. The shell was horribly dented in parts but it was possible to determine

that she was now standing on one of the wall panels. The vehicle had ended its dramatic hillside plunge on its side.

Light struggled into the cargo space through the partition window that had lost all symmetry. There didn't seem to be much remaining of the cab beyond it. The windscreen was gone, with most of the dashboard, engine and chassis torn away. She could see only trees and earth. She didn't want to know about the state of the driver and his front seat passenger. That wasn't going to be pretty.

There was no escape from the vehicle that way though. She turned to examine the loading doors. They were still intact, but battered; outlined by white light where they had parted from their frame. She had to hope she could force them open.

She turned back to Sam, and realised her companion's wrists were still bound. That was the first order of business then.

Lara crouched over the dead merc. As expected, he had a tactical knife sheathed on his belt. She tugged it free and returned to her friend.

While Lara sawed at the cord, Sam asked, "So, what's the plan?"

"We keep moving."

She'd said it to Roth all those years ago on Snowdon. She could remember his proud smile then; the way he rested his hand on her shoulder and murmured, "That's my girl." The mantra had saved her on Yamatai, just as it had countless times since. Stasis was doubt, and death.

She grimaced at the memory of Roth's smile, counterpoised with his expression as he died right in front of her. His eyes as lifeless as the merc's. She couldn't ever lose someone like that again.

She cleared her throat and continued, "We need to put distance between ourselves and Natla; get away from the road; find a farm house or something. Then we can call the authorities. They're already looking for us."

Sam nodded.

The second she had cut her companion free, Lara returned to the merc's body and began searching it properly for anything useful. His belt was a goldmine, strung with three ammo clips, knife sheath and, most pleasing of all, a waistband holster cradling a good ol' Colt 1911. *Come to mamma...*

She tugged off the belt and buckled it around her hips.

The man was also wearing a black canvas military jacket. Lara began probing every pocket. She found a brush-steel Zippo engraved with a vintage pinup silhouette, and slipped it into her cargo pants. She even found a small vinyl water pouch.

She snatched it up and guzzled mouthfuls petulantly. *Fuck you.*

While the archaeologist was intent on looting, Sam murmured, "Lara, are you sure you're okay?"

"I'm fine."

The truth was that she was still numb to her body – ignorant of whatever injuries the crash had aggravated, or added to her current tally. The adrenalin would keep her going for now.

Sam's question had returned Lara's attention to her companion though. Sam was wearing her beige slacks from the museum commemoration, and a teal button-up shirt to replace the blouse Dupont had ripped. There was no insulation to that outfit. Or camouflage.

It was damp in parts with blood, but Lara stripped the man's jacket from him. She held it out to Sam. "Put this on."

The filmmaker frowned, but to her credit she obeyed instantly.

While she was shrugging it on, her companion moved through to the back of the van, collecting a dropped assault rifle in the process. Lara strung the weapon across herself.

The second merc's body lay at her feet, right before the exit. He didn't have a jacket – pity – but there could still be something useful of his to pilfer. Like the water bottle he'd flashed before the crash. They'd need that.

As she was bending down, the man moved.

Lara straightened reflexively. She heard Sam gasp behind her.

One of the merc's eyes opened a crack. "Help me...." He slurred. "Please."

Lara response was instinctual. She unholstered her Colt and shot him in the head.

For a second her ears rang with the sound.

Then everything was quiet.

That was until she heard Sam's shuddering voice behind her. "Lara... he was wounded."

The archaeologist lowered her head in a silent plea. *Please, Sam. Not now. You were never supposed to see anything like that.*

Guilt transformed into temper; an instant chemical reaction. From it dripped toxic defensiveness, which pooled in her gut, ready to drown her and anyone within a five foot radius.

As she tried to keep her emotions in check, Lara delivered her explanation robotically – primarily to the fresh corpse at her feet. "Hurt men talk. Dead men don't."

"But –"

Lara spun around and snapped, "What?"

A scowl had started to supplant the shock on Sam's face. She muttered, "You didn't have to kill him."

"No. I did. They're bastards! They all are. If you show mercy, you're dead." She reholstered her gun. "Sam, this isn't about right or wrong anymore. This is about survival. And that means making sure Natla has as little information about us and our movements as possible. Do you understand?"

The adventurer took a step towards her friend. Instantly the latter jerked away. That drained Lara's anger in a heartbeat.

"Sam, I would never hu—" Lara was barely halfway through the sentence when she realised the dishonesty of it. She had hurt Sam before. In New York. Sam had first-hand experience of what her former best friend was capable of when the wrong buttons were pushed.

Lara still felt the rages that had started in Yamatai. She liked to believe that over time she had learned to focus them. To channel them from roaring, uncontrolled flame to lighting – cold, efficient and deadly. But that didn't mean she was any less merciless; any less of a monster.

She sighed, "Do you see now why I left? It's not safe around me."

She couldn't stand looking at the mounting fear and doubt so plain on Sam's face. Lara turned back to the corpse, dropped down and began pillaging.

She pocketed another two ammo clips and attached the water bottle to her belt by its carabiner. There wasn't anything else to claim.

Finally she detached the merc's unused pistol, stood and returned to Sam. Her companion was still staring at her, her face muddling terror and disappointment.

Lara held out the Colt. "You know how to use this?"

Sam took it, breaking her silence in the process. "Yes."

"Good."

Lara set about trying to break free of their prison. As expected, the back doors had no inside handles. She had to hope that the impact of the plunge and multiple rolls had damaged the locking mechanism. *Oh, for a climbing axe right about now.*

She pressed her shoulder against the join and pushed. The first shove produced nothing. Neither did the second. "Come on," she grimaced.

She was surprised when Sam slotted in next to her. Together, their efforts were enough. Both doors swung open, the bottom one clanging as gravity tugged it to the hard earth. Lara just managed to stop the other panel from swinging back and hitting Sam. Not that the gesture would do anything to dilute the horror she had just stoked in the filmmaker.

Together, the two women stared out at freedom. They were at the bottom of a steep incline, facing thick forest in every direction. In front of them, the ground dipped off in a further five foot step, with trees studding the slope, and crowding the valley beyond.

Sam murmured, "Do you think we're in Macedonia?"

"I'm not sure."

Lara stepped out of the vehicle. Sam followed.

The pair rounded the front of the van.

One of the front seat mercs was lying there like a ragdoll; half ripped from his seat and flopped over. His sickening, spine-snapped posture revealed a pistol tucked into the back of his trousers. Lara snatched that up too, and slipped it into the back of her cargo's. Two guns were better than one.

Something crackled off to her left, on the periphery of the clearing where the van had come to rest.

Lara shared a worried glance with Sam before grabbing at her freshly acquired pistol. Holding it out before her, the archaeologist advanced on the source of the noise. Sam had positioned herself behind Lara's right shoulder and was keeping pace with her own weapon in hand.

Lying in the scrub was a chunk of the vehicle's cab and engine, badly mangled. Set in it was a portion of blood-and-dirt smeared dashboard, including the aircon control panel and a two-way radio console. The latter was intermittently crackling and squawking as it struggled to find reception sans antenna. But occasional words were breaking through the noise.

Lara's chest tightened as she pieced together the message.

"Unit 3? Unit 3?... Unit 3 respond, over.... What's going on?... Team en route... last GPS coordinates, over..."

Shit.

Lara grabbed Sam's free hand. "Move. Now."

Chapter 32

Lara started bounding down the hillside, with Sam in tow. Actually, that wasn't a fair assessment. Sam was striding alongside her companion, keeping up admirably.

Lara would have been impressed if at that moment she wasn't so preoccupied with the thought of imminent on-foot pursuit. At least that knowledge had given her a fresh hit of adrenalin to keep her going. Physically and mentally, she was firing on all cylinders – hyper-responsive to her surroundings; sensitive to every minute disturbance that her body made to the forest floor, the knee-high brush, the very air.

This was what it was to be alive.

Sam's voice tugged her out of her blissfully feral mindset. "So, are we just going to run blindly into the woods?"

"No. Change of plan. We head in deeper to lure whoever is looking for us. It'll be harder for them to track us in here. Then we return south in an arc, get back to the road and try flag down some help. Wherever Natla wants us, it's north of here. So we need to be as far as possible in the opposite direction." Lara glanced at her friend's face. "Are you up for that, Sam?"

The filmmaker's expression was strained but her voice steady when she responded, "Of course."

The going wasn't easy – they had to continually watch out for branches, roots and rocks intent on tripping them, and then lunge over the obstacles – but they moved swiftly enough. Lara kept listening for pursuers, to the point that her temples were throbbing from the relentless concentration. Yet there was no sign of them. Either Natla's forces were bloody good hunters, or they were still miles away.

Lara didn't have a watch but she estimated by the light shift that they'd been trekking for at least two hours, with nothing but rudimentary rests while the adventurer reoriented their direction. The lengthening shadows beneath the trees and resurgent crispness in the air suggested they had hiked straight into the late afternoon.

Sam, meanwhile, had been unusually quiet. At some point the women had stopped holding hands. And while Sam kept pace, she refused to meet Lara's gaze whenever her companion looked in her direction.

Lara knew exactly what the problem was – the elephant in the room. Or, rather, the bloated carcass of an elephant that had long since had its fetid guts ripped out by hyenas.

She scowled at herself.

At that point they were following a stream in the dip between two hills. Judging by the distant roar, the trickle was a tributary for a much bigger body of water.

"Wait," Lara blurted.

Sam stared at her.

"Let's take a break."

Immediately the Englishwoman dropped down and busied herself with filling their water bottle.

In the process, she found herself gazing at her killer's blood-mottled reflection. The doppelganger's voice echoed in her ear, as malicious as before. *"How much do you want to bet that your dear sweet Samantha doesn't even notice the difference between us?"*

The truth? The truth was there was no difference.

She'd accepted that. But that didn't mean she was any less ashamed to show it in front of Sam.

Lara sank her hands into the water and began rubbing at them, trying to wash out the evidence of her brutality. *Out, damned spot! Out, I say!*

She watched the dried blood change from black to brown, and then red; before sloughing off in ruddy clouds.

When the worst was gone – when the tarnish was restricted to her cuticles and the creases in her knuckles – she cupped handfuls of water and began splashing her face and neck. She used her inner sleeve to scrub her skin in earnest.

At some point in the operation, Sam had crouched down alongside her. The filmmaker was clutching her shins and staring into the stream bed.

"Is – ?" The start of her question came out as a squeak, and then immediately died, as efficiently as if someone just stomped on a noisy little mouse. She swallowed and tried again. "Is this what it's always like with you, Lara?"

The fear distorting her features only amplified the unsaid synonym. *Is this what your life is now?*

The archaeologist's kneejerk reaction was snark. "What? You thought that after Yamatai I was going to be one of those girls eager for a coffee and catch-up every time she was in town?"

Immediately she regretted her spiky, overly defensive reaction. Sam didn't deserve it. She was only looking for reassurance; reassurance that her old college buddy and reluctant partner in crime was still somewhere inside Lara's scarred skin. Curled in a corner and rocking tearfully, most like.

Disappointment had joined the unease colouring Sam's expression. The resulting guilt on Lara's part meant that she could only look at her companion in three second increments. Swallowing down on a new dose of foul-tasting shame, she tried to respond to the question again.

"Sorry..." She drew the back of her hand across her mouth, and explained to the stream instead. "No. It's not always like this. There's not normally so much... killing. But every so often someone tries to stop me. Antiquities thieves, professional rivals; these wankers called Trinity..." She looked back at Sam, trying to will acceptance of her words. "I don't enjoy it; the killing. It's just, over time, become... easy."

"Oh."

Lara kept replaying the moments following the merc's execution; the look of horror on Sam's face as her former best friend – her current aspiring lover – revealed her savagery.

Lara grimaced, "I'm sorry. I never wanted you to see anything like that."

"Actually I already have." Sam smiled sadly. "Back on Yamatai, when you rescued me from the Solarii fortress. You shot that guard through the throat. Right in front of me."

Lara remembered. She had just started to feel the cool flicker of disconnect from her actions. And she was learning what it was to revel in it. Even before she lost Roth, and fully embraced the numbness, and the strange, utterly callous brand of competence it was paired with.

"Sam..."

The filmmaker shook her head, snipping Lara's objection. "I see now that's not really you."

Christ, Sam. Stop deluding yourself. "Yes, it is. Of course it's me. And I frighten you."

"Yeah. You do. But sweetie... I think you would terrify any sane person."

Lara gaped, "Are you actually making a joke?"

"Well, I wouldn't expect *you* to recognise one." The corner of Sam's lips twitched. "That was never your strong suit."

"How can you joke about this? You need to stay away from me. I need to get you home – "

Sam's fingertips brushed Lara's cheek. "You're doing it again."

"What?"

"Putting me behind glass." She sighed, "Putting me on exhibit, with a little plaque that says 'Samantha Nishimura. Critically endangered documentary maker. Saved by Lara Croft a dozen times, and counting'."

Lara could feel the frustration flowing through her veins. It set hard in every muscle it passed through, putting her on edge. She just wasn't getting through to Sam.

She seized her companion's wrist. She stared into her eyes. "I'm alone for a reason, Sam. I have to be. Forget that I'm a magnet for trouble and tragedy. What if I'm the one who hurts you? What if I lose my temper and I lash out unthinking at you? Again. What if you get in the way at any other time and I can't stop myself?"

Sam's free hand pressed against Lara's other cheek.

"What if? What if? What if? What if you stop this masochistic insistence that you need to isolate yourself and actually believe someone can love you?"

"But how can they?!"

Sam tugged her into a kiss. Open mouthed. Insistent.

The frustration drained from Lara's limbs. She thought her grip on Sam would slacken, but it only white-knuckle tightened as the kiss deepened.

The filmmaker withdrew from the clinch first. Her chin was pink with the diluted blood still dripping from Lara's skin. Continuing to cradle her companion's face in her palms, she murmured, "I'm not asking you to believe me. Just trust that I can handle this, okay?"

"But you shouldn't have to *handle* this, Sam." Lara's eyes were suddenly feeling ominously moist. *Don't you dare fucking break down now, Croft.*

"You sprung that on me in the van, Lara. I wasn't expecting it." Sam exhaled, "I don't know that I'll ever get used to it but I think I can understand it."

"The way you looked at me..." Lara blinked. "It's one thing to do the things I have. It's another to recognise what I've done. The horror on your face; I look at you and it's like holding up a mirror. I'm forced to see myself like this." She glared at her bloody front and the dissipating evidence of her crimes in the water by her feet.

I've just accepted it's all me. With your judgement on top of that... "It's too much."

"Then let me be there to help you so it's not too much. Whatever I need to do, sweetie. Whether that's be at your side, or be waiting for you when you get back. It doesn't matter. You need someone to show you it's okay; that you don't have to hate yourself. And I think I can do that."

Sam seized Lara by the jaw, turning the archaeologist's head so they were looking each other in the face again. "I was trying already after Yamatai, before you ran." She winced, "This is the only way I know how to save you, Lara. To remind you that you are good, no matter what you think. And to get it through your thick skull that I do love you and will always love you, no matter what."

And where does Steven fit in all this? The archaeologist didn't ask that question out loud though. She dipped her hand in the stream, and raised her fingers to Sam's cheek. In silence, she began thumbing away the crusted blood there too.

What if Sam was right, and the difference was having someone there to counter the bitterness and judgement of her own voice, which had been so deafening for so long?

Lara murmured, "I love you, Sam. Now let's get moving."

They'd trekked a mile deeper into the woods when Lara began to feel strange. She was weirdly breathless and spacy. Beneath her, her legs were barely cooperating anymore. And everything was starting to hurt. Really, really hurt. Her ribs. Her head. Her shoulder. Her back.

No. Not now.

The adrenalin that had got her onto her feet post-crash, and kept her going, had finally run out. She had to hope Sam wouldn't notice.

No luck.

Her companion was frowning at her. "Lara, are you okay? You've gone really pale."

The archaeologist was in the process of nodding when a dizzy spell sent her groping for the nearest tree trunk. She was bracing against it when the nausea struck. This time she had no control.

She bent suddenly and stiffly at the waist, just like a poorly manipulated ventriloquist's dummy. She vomited. Over and over she heaved.

She was powerless as the waves rolled through her gut and up her gullet. Her knees quivered in the aftermath of each tidal surge, which left her skin damp and sticky.

Instead of dwelling on her rapid deterioration, she tried to concentrate on a miniscule reason for gratitude. It was only water she was throwing up. There was no sign of blood in the growing pool of sick; no indication that an internal injury had spilled its damage into her digestive system.

When the last convulsion seemed to have passed, she swirled her tongue around her mouth and spat on the ground.

She straightened then.

"Lara...?" Sam asked.

"I'm fine," the archaeologist declared, despite the sparkling motes raining down before her eyes.

At her first step, her legs buckled.

Instantly, Sam was slotted under her arm. "Whoa, guess I'm getting my chance to save you sooner than I thought. Come on, Tomb Raider, let's get you somewhere safe to rest."

"No. We need..." Her voice had become as uncooperative as her limbs. "...keep going."

"Lara, the sun's going to set soon. I really don't want to be lumbering around this place in the dark. We can find somewhere to hole up until first light."

"No."

"Well, you can't do anything like this."

That was the truth. What was the expression? *Weak as a kitten*. So much for being a formidable lioness. Sam was half-carrying and half-dragging her at that moment.

"...won't get up again," the Englishwoman argued weakly.

"You're in no condition to argue with me, Croft. Come on."

They'd been moving in the direction of the river, and it was close to the water that they found a mangle of rocks camouflaging an overhang. Set halfway down a slope, it wasn't ideal. They were blind to approach from above. And if their hiding place was found, they'd be cornered with no alternate escape. Plus, being in such close proximity to the roiling waters – presumably beyond the next ridge – made it difficult to listen for Natla's forces. The flipside though was that the roar meant the women could speak quite freely, without whispering.

Not that Lara was in any state for a fat chat.

The last time she had felt like this was two years previously when she had stumbled onto a forgotten tribe in the Amazon. Before she could explain, they zapped her with hallucinogen-laced darts and she spent three days wandering through the rainforest until she realised she wasn't actually a Morpho butterfly. The comedown had not been pleasant.

At that moment though, Sam was studying her companion's ashen face. "I'm no expert, Lara, but I've watched enough medical dramas and reality TV to be pretty sure you're in shock."

"...*body* in shock."

Sam helped Lara to settle into the earthen-floored alcove before squashing in next to her. It was a tight fit with the two of them but Lara wasn't going to complain about the snugness. She was still trembling, and the stone against her back wasn't helping. Once the sun set, the temperature seemed to drop a further five degrees.

Lara fingered the lighter in her pocket. As appealing as the thought was, it was too risky to make a fire.

Sam seemed to be brooding over the same thing. She removed the merc's jacket and draped it around Lara's shoulders. Then she snuggled into her companion, sliding an arm around the archaeologist's waist as she slipped under the protection of the lined fabric as well. Lara bit down on a hiss as Sam's hand brushed her broken ribs.

The combined body heat did help though. As did being reclined. Lara started to feel marginally better; regaining control of her limbs and voice as her muscles unclenched.

Even more comforting was the sensation of Sam pressed against her – the filmmaker's temple at Lara's jawline, the feeling of her breath on Lara's neck and the steady, soothing rhythm as her chest expanded and contracted against Lara's body.

Lara relaxed into Sam in turn. It had been years since they cuddled like this. For real; not simply in one of Lara's dreams. It had been just as long since the archaeologist was physically intimate with someone in such a non-sexual way. *God, she'd missed it.*

The women were quiet for ages, staring out into the forest as every tree was swallowed by the spreading gloom. The only sound that came to them was the river's grumble.

Eventually Sam broke their personal silence.

"You know, for ages I fantasised about making love to you in a setting like this. Well, without a mad woman's heavily armed death squad on our tail."

Lara glanced down at her companion. "You did?"

"Two wood nymphs. Naked, given over entirely to each other's pleasure. Naiads..."

"Dryads," Lara corrected.

Sam smirked, "Gee, thanks, Professor Croft." She added with a sigh, "I keep thinking that if I'd known earlier how you felt – how / felt about you – just how different all those camping trips would've been. Like we'd only have needed to pack one sleeping bag."

Lara arched an eyebrow. "I'd still be the one carrying it."

Sam ignored her. She was grinning, "Like if I'd known, we would have done more than sleep out under the stars in the Kalahari."

"That would have been nice."

Lara felt Sam's hand slip under her polo neck and lightly trace her abdominal muscles. As the filmmaker's fingertips tentatively explored her companion's flesh, her breathing quickened against Lara's throat.

The archaeologist smiled sadly. "I'm afraid I'm not much good in that department at the moment."

"I know..."

"Honestly, right now I'd rather have a cup of tea and a plateful of Jaffa Cakes."

Sam burst out laughing. "You blow my mind, Lara Croft."

"How so, Samantha Nishimura?"

"I mean one minute you're executing men with headshots. The next you're the exact same girl I used to know; sweet and shy and enduringly dorky."

"There's no difference. I promise."

Lara retrieved Sam's roaming hand and entwined their fingers. As ill-advised as it was, given the circumstances, she was starting to feel sleepy. And she didn't think she'd be able to resist the lure of pain-free unconsciousness for long.

Sam lifted her head, and brushed her nose against Lara's.

"There's more that I fanaticised about," the filmmaker murmured. "Don't lose it, alright?"

Something about the way she said it reassured Lara. She let a contented noise rise from the base of her larynx in response. "Mmmm?"

"Did you ever think how beautiful our babies would be?"

That woke her up. "What? How exactly would that work?"

Sam pecked at the pulse point on Lara's neck. "It's the 21st Century, babe. We have options."

Lara's expression was bemused. "I still think Steven is better equipped to help you with that than me."

Perhaps she shouldn't have mentioned the fiancé's name. Sam looked momentarily deflated. But she shrugged it off and returned to her explanation; half-excited, half-embarrassed. That wasn't like Sam normally.

"Now I knew you were never interested in having kids. Or being pregnant. So I'd have them. We'd take one of your eggs first, and I'd carry it. I'd have your baby. And the second time, I'd have my own. Same sperm donor. Japanese, so the girls look like the both of us; have the same heritage."

Lara's eyebrows climbed. "You have it all mapped out."

Sam made a face. "Total lesbian cliché, right?" She added shyly, "It's just that we were best friends for so long, I thought we could fast track a lot of the usual couple-getting-together stuff." She cleared her throat, "Although I would like to clarify this is all set aside for one day, far in the future, after we've had crazy adventures together for years – setting both the archaeology and documentary worlds alight."

Suddenly Sam sat up. There was panic in her voice and expression. "I'm sorry. This is too much for you, isn't it? I didn't mean – "

"It's okay, Sam. Really." Lara reached for her companion and drew her back down. The filmmaker slotted perfectly under Lara's arm. Like she was always meant to be there.

"I feel kind of silly telling you all this, Lara."

"Don't be."

"It's just that, at first, after New York, for a while I thought you'd just freaked out about what happened. I thought you'd get over it and come back in a few days or weeks. So I let myself think about us; plan our lives together..."

Lara tried to imagine it. Her own little family. Clutching a stubby toddler's hand in her calloused palm and looking down into an expectant little face that was partly hers. The difference would be marginal, like a copy of a copy. Her, but not her. Another person. As perfect and natural and *right* as Lara's doppelganger had been *wrong*.

She imagined two raven-haired girls running rampant around Croft Manor, filling those mausoleum halls with shrieks and giggles.

Then there was Sam; *Mom* to Lara's *Mum*.

Sam, the hands-on mother, dishing out loads of hugs and kisses and tummy raspberries... when she wasn't joining in the boisterous chases. Her camera was always in hand, of course, to document every moment.

Lara, more reserved – more upper-class Brit than she liked to admit – would be standing off to one side when it came to such rambunctiousness. She was good at telling bedtime

stories, though, and joining in sandbox excavations. She could do that, just as she could teach the girls the way her parents and Roth had taught her.

She was surprised how easily she could picture it. Surprised. And scared.

She couldn't actually have that life, could she?

She mumbled something to Sam about needing to keep watch, but she dozed off like that; thinking about a tranquil, domestic future she couldn't believe she had any right to fantasise about.

She woke squinting against the bright white light of dawn.

She was lying on her side, her head in a scrunched pillow made of the merc's jacket.

Most disturbing, she was alone.

She sat up, ignoring the wave of dizziness as her inner equilibrium was slower to right itself than her body.

Sam?! Christ, where are you?

Remembering where she was, Lara just managed to stop herself yelling.

Fuck! This was like Yamatai all over again...

On her hands and knees, she crawled to the mouth of the hiding place and scanned her environment.

In every direction, nothing but trees and mottled, muddy forest floor.

Lara grabbed hold of the boulders shielding her, and used them to pull herself upright. Standing, she was very quickly aware of the damage done to herself. With Stone's painkillers long flushed from her system, her broken ribs and battered skull were throbbing, evidently spewing molten metal with every pulse. She kept having to blink away reflex tears.

Then there was the whiplash from the van's tumble. Her neck and shoulders were agonisingly stiff. She could barely turn her head.

But she could make do. She had to.

Pistol in hand, rifle strung so that she could shoulder it with her other arm if needed, she stepped out into the open.

"Sam?"

Again, Lara assessed her surroundings. But her survivor's eye didn't pick up anything.

Let's hope there are no wolf traps waiting for me this time...

The archaeologist advanced down the slope, ignoring her jelly legs.

"Sam?!" she hissed again.

The answer was a single gunshot to her right.

Chapter 33

No.

The gunshot was as effective as a starting pistol. Lara was mid-sprint before she even realised her legs were pumping.

She was closer to the river now, but even with the rumble, she could pluck out scraps of human sound.

Strident male voices...

And a woman's. *Thank fuck, a woman's.* Speaking; neither screaming nor wailing.

Lara exhaled. That realisation restored some sense. Her dash had been foolish until that moment; too focused on what lay ahead to worry about self-preservation. She'd run noisily straight out into the open without any thought of cover. A sniper could have picked her off in half a heartbeat.

She slipped behind a tree and sank into a crouch.

Like that, darting erratically and unpredictably between trunks, she continued to scurry towards the source of the noises.

She grimaced to herself. *I'm coming, Sam. Hold on.*

Lara found herself looking down on the river, about fifty foot across. The water was rushing and roiling – a kayaker's dream – but the current was clearly not as formidable as it once had been. Centuries ago, at four or five times its current width, it had carved a gulley between the hills, slicing away the earth on either side. The flow may have weakened but the evidence of its erosive power was still apparent right at Lara's feet. The ground dropped straight down to a heavily pebbled floodplain.

On the closest riverbank – maybe 20 feet from her position – were three figures. Sam was on her knees, cupping her cheek. Over her stood a merc in woodland camo, with his rifle pointed at her. Between the pair and Lara, a second man was bent over, groping at the earth as he retrieved a dropped pistol. Lara noticed the fabric over his bicep was shiny-wet and stained almost black.

Good try, Sam.

Words came to the archaeologist distorted by the current's grumble. But by straining her eyes as much as her ears she was able to slot in the missing syllables and sentence fragments.

"Where's your girlfriend?"

"I don't know."

The rifle-toting interrogator drew back his fist, and Sam yelped, *"I don't know!"*

"What do you mean?"

Silence.

"Answer me!"

"I don't know. She went off to find food; left me to get water." She pointed at the bottle lying by her side.

So that's what she'd been doing. No doubt for Lara's sake.

The man closed his fist around a communicator on his jacket lapel. He muttered into the two-way radio, "Got one... Nah, not Croft. The other girl... Croft won't be far... Bringing this one now... Yeah, she's catnip for the other bitch... Copy that."

The merc hauled Sam to her feet. He shook her. "No tricks or you get another one. Or payback for what you did to Costa. Understand?"

Sam nodded. Petulantly.

She was shoved into place three feet before the men, and the trio began moving downstream.

Lara was in the difficult position of following them and watching her back at the same time. What she wouldn't give to have her bow in hand so she could end things swiftly and silently. Her guns wouldn't be much good when it came to the latter, particularly if Natla's forces were converging.

Shit. She'd have to time this just right.

As the river cut deeper into the earth, the bank steepened and climbed. Even though the water camouflaged the sound of her movements, the men were on the alert. They were expecting her; continually scanning their surroundings. That slowed her approach.

If they spotted her, it was over. Sam would be used as a hostage – the interrogator merc never took his barrel off her – and Lara suspected Natla had already ordered her forces to kill the young American woman should the archaeologist resist.

If Lara botched this rescue, the former roommates would be back exactly where they were pre-escape: bound, bullied prisoners at the mercy of a madwoman.

The bank to the band's left became a cliff-side, dropping sheer into the water. The river was deeper and narrower here. From kayak-suitable it had become a whitewater wet dream. On a normal day Lara would have happily leapt into such a thrilling foam-strewn battle. Just then though she was only interested in the river's muffling effect.

The path widened, and for an eye blink the mercs seemed more concerned with the exposed terrain before them.

This was it.

Lara got a good grip on her looted tactical knife. In a crouch, she crept forward, keeping her head below hip height on the men.

The rear guard, the bloodied Costa, was her prey. As he turned his head to scan behind him, she side-stepped into his blind spot. With her back leg fully loaded, she sprang forward and upward, driving the blade through his latissimus dorsi. At the same instant, she clamped her hand over his mouth.

The blade had found a sweet spot. Missing bone, it slipped straight into his ribcage.

Already she had emotionally disengaged. She knew it by the fact she was indifferent to Costa's jerks against her; his stifled cries caught in her palm. Instead, she appreciated the beauty of her weapon. She'd have to get one of her own. The carbon steel was superlative. She'd experienced more resistance slicing tuna sashimi.

Lara drew out the blade and thrust it back in, right to the hilt.

Then, a third time.

For good measure she yanked the knife free and applied it to the left side of Costa's throat, where his jaw met his neck.

Don't turn around. Please. She willed it for Sam even more than the merc monitoring her.

Lara could feel flesh part beneath the blade as she arced it back towards her. Wet syrupy heat rolled over her thumb and index finger as if she was toying with warm toffee sauce.

The soldier didn't seem to know what to do. He grabbed at her knife hand, and then his throat, and then back at her.

Just die fucking quietly.

"Hurgh!"

He gurgled through her fingers, expelling a stream of blood to match the one coursing down his front.

That did it.

Costa's partner turned, along with Sam.

The second merc's roar matched Lara's sentiments exactly. "*Fuck!*"

His trigger finger was already tightening.

Lara dropped down as the dying man took the semi-automatic burst meant for her.

The damage was done; stealth had become pointless. Left handed, she palmed her pistol and dived sideways, away from the cover of Costa's tumbling body.

Lara fired. One bullet and the shooter's face splattered red. He dropped instantly.

The archaeologist's boot heel connected with the ground first. It allowed her to transition into a stride, restore her balance and save herself from a painful prone landing. She was aware that if she went down, she probably wouldn't be capable of getting up again.

So she stood, chest heaving, with two more corpses at her feet.

"Lara!" Sam ran at her companion and threw grateful arms around her neck.

Lara squeezed back. Eyes closed, she let herself relish the embrace. Just for a moment. Then she pushed Sam back out to arm's distance.

"Are you okay? Did they hurt you?"

Lara frowned as she ran a thumb over the filmmaker's cheekbone. It was already puffy and mottled mauve.

"He hit me, but it's okay." Sam grimaced then, "Lara, I'm so sorry. I screwed up. This morning, I thought I was helping..."

Tears sparked in her eyes.

Lara took the filmmaker's face in her hands. "It's alright. Truly." She pressed her lips to Sam's forehead. "But we need to get out of here. Now. They'll be swarming this place any minute."

The archaeologist didn't wait for a response. She bent and scooped up Sam's gun from Costa's body. As she handed over the Colt, Lara let her gaze return to the corpse's bloody sleeve. "Not bad, Sam."

The praise was more effective than a kiss. Sam brightened even as Lara roughly seized her hand and initiated a sprint back upriver.

Once again it was adrenalin that kept the Englishwoman moving. Her senses were consumed with survival and surveillance; there was no part of her consciousness free to assess her injuries. It was better that way. She didn't want to ponder how much she really had left in her failing body. She suspected the Empty indicator had been flashing for so long that the little red bulb had already blown.

Adrenalin seemed to have a different effect on Sam, meanwhile. She just wouldn't let go of her need to explain the incident on the river bank.

She was babbling away, her voice one notch above a whisper. "I don't think you were even conscious but you kept pleading for water all night. You emptied the bottle and I knew you'd need more when you woke up so –"

"Sam, be quiet. I need to concen –"
A fist connected with Lara's jaw.

The next thing she knew she was on the ground, half-sprawled in a bed of leaves, and tasting blood.

She recognised the twanging accent even before the shadow completely swallowed her.

Larson stood over her with his revolver pointed at her head. He scowled, "Goddamn you, girl. You killed six squad mates. I can't let that slide..."

Chapter 34

Lara blinked up at the big man.

She recognised regret there, warping his features as much as rage when he growled, "I can't let you go now."

Lara hauled herself into a sitting position.

She clutched at her jaw; readjusted it in its socket. The joint cartilage made a too-crunchy sound as she opened her mouth. *Great.*

She sighed, "I didn't know you were such a team player, Larson. I thought we had that in common."

"I gave you a chance. You just had to escape; run away. But you've turned everything into a bloodbath."

She shrugged, "I kind of do that."

Sam had been standing just behind Lara's shoulder when Larson's fist came swinging out from behind a tree. Since that moment the filmmaker had become a frozen doe, taking in the scene with wide brown eyes just like the timid creature.

Lara looked to her companion at the exact same moment Larson did. Being the focus of two hunters was enough to startle Sam from her trance. She began to back away. But she was too late. With a single stride Larson had her.

He hauled her against his front, wrapped his arm around her throat and turned back to Lara.

The archaeologist had used Sam's attempted escape as an opportunity to lunge for her Colt. When Larson struck her, it had flown from her fingers and landed several feet from where she sprawled.

But she was handicapped by her injuries.

Her dive felt short and she had only scrambled halfway to her weapon when Larson barked, "Don't think about it!"

Sam was already in place as his shield. For extra effect, the giant pointed his pistol at her skull. It was Lara who remained the nexus of his attention though. He nodded towards the archaeologist's rifle; foolishly forgotten, but still strung across her torso.

"I underestimated you before, darlin'. I'm not doing it again. Toss that over here."

Lara frowned. It might pay to play the good girl for a bit. She slipped the strap over her head and skidded the gun across the earth towards Larson.

"Good. Now get up."

It took the use of all four of her limbs but Lara was able to stagger to her feet. Amazingly, she still had it in her, even if her legs were quaking visibly beneath her.

Larson noticed too. He blew out his cheeks. "You're tough, girl, I'll give you that. I've partnered with SEALs who wouldn't be standing after everything you've been through."

"Thank you."

"Prettiest darn cockroach that ever lived."

Lara gave him a bloody grin. "I've been called a rat before."

He shrugged, "Rats, roaches; makes no difference to me. They're all pests. I'm just the exterminator."

"Lucky me."

"Damn lucky. You're to be taken alive. Miz Natla's orders."

Lara raised her arms, and dropped them to her sides with a slap. "Come and get me then."

Sam's expression screamed the question, *What the fuck are you doing?*

Larson seemed more amused than worried about the feeble boxer's taunt, delivered from the far side of the ring. "I think you're brain damaged after all."

He shoved the filmmaker to the ground and sauntered two steps closer to Lara. "This suits me just fine. I prefer a more hands-on approach." He slipped his pistol back into its shoulder holster.

Lara coolly appraised him, standing before her at his full height. "My, you *are* a big bugger."

He smirked, "Intimidated?"

"Nah," she imitated his strong accent. "I've handled bigger."

"But have you had better?"

"We'll see."

Now, Lara.

She feigned a repeat lunge for her Colt.

Snapping out his revolver, Larson mirrored her movement. Which was exactly what she wanted him to do.

Lara redirected her momentum. She sprang backwards at the same time she groped behind her.

Two guns are better than one.

She tugged her second stolen pistol from her trouser waistband, and fired.

Larson did the same.

Neither of the killers were on target. At the realisation, Larson's smug smile evaporated. His face darkened into a cumulonimbus.

And then the hurricane struck.

He charged her.

Lara stumbled backwards, preparing to dodge and fire at the same time. It had worked before.

But she was already closed down.

Flannel-clad limbs enveloped her. A fist crushed her wrist and yanked her gun arm out to the side – with a jerk so vicious that she felt her elbow overextend. She was caught in a half-crucifixion pose; her pistol useless.

How could he be so big and so damn fast?

She would have called it a rugby tackle. Or a wrestler's takedown. It happened so quickly she couldn't actually tell which description was more appropriate. The force of his brute's body colliding with hers bashed the air from her chest at the exact same moment her boots left the ground.

She'd lost the range keeping her safe. She couldn't fight Larson on strength, even on her best day. So she had to be smart about how she expelled her energy.

Be that little rat.

Even as he continued to drive her backwards, she wedged her knee into Larson's gut and pushed off it. It was just like scrambling up a mountain face. She dug the fingers of her free hand into the mercenary's neck and tugged herself higher on his body.

When her face crested his shoulder, she had a micro-second to react. Clamping her thighs to his sides to stabilise herself, she grabbed the tactical knife from her belt. And stabbed it into his trapezius.

Go down, you big bastard!

Howling.

Hands seizing her under her armpits.

Flying backwards.

And having her little voyage abruptly terminated by a tree.

Lara struck the trunk square on. The impact blasted the pistol from her fingers. It also smacked the back of her skull against hard, knobbly bark.

She tumbled into a waiting maw of blackness.

She came to moments later, splayed across a tangle of roots at the base of the tree. Her body was unfeeling and useless. Somehow her eyes were still open. Unblinking. Barely

focused. Her existence had become moments of tunnel vision punctuated by far longer stretches of darkness.

In one of the cognisant patches she realised Larson was glaring down at her. "Now why did you make me go and do that, kitten?"

In his fist he held her knife, still dripping his blood.

The big man grumbled, "I'm getting rather sick of being stuck by you."

He knelt down before her. "What? No snarky comeback this time?" He cupped her chin in his palm and scrutinised her. "Damn, such a beautiful broken doll. It's a real pity..."

Larson jabbed the knife into the dirt alongside his boot. That liberated his other hand. With it, he trailed the back of his fingers along her throat.

He leaned in and murmured right against her earlobe, "I gave you a way out. Now I'm going to give you another one. I'm sorry. I didn't want it to come to this."

Both of his hands fastened around her neck.

Lara was still trapped inside her body. She heard herself make some kind of desperate noise; watched her fingers scrape ineffectually at Larson's forearm, but it was all physical reflex. She had no control.

Her windpipe closed.

Larson locked eyes with her. She knew his look too well; the way his stare burrowed into her pupils, mining for fear or any other reaction that would nourish his kill-lust. The man who had pitied her; who had saved her life when he hauled her into his arms and dashed to Stone's medical tent... that man would be gone until his brutal task was complete.

Tightening his grip, Larson straightened; lifting his captive off the ground.

Lara's feet dangled. Her body was trying to fight; to survive. Legs kicked out. Hands scrambled over flesh. But she couldn't reach anything. Her executioner was too big. Arm's length was beyond her.

Larson walked them towards the edge of the cliff.

He gazed down at the rapids, and then back at Lara. His voice was matter-of-fact as he explained, "When Natla asks, I'll say you were desperate. You jumped; broke your neck in the fall, or just simply drowned. Either way, you'll be free from this."

Larson readjusted his thumbs so they pressed over the archaeologist's carotid arteries. Suddenly her head felt like it was collapsing in on itself. She was already freediving, deep into murky redness that turned darker the further she swam.

"Hrrrk." She tugged on his fingers, trying to create some breathing space; a single tiny channel for circulation. It wasn't working. She couldn't –

"Put her down."

Sam's voice.

Larson turned. Behind him, several feet down the path, the filmmaker was standing with her pistol raised.

The giant sneered at her, "Give it a break, sugar. You don't have it in you."

"I'm Japanese, asshole. Don't you know that means I'm crazy?"

Larson lunged a single step in Sam's direction. She hopped back – a skittish bird – and the big man laughed. "Just shut up and wait your turn, Yoko."

The brute returned his focus to Lara. He squeezed harder and the archaeologist felt her legs start to jerk. Her head lolled sideways against his knuckles.

So this is how it ends?

A gunshot, and she jerked again. Except this time the motion was a tremor, skittering along Larson's arm into her own limbs.

The giant's eyes widened, at the same moment his grip loosened on her throat. Lara dropped face down on the ground. She lay there, shuddering and coughing and sucking in whatever air her epiglottis would allow.

She could see Larson's boots striding away from her. A second gunshot rang out. A third. Larson stopped in his tracks. His next step was smaller, less certain, but he was still advancing.

Lara knew exactly what towards.

She struggled to lift her head.

Sam got off a fourth shot, point blank into Larson's chest as he reached her. She looked furious and terrified, both.

It was like witnessing a tree come down. Except the roles had inverted. Suddenly Sam was Paul Bunyan, looking up as Larson, the former flannel-clad woodsman, toppled right into her.

Lara watched as the giant delivered a single straight-armed punch to Sam's head as they collided.

Together, they plunged from the precipice.

No.

"Sam!" Lara yelled. "Sam!" She wailed again, "SAAAAMM!"

Then everything sparkled like clear Winter skies in Finland. Lara's forehead hit the earth once more.

Chapter 35

Her voice was strident in the blackness.

Get up. Get up! She will die if you don't move your arse this instant.

She could imagine the doppelganger's furious face as she spat the words – the way her expression was equal parts anger and exasperation. *I've carried you your whole life...*

How Lara missed the gravel of Roth's voice as her inner motivational monologue. How oddly soothing his Northern brogue was in comparison to her own silky accent.

Lara!

Eyes still closed, she let her fingers spider over the earth; burrow under the leaf cover until she was able to find a patch of soil soft enough for her nails to penetrate.

When she had a reliable handful, she tugged herself forward. Still face down in the pit of her own personal prison.

Lara! Stop fannying about. Move it!

She forced one eye open. She would have hissed against the blurred brightness but her shriek had already exhausted her air supply.

Instead, she continued to haul her body towards the edge that Sam had plunged from.

Sam.

Lara's knees found purchase against the ground. So too did the toes of her boots. Slowly her body was coming back to life.

Her legs pushed off, joining the pull of her arms to propel her.

Sam.

She was dragging herself...

Then crawling...

Then staggering...

Her first certain step.

Striding.

Running.

She didn't even stop at the precipice. She knew what she would find below. Nothing but black, churning water.

No rocks or bodies at the bottom of the twenty-five foot drop.

Still moving – she knew that if she paused for one instant her body would break down entirely – she bent and scooped up Sam's pistol. Then her legs pumped into a sprint.

It was like another horrible fever dream; like she was watching herself in the third person. But she couldn't dwell on the sense of spacy disconnect.

Downstream. She had get downstream.

The river's course twisted in parts. She might be able to catch up on foot. Certainly she couldn't in the water. She'd lost precious seconds while she was unconscious. And fighting the current would demand more sustained strength than she was capable of.

So she ran.

Sam.

She tripped and skinned her palms. Every leap over a breached root threatened to buckle her legs on landing... Still, she kept going. And her eyes never left the water.

I'm coming.

Gunfire.

An instant later, bark exploded to her left, flicking splinters against her cheek.

Shit.

She hadn't even seen them. Eyes darting back and forth over the environment, she still couldn't spot her pursuers. Her adrenalin level was too high; her survivor's focus shattered just like the tree trunk. She was panicking.

Shit shit shit.

She had no other option. She ran again.

More gunshots. More sprays of wood to either side of her – some closer than others.

Under her feet, the terrain was descending again. The cliff became a less intimidating cut bank, while the river – still furious – widened. On the far side, a rock-strewn point bar had developed between the water and forest. Lara kept hoping to see Sam lying there – drenched and miserable, but alive; hacking up liquid from her lungs as she swore and whimpered.

"Croft!"

Striding at her out of the forest were three mercs with raised assault rifles.

"Freeze!"

She responded with two shots of her pistol, and darted downriver.

But there were men there too, on the same informal path between water and woods that she was following.

Fuck.

The wounded lioness was corralled. She found herself backing up to the brink of the bank. The two units reached her at the same time, and immediately fanned out into a semi-circle to surround her.

"Drop your weapon and get your hands up!"

Another man was muttering into his two-way radio. "Yeah, we got her."

Lara glanced over her shoulder at her last remaining escape route. It was still a fifteen foot drop, and she had no idea how deep the water was directly below her. Could she risk more broken bones? Could she function with them?

Motionless, her limbs were starting to stiffen with fatigue. She tried to take a deep, steadying breath but her lungs were quavering as much as the rest of her. She had to act quickly or she wouldn't be able to. What choice did she have?

"Croft! Put down your gun or we put you down!"

She looked back at the river.

Then she saw it, further downstream. A teal blouse, suctioned to the back and shoulders of a body, face down. At that moment the figure was caught on a tangle of branches and other forest debris long accumulated between rocks.

Lara slotted the Colt into her hip holster. She raised her hands. Then she turned and leapt.

The current was stronger than she expected; the temperature colder. Fortunately the water was also just deep enough to accommodate her plunge. The impact of her heels on the riverbed shot a sharp pain up through her knees and hips, but nothing tore or snapped.

Her head broke the surface of the water. Instantly, her body began its feeble, raspy attempt at replacing the air crushed from her lungs by the river's chilled fist.

Sam.

Caught in the current, Lara was almost at the spot where she'd sighted her companion. But there was nothing there except for sodden foliage and driftwood.

She hadn't imagined the sighting, had she? Willed it into existence through desperation, like a desert mirage?

"Saaaaammm!" She found herself screaming over the roar. Stupidly expending the energy she needed. But it was all reflex; a vent for her mounting anguish.

There.

Ahead.

Sam was bobbing limply in the current. Horrifyingly, she could have passed for a Baroque saint on canvas, facing skywards with her eyes closed and her arms wide in acceptance.

Lara kicked off, swimming with the flow to reach her former best friend. That was the easy bit. She collided with the filmmaker, and immediately encircled her waist.

"I've got you." Then she added, "Sam?"

No response.

"Sam?!" Lara yelled. It was difficult to get a good look at her companion's face as the river swept and spun them, but the archaeologist could see Sam's lips were the same sickly shade as her skin.

It took everything Lara had to haul them out of the current and onto an earthen bank. In fact, she couldn't even get them fully out of the river. Her legs, and the arm she'd used to paddle with, had devolved into jelly once removed from the water. She collapsed breathless on Sam while they were still lying half in the stream.

"Sam? Come on. Wake up." She tapped her companion's cheek. Then she groped for a pulse point on her throat.

Nothing.

Lara retracted her fingers and glowered at them. Something was obviously wrong. She'd lost her sense of touch. It had to be. Otherwise Sam... No. That was impossible. She couldn't...

"Sam!"

Lara pushed herself into a crouch alongside her former best friend. She pressed the heel of her palm against Sam's sternum, placed her second hand over it and thrust down with her full weight behind it.

Then again.

She delivered the set of chest compressions brutally. "Don't you fucking dare!"

She seized Sam's face and forced a breath down her throat.

Too much air, as it turned out. Lara dropped back on her haunches, feeling lightheaded. It was her instant of physical reprieve while she waited for Sam's heart to restart under her splayed fingers.

Nothing.

Lara started a fresh set of compressions. "Nishimura!" she yelled. "Stop being so bloody difficult."

Another exhalation, expanding Sam's cheeks and chest.

"Typical Yank," Lara grumbled during another pause of assessment.

A third round of CPR.

A fourth.

By that time, the jibes directed at Sam had reversed their course and started to needle tears from Lara instead.

Arms flopped at her sides, the Englishwoman stared at her companion's unresponsive form.

Lara had started to tremble violently again, but the physical exhaustion, the bodily warmth sucked from her by the river, was irrelevant next to the emotional maelstrom that had enveloped her.

"Please?" was all she managed to squeeze out from between gritted teeth.

Lara had never truly given up in her life. There had been many times since Yamatai when she'd been forced to surrender, but despair never entered her mind. Escape remained her focus until it became her reality again – typically achieved with a stream of bullets and blood.

Her life skirting the shadows, forever interacting with greediest and most self-serving of humanity, had made her pessimistic. She was prone to cynicism. But she had never accepted defeat. Not when she lost her parents. Not even with Roth and the others, when it was explicitly her fault.

But if Sam was taken from her – if Lara was responsible for her death – the archaeologist didn't know if she could go on anymore. She would be broken inside in a way that nothing could repair.

For five years, since fleeing New York, she had been hollow. Her attempts at filling that emptiness had included all-too-brief bodily exhilaration – the silken bliss she felt as bare skin brushed her own, or the noticeable pounding of her heart as she flung herself from yet another precipice. Then there was the longer-lasting mental satisfaction of peeling back layers of mystery, and looking on long-forgotten and discredited truths with her own eyes.

For five years there had been a cavity within her, and though it frequently emptied out, everything was in place. All the pieces were still there.

If Sam... If Sam was gone, that internal chasm would be crammed with razor-edged shards snapped off from within her, and every moment of every day, no matter what she did, they would be spearing and slicing her.

To the world, she would look the same as always. But inside she would be silently drowning in blood.

Her knuckles brushed against her gun holster.

No!

Enraged, Lara slammed her palms down on her companion's chest.

"Sam, Goddammit! It doesn't end like this!"

The Englishwoman pumped and pumped until her shoulders ached; until she couldn't tell if the liquid blinding her was river water shaken in the frenzy from her hair, or if it was sweat, or tears.

"Hyurk!"

Sam jerked beneath her touch, and promptly expelled a mouthful of water.

Startled, Lara wrenched her hands away and watched the American woman coughing and mewling.

The archaeologist was a frozen observer until Sam's eyes fluttered open, blinked and clenched shut again in another hacking fit. At that, Lara's survival instincts kicked in vicariously, and she had the sense to roll the filmmaker onto her side.

She stroked Sam's hair while she retched.

After all her yelling, sympathetic words were like chunks of ice wedged in Lara's throat. She forced them out anyway, through quivering lips. "It – It's alright. I'm here."

It was like being on the mountain top all over again.

Except there was no ray of sunshine – no sky-delivered warmth – to indicate their happy ending like on Yamatai. Here, they still weren't safe.

At that realisation, the world around her came rushing back, with an overwhelming intensity that matched the river's volume.

How long had her resuscitation efforts taken? How much tracking time had Natla's forces been gifted with while the pair of young women was stationary?

Lara winced. She didn't want to do it, but she had to. "Sam, I know you're exhausted but we have to move, okay?"

The filmmaker's eyes cracked open. "La – ?" she rasped.

"That's right, It's me. Just hang on. I'm going to get us away from here."

Lara passed her hands under Sam's armpits and linked her fingers behind the American's back. With the sling-grip secure, Lara jerked as much of Sam's weight as possible onto her lap. The way she flopped about, Lara was pretty sure her companion was unconscious again. The alternative...

She blurted the question reflexively. "Sam?"

"Nnngg" grumbled against her throat.

"Okay, just checking."

With that reassurance, Lara channelled everything she had into her quads. She straightened, and immediately almost stumbled as her vision whited out.

Her first step offered just as little reassurance. It felt like her knees were on the brink of folding beneath her.

Her own voice, cool and insistent, sliced through her doubts. *Focus on the tree line. Not your body.*

She managed two more steps before the woods in front of her transformed. Figures were swarming in the murkiness between trunks like animals fleeing a blaze. Except what was coming towards her out of the gloom wasn't a mismatched collection of deer, reptiles and ground vermin bonded through desperation.

These were the hunters.

A half dozen soldiers were advancing towards her, assault rifles readied.

"Fuck!"

Shifting Sam's weight entirely to her left arm, Lara groped for her pistol with her free hand. With the Colt in her palm, she bounced her aim from man to man, hoping to make them wary; hoping to buy her and Sam a few precious seconds.

She glanced upriver. Another four mercs were striding along the floodplain.

From downstream, a unit approached that was the men's exact mirror.

Bugger.

Lara turned back to the water: her last viable escape option.

Across the river, two grinning snipers were flaunting their presence.

Shit shit shit.

There were just so many of them – barrels pointed at her from whichever direction she spun towards.

And the men were converging quickly.

She tightened her grip on the Colt. She might be able to take out two or three before they began retaliation fire, but she couldn't fight them all.

She couldn't save herself; she couldn't save Sam.

Roth, I'm sorry. I'm not you.

She was already lowering her gun when a rifle butt smacked her skull from behind.

Chapter 36

She remembered this.

It was always her favourite part of the day: Story time with Dad.

She was freshly bathed, wearing her penguin print pyjamas, and tucked under the duvet; *snug as a bug in a rug* her father used to say.

Richard Croft was lying next to her in bed, on top of the covers. Even while at home in the manor, he still dressed like he was mid-expedition. When Lara had been very young – when her fingers were chubby and clumsy – he used to hide things in the many pockets of his cargo pants for his daughter to discover: coins, sweets and, her favourite, little puzzles that made her grin when she solved them.

At that moment though, she must have been about five.

She had just started to read. She was slow at it but bundled letters on the page were beginning to make sense, and actually match the sounds in her mouth. Not that it mattered come story time. That was when she let herself relax and get swept up in Dad's tales – and his undivided attention.

Richard Croft was always busy. But every evening, come Lara's bedtime, he would put his work aside and tread upstairs with a tome in hand.

Lara had a lot of books – colourful picture books for children. But every story time, Dad would bring something special from the library downstairs. Leather bound, centuries old often enough, with hand-painted illustrations.

Her favourite was *The Jungle Book*. When she stroked the hand-inked drawings she could imagine what the giant banana leaves would feel like against her skin as she brushed past. She wanted to go there desperately.

As it turned out, the entertainment for that particular evening was a set of folk tales from the Far East. And if she concentrated hard enough, she was certain that she could smell traces of incense wafting off the pages.

The book lay open on an etching of a mountain temple fronted by two stone dogs. Or lions. It was hard to tell. They were strange-looking creatures, with gaping sharp-toothed mouths. She supposed she should find them intimidating but she didn't feel scared. Instead, she thought they were quite exciting. Especially if they could come to life in their wild, bug-eyed state. That would be even more thrilling.

Her father pointed at a picture. "Do you know what those are, Ladybird?"

"They're..." She scrunched up her face. She knew this. "They're guardians."

Richard beamed. "That's my girl." He ruffled her hair. "You're absolutely right. They're guardians. But did you know that we're guardians too, your mother and I?"

Lara stared at him, wide-eyed. "No."

Richard Croft chuckled, "Well, we are."

Her mouth dropped open. "What do you mean?"

He clawed his hands and mock roared, making his daughter giggle.

"Daddy, you're silly."

Richard snuggled in next to his little girl; a housecat again instead of a lion.

He started to explain. "Well, Lara, most people tend to live in the present. Or the future. They forget the past very easily. The further they move away from it, the murkier it becomes, like when you stick your hand deep into a muddy pond, or..." He cleared his throat, "...that old fountain in front of the hedge maze when you think your mother isn't looking."

How did he know about that?

Her father didn't berate her though. He simply asked, "Do you understand, Lara?"

She nodded.

"As guardians it's our job to make sure people don't forget the furthest past: the heroes, the villains; humanity's greatest achievements and its greatest mistakes. We love to celebrate and revere instances of success; even as we're tempted to overlook our moments of greatest shame too. But we have to look back and acknowledge the whole picture, Lara. We *must*. The whole truth, for better or worse, no matter how difficult and painful that may be.

"Forgetting is one of the most dangerous things we can do. It opens a door to great evil and suffering; it enables its return. Forgetting lets evil sneak up on us from behind while we're only looking forward."

Lara frowned. Being a guardian sounded like a lot of responsibility.

She swallowed. Then, committed to her decision, she piped up.

She was aware of how small and childish her voice sounded, but she hoped her tone conveyed the sincerity of her resolution. "Can I be a guardian one day too, Dad?"

Richard's smile broadened. "My darling, I see you growing up to become one of the greatest guardians of all time. Putting the heroes of legend to shame."

"Dad," Lara blushed.

Just then Amelia Croft peered around the bedroom door.

She gave the pair an exasperated look. "Richard, Lara was supposed to be asleep an *hour* ago."

Dickie Croft winked at his daughter. "What are rules for, if not for breaking? Right, Ladybird?"

Lara nodded enthusiastically.

Richard snapped the book shut and leapt off his little girl's bed. As he was pulling the duvet up to Lara's chin, she gazed up at him.

"Dad, I want to be just like you."

"I'm sure you will be one day, sweetheart. But better and far brighter – you have your mother in you after all."

Just before he turned off the bedside light, Richard Croft bent over and kissed his daughter's cheek.

"Goodnight, darling."

"Wake up, English whore."

She was torn from the soothing darkness of her childhood bedroom into bright, abrasive light. It was a second birth, just as traumatic as the one that had brought her into the world.

She was finding it difficult to take in and process the details of her surroundings; the state of her body. Comprehension came to her in crisp detail out of the haze, but only for a heartbeat before retreating again into the blur.

Outside.

Sunshine.

Forest.

Crisp Autumn air that prickled her skin and lungs.

She was upright but not standing of her own accord. She hung bow-legged and limp between two men, each restraining her by an arm.

She let her gaze sink from the mercs' blank expressions to her useless feet, where instead of planted heels, the toes of one boot and the ankle of the other were dragging against the earth.

She slowly lifted her head again.

Dupont stood before her, quaking with fury.

"Larson was my friend, Lady Croft," he hissed.

Chapter 37

She didn't remember much of the beating, except for the first blow. And that was mostly because in the aftermath she found herself fixating on a splatter of blood in the dirt. Her mouth, her nose, her brow – she wasn't sure where it had come from. Strewn on the ground though, dark and glistening, it looked like it belonged on a Jackson Pollock canvas.

She was still staring at the blood when Dupont's fist struck a second time. And a third.

Then it all blurred together.

At some point she thought she heard Natla's drawl.

Lara's arms were released and she fell onto her knees and elbows. She managed to hold that position for all of a second before a heel slammed into her side. She collapsed face-down on the ground and just lay there.

More fists. Boots. She took them all. She had no fight left.

Once she tried to drag her shins under her body in an attempt to stand, but the response to that was a savage stomp on her kidneys. She sprawled again.

For a long time all she was aware of in the blackness was her rasped breathing, growing slower and less efficient, and her body jerking with every blow. Meanwhile Dupont grunted with a satisfaction that sounded practically sexual.

She supposed she should have found it strange that she couldn't feel anything, but it was probably for the best that way.

Her musing was interrupted by Sam's desperate voice, calling from somewhere far away.

"Stop it! Please. You're killing her... I did it. I shot Larson. Please! Look at her. She couldn't do anything."

Natla responded, "Except crash one of my vehicles and kill seven men during a very misguided escape attempt."

"I was the one who killed Larson."

No. Goddammit, Sam. Don't do this. I can't help you...

"Saaamm," Lara slurred, the words struggling to emerge from the swamp of blood, saliva and loose teeth that her mouth had become.

She couldn't open her eyes. But she could hear rubber soles striding away from her.

Followed by the muffled thwack of knuckles striking flesh and Sam's shriek of pain.

It happened again and again.

Lara couldn't even lift her head. All she could do was listen to the cruelty. It had its own special soundtrack – a dark, condemning mantra echoing inside her skull, repeated in her own voice. *You have failed. You have failed Sam...*

"Enough, Dupont," Natla snapped. "You've made your point."

In between Sam's shuddered breaths – Lara knew she was on the brink of sobbing – the archaeologist heard Dupont sneer, "Thank you for your honesty, mademoiselle."

Fists closed around Lara's biceps and she was hauled upright into a crucifixion pose, her arms splayed wide and useless.

Fingers clasped her jaw and raised her head. "Open your eyes, cherie."

Lara obeyed. Or she tried to. Her left eyelid was evidently too swollen to lift completely.

Dupont's satisfied grin filled her restricted field of view.

Then he stepped aside and Lara found herself facing Natla. Even with the application of make-up to gala dinner standards, the woman's face was unmistakably discoloured. Beneath a liberal coating of orange-rouge, her lips were grey. Even her eyes had lost their pinprick focus. She was exhausted; struggling.

Yet still she managed to keep her expression frosted when she murmured, "No more games, Lara."

Fine by me. The less arsing about the better at this point, even if what's waiting is a bullet.

Lara bound her words to a breath. It was the only way to get them out of her broken body. "If you kill Sam, Natla, I won't help you. You may as well kill me too."

"Disregarding everything else you've done, do you think you are in *any* position to negotiate after that little stunt you pulled with Stone?"

"What?"

"Where is she?"

"I don't – "

Dupont's fist swung in from nowhere.

A moment of blackness and then Lara was aware of fresh blood dripping from her chin. She shook her head in an attempt to unscramble her thoughts.

Don't worry about me. Just keep her distracted. That was what the doctor had said to her back at the Delphi base camp, before the archaeologist was hauled away.

Natla scrutinised Lara's expression. Not finding what she wanted, she threw out a few more words as bait. "The good doctor was supposed to join us here after packing up, but she vanished from the medical tent. Her boy has also disappeared from my research facility. You wouldn't happen to know where they are?"

Lara started laughing. She hadn't meant to, but the response was reflex – a fissure cracking open to vent her built-up base emotion. She couldn't even stop when Dupont loomed scowling in her peripheral vision.

"You're buggered, Natla. We're both of us buggered."

The blonde, at least in appearance, took the insubordination in her stride. She sighed, "This is exactly why I hate relying on people. You've always struck me as someone who feels the same, Lara. After all, I think you've enjoyed the greatest success alone; without the complication of useless sidekicks." She glanced to her right; then let her ice-cold irises flit back to Lara's face.

The Englishwoman knew what was waiting for her in that direction. The sight of Sam, bedraggled and bleeding – but trying to be strong – stifled Lara's laughter as effectively as a lid over a flaming pan.

"I was going to kill her," Natla explained matter of factly. "As punishment for whatever little scheme you and the doctor came up with. Or at least shoot her so you have some real urgency to motivate you. But I have a better idea. Remember my original offer, Lara? Disobey me and she suffers the consequences? You have three hours. After that, my men take turns with her. Thirty minutes each to do whatever they want. Beatings, torture, rape; I don't really care. Their instructions are to make her suffer."

The businesswoman paused to relish the look of horror settling over Lara's features like a shroud. The archaeologist knew exactly what the blonde would pick up on; what would please her most: when once there had been a layer of fury beneath Lara's fear, now there was simply defeat. Physically, the younger woman didn't have anything left for defiance... or obedience for that matter.

Natla added, "Afterwards, *you* can decide what is more humane: Getting her to a hospital or putting a bullet in her head after everything they've put her through."

Focus on your options, Lara. Don't look at Sam. Focus on what you can still do to get out of this.

The archaeologist grumbled, "Three hours. Three hours for what?"

"Well, my dear Lady Croft, we're here."

Lara couldn't believe it. For the first time she attempted to assess her new surroundings properly. The place didn't look any different from the forest she had fled through. Pine. Dirt. Chunks of rock.

They were standing in a gulley between a tree-studded hill slope and a cliff face. The former was unremarkable; the latter... atypical at closer inspection.

Despite her physical exhaustion, Lara felt her mind shift into a higher gear. The boulders that fronted the cliff had been hewn. It was rough work but definitely man-handled as it were. Though the space between them was filled with solid limestone, slabs of rock had been hauled into an obvious post and lintel frame. She thought instantly of Mycenae. There was even a monolithic pediment above the lintel – but so weather-battered it was impossible to discern the carving that had once fronted it.

Lara swallowed, her mouth suddenly dry from gaping. Though at that stage there was a part of her that couldn't give a rat's arse about the Aegis anymore, another part of her was enthralled.

Natla had found it – the hiding place of a mythological treasure – or, far more credibly, an undiscovered, undisturbed construction from the Bronze Age.

Lara tried to keep interest from tinting her voice when she responded, "Well, cheers, Jacqueline. Now you can let us go."

"Not quite. For one thing, I can't risk you running off to the authorities and interrupting what I'm trying to do. Not until I have the Aegis in my hands."

Sam blurted, "We won't say anything. We swear. Just dump us in the fucking woods somewhere. Lara's half-dead; we'll take forever to get out."

"I am aware of that, Samantha, but I'm out of time; more so now thanks to the good doctor's desertion." Natla traced her index finger along Lara's jawline as she continued to address the filmmaker. "I still need your lover, half-dead as she may be."

Lara glared at her captor. "What do you want me to do?"

Sam snapped, "Lara, don't help her. You know you can't trust her. Jesus, she'll kill us as soon as she has what she wants!"

"Perhaps," Natla smirked. "Or perhaps I'll no longer care about such trivial things as two baby dykes once I'm well, and practically a god."

Lara hissed back, "A mad god."

"Who *you* are going to help."

"I got you here. What else do you expect of me? I haven't quite perfected walking through walls yet."

The smugness of Natla's smile achieved a new incandescence. Her gaze flicked to the men restraining Lara, and they immediately followed the unsaid order, marching toward the archway with the archaeologist strung between them like a rack of freshly caught trout.

At the frame's base, Lara realised as she drew nearer, was a stone dais. It just wasn't obvious until you practically stood on top of it, given the centuries of earth shift that had sucked it down into the soil and smeared moss across its surface.

Natla's mercenaries released their hold and Lara tumbled into the disc. On all fours she found herself facing a pair of thickly engraved spirals, sandwiched between geometric patterning. Smaller swirls wafted off to the sides of the central image like tendrils of smoke.

Lara ran her fingertips over the spirals, which were grainy and darkened through two millennia of exposure. Her brain took a little longer to identify what the shapes represented. Eyes. Around them, feathers. And then wings stretching out. It was an owl. The emblem of Athena.

Her head shot up as the men stepped off the dais.

Before her, the apparently solid rock between post and lintel shuddered. A grating sound was followed by ticking, and then the limestone began to retreat into the cliff.

Lara stared down the lightless tunnel left in the stone's wake. *How...?*

Natla explained, "That only happens when a woman stands on it, alone. So now you see why I still require your skills."

The pair of mercs stepped back onto the dais and seized Lara's arms. No sooner did their boots scrape across the rock than the door rushed back towards them and slammed shut – as airtight in its frame as if it had never been disturbed.

The men hauled Lara backwards off the dais. She was still fixated on the secret structure – the possibilities of how it was made; what it contained – when a watch was tightened around her wrist, and a pack slipped over her shoulders. The latter was fastened with a strap across her chest.

As before, an LED light was attached to the front of the pack. Lodged into a pocket on the other strap was a two-way communicator. Clearly the impromptu nature of the camp move meant they were using budget-conscious communications technology this time around. That or Natla had no interest in tracking or talking to her "employee" anymore. All the businesswoman cared about was the prize placed at her feet. And Lara was certain, as far as Natla was concerned, that should require nothing more than an occasional blunt threat.

The merc adjusting Lara's pack prattled off a list of its contents. "Glow sticks, compass, notebook, rope, chalk..."

"No weapons," Natla was quick to add. "Lady Croft is notorious for her ingenuity. I'm sure she can make do with whatever she finds down there."

Lara scowled at the blonde. And then hissed when a hypodermic needle was jabbed into her right arm. The bloke kitting her out certainly didn't have Stone's bedside manner, even if he had inherited her comprehensive bag of medical supplies.

Natla chuckled at Lara's reaction. "Relax. It's just a little energy to keep you on your feet."

"Until you get what you want."

"Of course. But if you pull this off, then so too will you." The businesswoman's gaze tracked deliberately in Sam's direction. She jeered, "That is what you want most?"

So much so I'm agreeing to deals offered by the Devil.

As soon as the hypodermic was removed, Lara shrugged out of the merc's grip. She addressed Natla before the second gun-for-hire could clout her.

"I need to do something first."

Natla nodded and the man let the archaeologist go.

With dangerously unstable legs, Lara staggered towards Sam and the single guard keeping her immobilised. The Englishwoman tried to ignore the latter's presence; tried to imagine she and Sam were back in the forest alcove, huddled together and hidden from the world's many complications.

Most of all, Lara tried to ignore Sam's split bottom lip, which looked as angry as her cheek.

It was easy to be snarky to Natla. With the love of her life, though, Lara's tongue snagged on every word as if she was wading through brambles. "Sam... If.... If I don't..."

She didn't expect it – she didn't deserve it after everything – but she received a soft smile in response. "Lara, you've got this. I trust you. See you in a bit."

The Englishwoman seized Sam's face in her hands and kissed her.

I may never get to do this again.

"Enough."

The filmmaker and archaeologist were yanked apart.

Lara was restrained in a full nelson and driven across the clearing. She was shoved onto the dais with enough force that she stumbled to her knees. Before her, the doorway opened again, offering its pitch-black path to... what? Lara's personal Hades?

The archaeologist looked back over her shoulder at Sam for one final reassurance.

But Natla was there; positioned directly between the young women.

The blonde smiled with saccharine sweetness, "Three hours, Lara. I suggest you hurry."

Chapter 38

There was a mad dash to begin with; one that afterwards left Lara breathless and bent over, with her hands on her haunches.

The doorway opened when a woman stood on the dais but that mysterious functionality meant it also began to close as soon as the archaeologist stepped from it.

The entrance didn't slam shut as it had when the mercs joined Lara on the touch plate. However, the stone barrier began to advance with the same noisy, shuddered motion as it retreated.

Lara had to race forward and side-step it before the tunnel grew too narrow for her to pass. As she squeezed by she had an instant to appreciate the engineering in action.

The device ran on a pair of moving chain tracks cut two inches into the concrete flooring.

The ticking the archaeologist could hear stemmed from a set of hinged hooks attached to the base of the stone. In turn, the hooks would latch onto the chain and then release, before snagging the next link.

As the tunnel sloped upwards, the system worked against gravity when the door opened, and with it when closing. This accounted for the variations in speed.

It was archaic and elegant simultaneously.

Lara could see her full-strength self crouched alongside it, notebook in hand as she admired the primitive ratchet mechanism. Her present self though was panting and clutching at her chest, trying to find a rate of inhalation that would fulfil her body's need for air without aggravating her broken ribs – which felt at that moment like they were being snapped in opposing directions.

She had a choice between blinding pain, or a swirling storm of black motes before her eyes. She went with the former, expelling her agony open-mouthed into the darkness.

When she was feeling only shaky again, Lara readjusted the angle of her LED light for optimal distance visibility. Then she began to trudge along the widened corridor.

She knew that she needed her full wits about her – well, whatever brain cells hadn't been lost to oxygen starvation and various concussion smacks – but she found herself brooding. Away from humanity's noises, in the silence of forgotten tombs and temples, that often happened. She wandered physically and mentally. Every expedition had become an existential journey.

Right then though, she was unable to appreciate the pleasures of such a contemplative sense of being. She was scowling over possibilities.

Natla would kill her prisoners. Sam and Stone had both said it. And Lara had repeatedly defied Natla; repeatedly responded to the CEO with insolence. The archaeologist was a fool if she didn't acknowledge there'd be severe consequences for that. Natla was a vile woman, more odious even than her hellspawn head lackey, Dupont.

Obedience from this point bought Lara and Sam invaluable time. If the archaeologist could just stay on her feet, and not crumble like she wanted to, she still had options. She still might find a solution.

Perhaps – if it really existed – she could even use the Aegis to save Sam. The archaeologist would settle for that. As much as she craved a future with her best friend, she was willing to abandon her greatest treasure: the fantasy of a shared life with the person who had always meant the most to her. Lara would sacrifice the dream just as she would sacrifice herself if it meant Sam could escape.

I made you a promise.

She remembered murmuring those words on Yamatai, with Sam's head in her lap and the first rays of warm sunshine on her skin.

Lara had gambled with her life then too. And afterwards, briefly, she thought she had beaten the house. Except the chip returned to her was different from the fresh, shiny one she placed on the table. What she got back was battered and scarred, and bad luck to anyone who touched it.

She'd made the same gamble again with Natla, but she wasn't sure what she'd get back. If anything. This time the game was clearly rigged; impossible for the player to win.

Death was waiting above for her... if whatever was down here didn't kill her first.

She was confident of both parts of that statement.

She'd been exploring forgotten tombs and temples long enough to know that such an intricately designed entrance meant there were puzzles and traps waiting for her. Such high level complexity at the first tier of defence implied this place was going to be a special kind of subterranean funhouse.

She sighed.

If she was to survive whatever challenges awaited her, she'd need a change in attitude to help overcome her physical limitations and provide a point of focus when everything grew fuzzy. Outside, it had been her concern for Sam's welfare that helped her ignore her failing, flailing body. In this silent sanctuary, she lacked that much-needed distraction. Everything hurt so much more down here.

Her mind escaped to Yamatai again.

I'm not dying here!

That had been Reyes's insistence in the aftermath of Roth's death, when she was backed into a corner and hiding her fears behind furious determination. That Lara could do, even if she would never admit her admiration to the surly ex-cop herself.

Right. Channel Reyes.

The featureless tunnel opened into some kind of antechamber. Lara let herself turn in the large rectangular space so that her light could catch every detail. She was breathless again, but for an entirely different reason.

The walls were a red ochre, and marching along them, set in a bar of white pigment, was a row of women in profile. The figures were life-size, stylised in their rendering but detailed enough that Lara could make out variations of dress. Some wore simple slave tunics; others the elaborately decorated, cinched-waist skirts of the Bronze Age aristocracy. The latter group's similarly intricate jewellery and hairstyles confirmed their elevated status.

The female rebels of Natla's legend.

This class-diverse collective was captured in a perfectly preserved fresco – with bright mineral pigments spanning the colour spectrum. Combined with abstract patterning on every other surface, the effect was as dazzling and overstimulating for the eye as a Hindu temple.

The figures directed the viewer to the other side of the room. Lara followed.

There two doorways were set side by side. Above each was a painting, and above the paired images, a message.

Lara squinted at the Ancient Greek inscription. "Choose... your... path."

One door featured a hind and crescent moon. The other was capped by an owl and olive branch.

The way of Artemis. The way of Athena.

What was the difference? She aimed her light down either tunnel. As far as the beam reached, the routes appeared identical.

Lara frowned. This looked suspiciously like another test. But an ominously simplistic one. Was the choice simply meant to snare a layperson ignorant of the goddesses and their association? Or was there a nested riddle at play.

After all, both sets of women – the followers of Artemis *and* the followers of Athena – betrayed the grey-eyed goddess when they stole the Aegis.

Lara didn't have time to ponder. She went with the obvious choice, given the treasure she was seeking.

On the threshold of Athena's way, she fished in her pack for a glow stick, activated it and tossed it back into the chamber. Just in case she needed to make a hasty retreat in pitch blackness.

Lara was continually scanning the walls and floor of her chosen path for evidence of trickery, but the tunnel was as bare as the one that led to the frescoed vestibule.

For an average person, that would probably have been comforting. The archaeologist – no, the Tomb Raider – saw it as a psychological trap, encouraging a false sense of security when one most needed to keep their guard up. Even after Yamatai injected a survivor's

permanent wariness into her veins, she'd been too slow to learn that lesson. She had the scars to show for it too.

Don't be fooled, Lara.

And don't let yourself be awed and distracted by this god nonsense.

That was another rule to live by. It was easy to become intoxicated when it came to potential encounters with gods, and the promises of godhood. Most frequently it triggered a kind of covetous madness, as she had seen in Natla and many others before her. And though Lara's perceptions of the world had changed dramatically in the past five years – her mind forcibly opened like an oyster shell – her experiences had never managed to scoop out her precious scepticism about the existence of deities.

There were spiritual forces at work that the world chose to dismiss. Her father had ranted about them, and she herself had been touched by such ancient energies. Still, though, she couldn't accept the notion of supreme, omnipotent beings watching humanity from another plane. Time and again, the evidence of *gods* that she did unearth pointed simply to men and women who had cloaked themselves in magic, using it to mask or surpass their mortality.

The Aegis could not be the property of an actual goddess because gods did not exist – except as excuses for terrifying things that Mankind could not gain mastery over. In the same vein, it was highly unlikely that the relic was actually an armoured blanket-cloak, or shield, set with a monster's head. Classical mythology was almost entirely metaphor. Lara just had to work out what she was looking for and hope that the real artefact was obvious.

Light ahead.

Lara switched off her LED and slowed her advance, trying to absorb as much detail as possible of what lay before her, prior to reaching it.

From five feet back, hidden in the shadows of the tunnel, she stopped and gazed out into a room about the size of a high school gymnasium. It had the high ceilings of a school gymnasium as well.

The chamber was illuminated by braziers. Dozens of the clay bowls were set in bronze tripods and spaced around the perimeter. They gave Lara enough light to assess the contents of the room, at least at face value.

Unlike the vestibule and tunnels, the floor here was earthen, flung with loose sand. It was also irregularly studded with pillars. Consisting of limestone blocks clumsily piled one on top of the other, each of the columns was about one metre across. Some were five foot tall; others climbed much higher.

The impression was one of a training room or arena. The longer Lara stared, the more her skin began to prickle. She had a very bad feeling about this.

Especially given what faced the entrance. Side by side, posed on head-height pedestals were two life-size statues, brightly coloured. Lara recognised their classification as *korai* – freestanding sculptures of robed female figures from the Archaic period. Stylistically they

were out of date with the other artwork and architecture that the archaeologist had already encountered down here. They were more modern by at least four hundred years.

That mystery aside, at least it was obvious who the figures were meant to represent. Again the goddesses were paired: Artemis, slung with a quiver of arrows and holding a bow in her outstretched right hand; next to her Athena bearing a spear and shield. Curiously, they were armed with real weapons as untouched by the centuries as their paintwork.

Lara frowned. She was certain she was about to find out the reason for the unusually practical accessories.

Still, there was no point in delaying the discovery.

Trying to remain as silent as possible, she moved out into the arena.

She'd taken four steps when the ground sank infinitesimally under her right foot.

No.

She turned but it was too late.

A bronze portcullis had dropped over the entrance.

It was a foolish waste of energy but she seized the bars and attempted to lift the gate. As expected, there was zero give.

"Dammit!"

Behind her, something snorted.

Chapter 39

Please don't let it be a bear.

She clenched her eyes shut and willed it for an instant. Christ, she hated bears.

Then she glanced over her shoulder.

Standing between the pillars, several feet away, was a monstrous boar. Its shoulders were equal in height to her chest, and it seemed to be made entirely of muscle and black bristles.

The creature was also clearly as smart as it was large. She recognised shrewdness glinting in its pupils as it assessed her, all the while rolling its tongue around in its slimy, tusk-crowded mouth.

Orthodontist pay dirt.

Lara turned and stared back.

The feral beasts sussed each other out.

She knew it would smell blood on her. And weakness. The lioness was wounded and ripped from her environment. She needed open savannah to manoeuvre; space to build up speed and power. Trapped between the boar and the gate, she had neither.

Another snort, and the swine charged.

Lara lunged for the upper bars of the portcullis. Her fists closed around the bronze at the same instant she yanked her knees up to her chest, out of goring range.

Beneath her, the beast collided with the gate, jarring the grip from her fingers.

As she dropped, Lara managed to snap out a leg. She kicked off the barrier, giving herself just enough momentum to clear the boar's rump.

She landed, and her knees instantly buckled. She was on all fours in the dirt.

The stumble cancelled out her advantage.

The boar had turned. It shook off the disorientation of its collision and focused on the intruder once more.

Shit!

For Lara, it was a sprinter's start without the pistol. Instead, there was a soundtrack of grunts and huffs to motivate her.

The Englishwoman still had strength in her legs. It was the only part of her body where it remained.

She darted to the right, and then left, between pillars, hoping that the pig's momentum leeched it of agility.

The strategy seemed to work. Lara was suddenly on her own, hidden by the blocky columns. She'd bought herself a few seconds of safety...

Until a javelin skimmed past her breast.

The weapon wedged in the stone alongside her.

Lara stopped dead in her tracks and turned towards the source of attack. The pillar ten feet to her left was zig-zagged with holes. Her gaze dropped to the ground before her. They were well hidden but she could pick out a handful of small extruded squares. More pressure plates.

The entire chamber was booby-trapped.

As she hissed her frustration, the boar appeared behind her.

Unsure of the path ahead, and unable to retreat the way she'd come, Lara made for the nearest gap between pillars. Her guess was that it would take her in a diagonal towards the gated entrance. She just couldn't be certain, given all the columns obstructing her view.

Her new route was wide and straight. It would benefit the boar as well, but it allowed her to generate much-needed speed.

Suddenly a net sprang up out of the sand before her.

She tried to slow her approach, but skidded on the loose surface.

Her right shoulder connected with the wall of mesh, and she felt fabric and flesh part.

Razor wire.

Please, just give me a fucking break.

Her arm took the brunt of the impact, stopping her advance as it snared on the lattice. Fingers trembling, she had to detach her skin from the metal as tentatively as if she was plucking bones from a plated fish dinner.

Clutching her shredded shoulder, Lara staggered away from the net.

The boar was there, watching and rolling its jaw like it was chewing gum.

Hurt, dripping blood and resoundingly fed up, Lara exploded, "Sod off, pork chop!"

The animal blinked at her. Then it began to trot forward.

Lara's fury gutted. She didn't wait to see what would happen.

She ran.

It was a blind sprint on a path between pillars that she hadn't yet tried. With any step she could trigger another nasty surprise.

With any step...

Perhaps it was time to take a less grounded approach to overcoming the trials of the arena? It wasn't going to be easy in her state but it was a new strategy.

She sought out a shorter pillar; one about six foot tall. Reaching upwards, ignoring how it triggered fresh twinges along her side and throbbing shoulder, she hooked her fingers over the lip of the limestone. She loaded her quads and sprang upwards. Her arms could barely hold her weight, let alone lift her body. It was only through hopping her feet up the side of the block that she was able to scramble on top.

Lara lay face-down on the surface for a moment. She felt lightheaded again; her limbs like lead. All she could do was listen to indignant snuffling around the column's base.

Her eyes closed...

Then snapped open again when she heard Reyes's incensed island mantra.

I'm not dying here!

The archaeologist lifted her head.

Her elevated sanctuary gave her a better view of the whole chamber.

She seemed to have crossed most of it. The blocked entrance was far behind her, centred in the hewn wall. Up ahead though, located slightly to the right of her position, was another archway. It wasn't gated but in it was set a mammoth door of bronze and blackened wood. It was bolted with metal bars the size of railway sleepers, but Lara could see evidence of a locking mechanism.

The door had promise as an escape route. However, working out how to open it would require time. And until she killed or disabled the boar, time was something she didn't have.

A weapon. To survive, she needed a weapon.

The armed statues.

But how to safely get back to the entrance from her current position? She didn't have the strength or stamina anymore to boulder between the columns and stay out of Snowball's reach.

She needed a diversion.

The beast was evidently familiar with the arena's layout. It could sense traps and side-step them. But that didn't mean sense always outweighed its desires.

Lara grabbed hold of her ragged sleeve and ripped it from the body of her polo neck. She tore the fabric into two strips. One piece was used to bind her wound. The other...

The archaeologist tugged the two-way radio from her pack. She knotted the bloodiest scrap of cloth around it. Then she fiddled with the channel frequency knob until the communicator was continually crackling and squawking. Finally, she maximised the volume, and flung the radio as far from her as possible.

Go fetch.

She lay still then, until the snotty grumbling moved off.

Lara dropped to the ground. She crept in the direction of the entrance, scanning for more traps as she went.

A minute later she was once more looking up at the paired goddesses with their tantalising weaponry. The sight of them reminded her of other tales from Greek mythology – specifically those involving the great boars and their legendary hunters.

I'm no Herakles but I could be Atalanta.

The statues were close enough that Lara was able to wedge herself between the pedestals. With her back against one base and her boots against the other, she shuffled the six feet to the top.

Once there, she stripped Artemis of her bow and arrows. The archaeologist slung the quiver across her back, and quickly tested her capabilities.

Straightening her bow arm was answered with a sensation equal to thrusting a white-hot brand against her side. She bit down on a whimper while trying to steer herself clear of the barbed mental maze she'd wandered into.

You've survived worse, Lara. Hell, you've done worse to yourself...

Knowing she was descended from a long line of hasty masochists, she even whispered wryly, "You can do this. You're a Croft."

There were certain truths though that deserved no sardonic smiles.

If she could barely hold a bow, the Englishwoman certainly couldn't chuck a spear. That didn't mean the weapon was without its uses, however. The same went for a shield.

Lara hopped onto the other plinth, embracing the figure of Athena to stop herself losing her balance. Then she set about lifting the spear from the statue's grip, and detaching the gleaming, gorgon-fronted aspis.

She was lowering her new gear to the ground when a deep, chesty grunt snared her attention. The boar was back, scowling up at her.

Lara nocked an arrow.

She aimed at the surly animal. "Your move, little piggy. I could do with a nice bacon and egg sandwich right about now."

She never liked this part.

She loosed the arrow.

It struck the boar in the chest.

The creature squealed, reared up and landed heavily on its front legs. It looked angry but unshaken.

Lara tried again. She repositioned herself on the edge of the column, loaded, drew and fired.

The second arrow hit the boar in the hump of its shoulders. It didn't even flinch.

How tough was its hide?

The archaeologist wiped her forearm across her damp brow. Two shots and her arms were already shaky with exhaustion. Every movement felt sluggish; her form completely off.

A third attempt.

This time she caught the boar in the jowl. *That* pissed off the swine. It bellowed and threw its bulk against Lara's pillar.

"Fuck!"

The impact's tremor unsteadied the archaeologist.

Lara toppled sideways. She crashed to the ground, landing hard on her tailbone. She was still sitting on her arse, surrounded by spilled arrows, when the furious beast rounded the pillar.

It bounded at her.

Lara rolled forward into a crouch, tucking her legs under her for safety. She didn't think to grope for her dropped bow. Instinctually, she lunged for Athena's shield, which was still leaning against the base of the nearest column. Gripping the rim with both hands, Lara just managed to heave the barrier between herself and the boar.

The creature ploughed into her. The force of the blow smacked the interior of the shield into her face. More concerning, she could feel herself being driven backwards in the dirt.

The aspis – constructed entirely of wood beneath its bronze facing – had to hold. If it didn't, she'd be caught beneath the beast's bulk, and it would trample her or rip her apart. Probably both. She knew it would attack again and again until all threat was eliminated.

Lara's back thumped against limestone.

She was pinned against another pillar.

The boar withdrew a few steps and butted again, winding her and turning her arms to jelly with the force of its shield slam.

The animal followed up its charge with a snuffling around the edge of the aspis. It was trying to ferret out a gap in Lara's defence so it could wedge in its snout and use its superior strength to tear it away from her.

She had always preferred to work alone, but just then she could appreciate the advantage of standing shoulder to shoulder with an entire phalanx.

I'm not dying here!

Lara drew her fingers away from the boar's probing tongue and teeth. She fed an arm through the leather strap centred in the shield bowl, and tightened her fist around the second corded grip.

She had one chance for this to work, and it was entirely about timing.

She closed her eyes and inhaled.

Then she expelled the breath in a roar, using the action to energise herself.

Unintimidated, the boar responded with its own verbal challenge – resonant, sucked-in and the sound of nightmares.

Now.

Lara jerked her shield to one side, exposing half of her body to the creature.

The boar's eyes widened at her apparent defiance of survival instinct.

In that millisecond, Lara reached out with her free hand and grabbed the arrow shaft still jutting from the swine's jowl.

She ripped it free. And thrust the bloody head into the animal's dilated pupil.

A hoof caught her in the midst of the squealing fury but her attack had bought the time and space she needed.

Protecting herself with her aspis, Lara slipped out to the side.

She was tired of being the filling in a swine and stone sandwich.

The archaeologist scrambled to her feet. Then she ran. Or tried to. The sixteen pound shield threw her off balance. She grimaced as her obliques came into play to stabilise and straighten her torso.

Still, she kept going.

Without stopping, she scooped up Artemis's bow, dropped it over her head, and palmed the spear.

Time for Phase 2.

Lara had hated cross country hurdles at school. Yet that seemed to be what her life had become – an endless obstacle course. Sprinting. Leaping. Crawling. Climbing. She might as well have signed up for basic training with the Army after school instead of choosing the soft, sedentary option of Uni.

Somewhere behind her, the pig was still thrashing about. She could hear its shoulders and hindquarters regularly thudding against stone. Its hellish keening never ended.

Darting between pillars, at first Lara thought she'd disorientated herself. Her worries receded when she found skid marks and blood splatter in the sand. In the time she'd been battling the boar, the chamber's traps had reset.

Perfect.

Lara planted the shield upright in the ground, angling the polished skin exactly as she needed it. There was time for one calming breath before she retraced her steps.

When she found the boar, it was still bucking out of pain and frustration. It had managed to snap off the arrow shaft but the tip was still buried in the creature's weeping eye socket.

Despite everything she'd been through, the sight of the injury still made Lara feel queasy. She swallowed.

Then the archaeologist stepped out from behind the pillar where she was hiding.

"Hey!"

The swine's ears flared, and it swung its head in her direction.

The animal was suddenly silent; like its human opponent, gauging the distance between them. About twenty-two feet.

The Englishwoman waved her spear as extra enticement. "Here I am. Lara Croft, piggy matador. Come get me!"

Then she darted for the cover of stone.

A roar with the power to void bowels signalled that her invitation had been accepted.

It was a hazardous game of cat-and-mouse that Lara had initiated – for the boar, as she intended, but also, inadvertently for herself. Now that the creature was one-eyed, she'd hoped she could confuse it in the arena. But she was the one who kept going astray. And her concern about stumbling onto pressure plates meant that once or twice she overestimated the distance between herself and her pursuer.

She would leap out from behind a pillar to taunt the animal, and receive a blast of hot snorted breath against her cheeks. After that, there would be a frantic retreat to a new sanctuary.

It maintained the beast's interest at least.

Finally she was able to manoeuvre the swine into position. It stood at the end of a perfectly straight alley, glaring at Lara's crumpled, panting form at the far end. She lay against the base of a pillar, as curled and defeated as a bog cadaver.

The creature charged.

It trampled over the adventurer's reflection.

Between the metal surface of the aspis and the loose sand surrounding it, the boar had no way to stop.

Its momentum carried it into the freshly sprung net – with such force that the mesh tore free of its frame and wrapped around the animal as it went down.

Lara straightened, and stepped out of her hiding place.

She gazed down on the boar, tangled and shrieking; its short legs pumping impotently and its flesh criss-crossed with streaming lacerations.

Wilbur caught in Charlotte's web.

Lara felt momentarily sorry for the creature. As usual, her presence brought suffering to any living thing that crossed her path. She peered into the boar's eyes and recognised the agony she had caused for this marvellous beast.

She sighed.

Then she drove her spear into the animal's exposed abdomen, angling the metal head up towards the swine's heart.

Lara stayed to watch the boar die. She owed it that.

When the last puffed breath parted its jaws; when its good eye lost focus and rolled from the archaeologist to the ceiling, Lara finally limped away.

There was physical fatigue. And then there was emotional exhaustion so deep, so overwhelming, that she could feel the lethargy in her soul like a lump of frosted foreign matter. Somehow she had ingested it, and it just sat there, accumulating more and more layers of ice; becoming an ever-larger, ever-heavier drain on her body.

She did what she always did when such a sensation struck. She remembered her old survival strategy – the one that Roth made her repeat on Yamatai.

Keep moving.

She retrieved the trampled aspis and dusted it off. A polished shield had allowed Perseus to face and defeat Medusa without turning to stone. This particular construction of poplar and bronze had already saved Lara twice. She suspected it would do so again.

As she buffed the shield front with the hem of her shirt, movement scuttled along the edge of the dome. Movement that wasn't hers.

She looked up.

Three armoured figures were striding towards her.

Chapter 40

Lara was frozen. She couldn't help but gape. Fatigue aside, she was watching Ancient History advance in her direction; Ancient History made flesh and blood.

But before she could truly appreciate the sight, her survivor's eye weighed up their threat potential.

Two of the warriors carried a short spear and xiphos sword. The third was kitted out as an archer.

Worn beneath capes of animal fur, the trio's armour was bronze, or bronze coated – greaves, and a muscled cuirass fastened over a short Doric-style chiton. The warriors' faces were masked by crestless Corinthian helmets. The metal had been modified in the temporal region, though; battered out to look like the ears of a wolf.

Or hunting dog.

Apparently disparate puzzle pieces slotted together smoothly. Dogs. Boars. Nets. Spears. They were all associated with Artemis. In this brutal subterranean battle pit, did the way of Athena equate with a symbolic defeat of her wild half-sister?

Lara didn't have a chance to theorise further.

She felt the tickle of fletching as an arrow narrowly missed her cheek. Immediately she dropped into a crouch behind her shield. She huddled there, scowling, as more arrows thudded into the surface.

She'd been so fixated on the figures' appearance that she hadn't noticed when the archer separated from his squad, and hung back. Sometimes her intellect did obstruct her instinct. And then she felt like a right stupid git.

She could hear the crunch of steps. The bay dogs were near. She was closed down, with insufficient space to loose an arrow.

Not that she had many left after her fall from the pillar. Maybe five.

She'd have to improvise. As usual.

Eliminate on the basis of hazard level and opportunity.

When the toe of a sandal appeared around the rim of her shield, it was time to act.

She sprang upright, flinging a handful of dirt in the hoplite's face.

It was an old trick, but a staple in her close combat repertoire. It never failed to work.

The soldier jerked away.

Lara followed up with a deep lunge, her fingers snatching an arrow from her quiver simultaneously. She drove the improvised dagger straight through the warrior's calf muscle. The arrow head appeared bloody out the other side.

One.

Ignoring the soldier's howls, Lara redirected her attack at the second infantryman – already jabbing his spear at her head. The archaeologist stooped beneath the tip and leapt skyward.

Bypassing all armour, she brought the shield rim up under the man's chin. His head snapped backwards. As his body followed suit, Lara seized the spear from loosening fingers.

Two.

She turned to the archer and charged – as blood-lusted as the boar she'd killed only minutes before. In berserker mode as she was then, a half dozen arrows could have struck her and she wouldn't have slowed at all. As it was, some part of her still had the sense to keep her shield raised until she reached her enemy.

Though the archer stood his ground, and managed to unleash four shots, the missiles were fired desperately and defensively. The aspis caught them all.

On reaching her foe, Lara backhanded the archer's bow out the way with her shield.

Three.

Switching to an overhand grip, the archaeologist raised her spear to shoulder height.

She'd already decided. She was going to end it through the throat this time.

She focused on the jugular notch, aligning her arm with her aim.

But the way the archer's larynx was bobbing – and the strange squeaks he was making – made her glance upwards.

Corinthian helms were designed to cover most of the face, but in the visible strip between chin and nose guard, Lara found none of the stubble, scarring or sun-leathered skin she expected of an Ancient Greek warrior. There was only smooth flesh and full ruddy lips. Above them, set in the tear-drop slits, were wide, weeping eyes.

What was this?

Lara used her shield hand to seize the archer's helmet, and tug it from his head. Immediately, lank, ash-brown hair tumbled past the soldier's shoulders.

The Englishwoman was staring at a frightened girl. Maybe sixteen years old. Pale and too thin – and trembling at spear point.

Lara lowered her weapon.

"Raaaaagghhh!"

The archaeologist turned to find a spear thrusting towards her.

Inches from being impaled, she watched the shaft disintegrate. It had been severed by sword cleave delivered perpendicular to the initial jab. Though the detached metal head still

struck her, it was the flat side that bounced against her chest – as harmless as a skipping stone on its final hop. Splinters sprayed instead of her blood.

The other warriors had rounded on Lara while she faced the girl. And one had stopped the other's attack.

Even more startling was the adventurer's realisation that hidden behind the pair of helmets and flattened breastplates were women as well.

Lara expected the xiphos to swipe across her breast. She expected its bearer – the Amazon she'd hobbled – to claim the kill as her own. Except the grim-faced woman didn't. She sheathed her blade.

"Well done," she said to Lara in Ancient Greek.

Then she dropped to one knee, head bowed.

All of them did.

Befuddled by the turn of events, the archaeologist simply stood, chest heaving. She felt increasingly shaky. The tonal shift of the encounter had slammed her as hard as the boar. Her hackles were still raised. She was snarling inside, ready to snap at her enemies.

Blood will have blood...

But her opponents' surrender was like slipping a muzzle over parted jaws and bared gums. She cast aside her stolen spear. The shield she couldn't release though, even as a sign of good faith. Her body wouldn't let her part with the safety buckler-turned-safety blanket. The handle remained clenched in her fist.

The woman who had spared Lara's life stood again. Her companions followed her example.

"Come," the Amazon said.

Lara nodded her acquiescence.

She wasn't surprised when they left the arena by the second door she'd spied. It fronted another plain passageway; this one lit by wall-mounted torches.

Lara slotted between the limping leader with the other two warriors. She wasn't held at weapon-point but the silent unit was definitely not at ease.

The women's archaic language felt unwieldy in the archaeologist's mouth. She was far less practiced in speaking Ancient Greek than she was reading it, but she tried nonetheless – hoping she wasn't being too insulting or incoherent.

She murmured to her guide, "I – I apologise for what happened."

"No apology is necessary. You did what you were expected to do. It is as with us."

Lara spoke her thoughts out loud. "You are devotees of Athena. You are the ones who fled with the Aegis."

"We betrayed the bright-eyed goddess. This is our too-generous recompense."

"Do you know how long you have been here? What is your group's number?"

The archaeologist's questions went without response.

But as it turned out, Lara didn't need verbally expressed answers.

Just like the antechamber, the tunnel's walls were lined with female figures. Except, this time the pallid forms were real. Fingers reached out from either side of the passage and stroked Lara's bare arm; her neck; her cheeks. Digits trailed through her hair as she passed, or played over her earlobes with longing.

She wanted to shrug away from the unwanted caresses. The flesh that grazed hers was cold and damp. It made her think of root tendrils that had managed to shake off the Earth's soil and grope at anything that passed.

Her disgust was drained though by the sight of mournful faces that appeared momentarily out of the shadows before submerging once more into blackness.

There were over a dozen of them. Some looked barely pubescent; others were sagged and white-haired.

Lara wondered if she reminded them of their mother or sister; a daughter or even a grandchild.

Then scepticism gave her a hard slap.

You're hallucinating.

Except, she wasn't high on pain meds as she'd been in the Pythia's sunken temple. She couldn't use that excuse here, just as she couldn't claim that sweet vapours were swirling her thoughts. The air had been clear and crisp since she sprinted into the sanctuary.

She frowned. She couldn't use logic to explain the presence of the women, the warriors or the boar. She hadn't been able to make sense of the Oni either. She still couldn't. She simply had to accept that then, like now, their touch was evidence of the impossible.

It felt like with every step she was moving further into the realm of mythology and further away from the stifling rules of reality. Curiosity blazed within her. It kept her alert and upright. She was almost there. She could sense it.

There it was.

A doorway stood ahead of the battered party.

Mirroring the cliff-face entrance, it was a simple post-and-lintel construction, flanked by braziers and topped by a chunky pediment.

Protected from centuries of exposure, though, the pediment's relief sculpture was in perfect condition. Lara gazed up at the head of Medusa. As an undergrad student, the archaeologist had studied dozens of interpretations of the unfairly maligned gorgon, from the works of Baroque masters all the way back to vase paintings, sculptures and shield fronts crafted by unknown artists of the Archaic Period.

The Medusa looking down on her wasn't the squat, squashed face-thing of the earlier ages. Instead of fangs and a lolling tongue, she'd been given a far more naturalistic, but no less intimidating, treatment. Her expression was one of perpetual judgement of everything that passed beneath her. Her countenance was made even more menacing by the corona of stone snakes that framed her features. Every flicker of firelight would send the serpents writhing. But only for a heartbeat, so the viewer doubted whether it had happened at all.

A waking dream.

The Amazon leader stopped. She turned to Lara.

"You proceed alone. We are not permitted within."

Lara nodded her thanks and stepped past the woman. She paused on the threshold, leaning against the arch for a few extra seconds of support while she looked into the space beyond.

It was a vast circular chamber, domed with a corbel vault. She thought instantly of the beehive tomb at Mycenae. This tholos must have been around the same size as that celebrated structure as well – about fifty feet across and forty-four foot high.

To head height, the room was decorated with a rudimentary mural depicting Natla's story of the rebels in bright colour. Otherwise, the stone walls were bare and unplastered.

Centred in the chamber was an elevated dais ringed by several steps. An altar topped the platform. Standing next to the limestone block, evidently warming themselves by one of four braziers, was a cloaked shape.

Without looking up, the figure called out, "Approach, Lara Croft."

Its words were English. And they were spoken in a woman's voice, British-accented.

Something about that realisation set Lara's muscles on edge. Her skin had goose fleshed. Trusting her instincts, she stood her ground.

"Come forward," the figure insisted.

It turned, and Lara was facing Amelia Croft.

Chapter 41

Amelia, standing on the plinth. Wearing a peplos beneath her cloak.

She drew back her hood, revealing raven hair partially streaked with grey, just as it had been when her daughter was eleven.

Lara found herself shaking her head.

She stumbled back a step as she hissed, "You're not my mother."

"No, I am not. But you are more likely to listen to me in this form." The woman cocked her head. "Isn't that right, my darling?"

The being smiled just like Amelia; sounded just like Lara remembered. The combined effect felt like an uppercut to the archaeologist's diaphragm. She couldn't help it. Her eyes teared reflexively. "Stop that!"

If only she had her guns. She wanted her guns.

She remembered the bow.

Faux-Amelia watched impassively as Lara dropped her shield, before clumsily nocking an arrow, aiming and drawing.

All Lara could focus on was the single dimple an inch to the right of Amelia's mouth. Her smile had always been slightly crooked.

Mother.

Lara lowered her weapon. And her gaze.

She couldn't look at the woman. It hurt too much.

"Lara?" the imposter asked.

The archaeologist clenched her eyes shut.

She had yearned for Amelia Croft for fifteen years. But that fantasy had been locked away safely in her head, to replay when she was feeling especially forlorn. Having her mum *there*, actually standing before her, was something else entirely. She felt it in her chest, as a weighted ache that made it difficult to breathe in anything but shuddered gasps.

Lara's whole body was trembling with the desire to run up to the older woman, fling her arms around her and saturate every one of her senses. Fifteen years the archaeologist had endured a famine of parental affection – and now the feast was right there.

As imaginary as a child's tea party, her own voice reminded her.

Angry again, Lara battered down that part of herself willing to throw everything away to embrace an illusion. After everything, the archaeologist was not going to let trickery – the same game played by the Oracle – cloud her judgement. Especially when it was such a cruel tangible reminder of her loss.

The embers caught, and flamed fresh.

Lara straightened. Scowling, she looked up at the woman so confident on her platform.

"Who are you?" the archaeologist snapped.

The answer was paired with an enigmatic smile. "Someone... something you do not believe in."

Lara's eyes narrowed. "A god? Athena, herself?"

Of course. What else would the being claim it was?

In response, a fresh smile teased the corner of Amelia's lips – the same full set her daughter had inherited.

Athena and her many disguises...

The younger woman sighed. "Right. Well, that's lovely but I've come for the Aegis."

"And you may have it, Lara Croft."

The answer, delivered in monotone, startled her.

"What?"

Even with my blatant scepticism?

"You have been judged worthy, Lady Croft."

The archaeologist's surprise triggered an internal battle between snark and sincerity. She eventually settled on a shrug, "So I can just take it?"

"No. The Aegis is only gifted to the deserving. Its power is bestowed. It cannot be taken by the unworthy." The woman's gaze frosted over as she looked past Lara to the archway. "Even when given, use of the Aegis always has a price. The consequences for stealing it are especially *grave*."

Her irises thawed the instant they flicked back to the archaeologist. "I am however granting the Aegis to you. You have earned my patronage, Lara Croft."

Amelia dipped her head in homage. "The cunning hero. Odysseus reborn."

"With ovaries." Lara couldn't resist.

The being seemed amused by the wisecrack. "And the same incomparable resolve. Now, please approach, Lady Croft."

When the Englishwoman remained frowning and frozen – trying to determine if the invitation was itself a test – the fake Amelia continued to explain.

"The wearer and wielder of the Aegis requires a dual nature, like the Aegis itself. It heals and it destroys. Much like you.

"You, Lara Croft, are a creature of startling duality. Your courage. Your honesty. Your fierce, utterly selfless protection of everyone and everything that you love. But your nature is dark as much as it is light. The brutal, unflinching honesty with which you examine yourself means you know this. Your rage. How easy it is for you to anger and lash out with needless brutality. I can see into your heart. You admit to yourself how much you have come to enjoy killing."

Lara flinched. As much as she felt the assessment was accurate, it didn't make it any less painful to hear another person describe her as such.

"But," the woman added, "you are no monster, regardless of what you may tell yourself." She held out her arms. "Come, my child."

The calmness of the imposter's argument – its rationality and softly smiled acceptance – sapped the outrage fuelling Lara's resistance. Even as her sceptical side continued to bark warnings, the Englishwoman reclaimed her shield, and ascended.

Standing on the dais together, the being did the one thing that crushed Lara's heart as effectively as if it had been clamped in a plate gauntlet. It let the real Amelia shine through.

Looking up at her daughter, the older woman reached out and cupped Lara's cheek in her palm. "Look how tall you are."

"Mother – "

Lara stopped herself.

The woman's eyes were grey. Amelia's had been hazel.

Sentiment was making her susceptible to self-delusion. No matter how desperately she wanted this, it was a lie.

The imposter, realising the archaeologist's internal shift, withdrew her hand. "You are a remarkable woman, Lara Croft. You would deny yourself everything you want most. A life of sacrifices..."

"...made in exchange for answers," Lara finished. Every second she focused on the cerebral, a little more of the mist clouding her vision cleared. "The way of Athena, the way of Artemis; what's the difference?"

"That insatiable curiosity of yours... If you must know, both doors led to the same chamber. But to survive, it was necessary to be of both goddesses. Which, Lara Croft, you are."

The Englishwoman frowned, "Lucky me."

"Indeed." Amelia overlooked the sarcasm, which was a good thing. Lara realised she was probably edging towards enraging the powerful being, whatever it was. And pissing off powerful opponents had never made her life easy in the past.

"You are undoubtedly a daughter of Artemis, Lara Croft. You have the Light Bringer's fire; her commitment to action; her hunter's spirit. You share her tendency towards swift vengeance. Pity does not touch you. Neither does lust. In its place is a disdainful disconnect from Men and their world.

"But growing within you too is the wisdom of Warlike Athena. Your dedication to the principles of enlightenment, justice and cool-headed strategy pleases the goddess, as much as your resourcefulness and powerful insight.

"You are of both deities, Lara Croft. And that is rare."

"A daughter with two mothers," the archaeologist muttered. "Who the girl doesn't really believe in."

Faux-Amelia chuckled, "Even now, you still expel so much energy fighting acceptance. Perhaps one day that will change? Fortunately for you, you do not require belief to claim your prize."

The woman turned to the altar behind her.

Lara had been so hypnotised by Amelia's apparent presence that she hadn't scrutinised the contents of the dais.

Laid out on the stone surface were two complete sheepskins, stitched together at one side so they created what was essentially a giant pelt folder.

Lara approached.

Carefully she laid her shield next to the hides. Even though rational thought insisted it was impossible for an artefact to exist that turned people to stone on sight, she wasn't taking any chances – especially given the number of immortals she'd encountered the past few days.

Keeping her gaze on the aspis's polished surface, navigating entirely by reflection, she drew back the top piece of wool.

Just the corner.

She didn't know what she expected to find.

The little girl who used to sit captivated by her father's retelling of the myths; she wanted a shield fixed with a monster's head, or a goat-skinned mantle, tasselled with snakes and fronted by a terrifying fanged visage, occasionally twitching.

By comparison, the grown woman who spent most of her formal education poring over books and journals on the hunt for *real* meaning behind metaphor; she had been stripped of her imagination. Her adult self simply interpreted the Aegis as a made-up talisman; the ultimate embodiment of female power. In it, the primal, serpentine Mother Goddess was reunited with an aspect of Herself that had been masculinised and made *safe* for the Patriarchy; but which was still no less formidable than its original form.

Wild, raging Medusa melded with clear-headed, calculating Athena.

No wonder the desperate band of slaves and perpetually shut-away *free* women of the upper classes had sought the Aegis. It was a reclamation and reunification of female strength from across the Ages. Past and Present combined would unlock a truly emancipated Future, or so they believed.

But what physical form had this socio-psychological concept been kneaded into?

Lara's eyes widened as she stared at the reflection.

Maybe her child self did have the right idea after all?

She was looking on a patch of skin. Snake, evidently, judging by the scales and patterning. Except it was burnished gold, with brown banding. The adventurer hadn't seen puff adders with such striking camouflage.

Lara pressed her palm against the Aegis.

Immediately, she felt it. A sensation like warm, silky liquid. It spread through her hand and then up her forearm.

God, it felt good.

Eyes closed, head rolled back, she may have even moaned.

When her eyelids lifted again, her gaze settled on the back of her hand. She watched the scabbed, swollen knuckles heal. Skin knit together and the redness dissipated. It was as if none of her desperate battles of the past few days had happened.

She caught sight of her reflection. Her irises were glowing as golden as the Aegis. If it wasn't for their unnatural colour she would have thought she was looking on the face of her double again. The smile curling her lips was that conceited.

Lara withdrew her fingers.

She suddenly felt weak enough that she had to clutch at the altar with both hands to stop her collapse.

"Christ," she muttered.

Without the Aegis, she was barely more than a girl; physically feeble, easy to underestimate and even easier to abuse. With the Aegis though, she could shatter Dupont's shit-eating grin, reduce Natla to a pile of ash and tumours, and annihilate the woman's whole wretched army. They wouldn't be able to touch her.

The Aegis was liberation.

"How did that feel?" Faux-Amelia asked from behind the Englishwoman.

"Like what it is to be a god."

Lara craved more. She didn't believe a single drug existed that could equate the high the Aegis gave her.

More.

She pulled back the rest of the pelt. Almost, she looked directly at the Aegis. Almost. As depleted as she felt physically, psychologically she was still perilously overconfident as a result of touching the garment.

Refocusing on the mirrored surface, heart racing, Lara took in the artefact reported to have repelled the entire Achaean force during the Trojan War.

The skin was fringed with gold cord which had been braided together in dozens of tassels. Slap-bang in the middle of the Aegis was a face. Or, part of a face. With gaping holes where the mouth and eyes once sat, a woman's epidermis had been stretched out and stitched onto the snake scales. Excised in one neat piece, the human skin had turned dark and leathery with age. But even the passage of centuries, and the distortion forced on the features by the stitching process, couldn't hide the fact that the woman had not been European. A North African ethnicity perhaps?

The archaeologist longed to stroke her fingers across the visage, but she kept her hand outside temptation's radius.

As Lara glared at her fist, Amelia's reflection appeared in the aspis behind the younger woman. Lara noticed the being had no problem looking directly on the Aegis.

Faux-Amelia spoke.

"I remind you, Lara Croft. Use of the Aegis comes with a price. For those who use it, and for who it is used upon."

The Englishwoman dropped the sheep's wool back over the artefact and turned to her companion.

Amelia asked, "Are you prepared to pay the price?"

In a heartbeat.

Out loud, though, Lara responded, "I have no interest in using the Aegis."

"As you say." An inscrutable expression passed over the being's face. "Then you may go."

Lara wasn't sure what the correct protocol was. She bowed her head. "Thank you."

Then she flipped her shield, and lifted the sheepskin into the improvised bowl.

Heaving the treasure into her arms, she descended from the dais.

As she stood on the threshold of the room, the being called to her. "Lara."

The archaeologist turned.

It was Amelia.

It was really her. Not the serene creature too stiff and emotionally withdrawn to ever truly pass for the woman whose flesh she wore.

Lara recognised her mother's anxious pose. The way Amelia had always cocked her head slightly and hooked her fingers, trying to stop them breaking into a nervous dance.

Lara gasped, "Mum?!"

"I just want you to know how proud we are of you, darling, your father and I. We've missed you so much. Every day."

The archaeologist felt a single tear course down her cheek.

"Goodbye, Lara."

Her daughter's voice cracked. "Goodbye, Mother."

This time the shadow women wailed as she passed. Lara ignored them. Inside, so was she.

The answer had been so easy. She was going to use the Aegis on Natla; give it to that bitch in a way far different from what the businesswoman intended.

However, every step the archaeologist took, the artefact grew heavier. Her arms and shoulders began to burn. Sweat beaded on her brow.

Lara wanted to don the Aegis too badly. Despite all the dangers.

She knew that if she put it on, she probably would never take it off again.

She would be terrible; invincible.

She could accomplish so much.

Her mind flashed to her smug, golden-eyed reflection.

And Himiko's vile hisses.

We shall reign as a Warrior Queen... Unstoppable... Have anything, and anyone we want.

Lara had dismissed the vision in Stone's medical tent as a fever dream. But what if the Sun Queen was actually hunkered within the Englishwoman, a fragment of her soul sunk into Lara like an oil well? There was a reservoir of blood and blackness for Himiko to tap at will. For half a decade already, it had nourished her. Adding the Aegis would super-charge production. The Queen would uncoil and ride the dark surge to the surface.

Sharing her body with Himiko; handing over control to her – was that the price Lara must pay to use the Aegis?

Was that the cost of saving Sam?

Unleashing furious evil on the world. Would that be the legacy of Lara Croft, the last of her line?

In response, two statements echoed in her skull.

There are no heroes here. Only survivors...

Sacrifice is a choice you make. Loss is a choice made for you...

They were harsh words that she'd railed against on Yamatai. She had started to feel differently after the cursed island, but at the time she'd refused to believe life had to be like that. Mathias, even Roth – they were both wrong. Their truths were not her own.

Her 21 year old self would have insisted there was always anothe—

"Surprise!"

Standing in the antechamber was Natla and a rifle-toting welcoming committee. Lara had been so busy trying to untangle herself from her web of worries that she'd returned to the red ochre room on autopilot.

She was dazed by the unexpected confrontation, like she'd leapt upright straight out of a nap.

In fact, the whole scene before her had the aura of a dream; or, more specifically, a nightmare. Scattered glow sticks filled the already ruddy chamber with yellow light. Shadowed figures peppered the space. Skeletal Natla – Death itself – grinned at the archaeologist with Dupont's Lucifer at her right side.

Lara's eyes hunted the room for Sam. There she was, clasped in the arms of a scowling merc a few feet from the entrance. The filmmaker looked distressed, but otherwise unhurt beyond her earlier beating.

"Lara!" Sam yelled, "She made me."

Even as the archaeologist's lips pursed to ask the question, Natla explained. "Your girlfriend helped get us all inside. I hope you don't mind?"

Then the blonde's gaze snagged on Lara's bundle, and her malicious smile waned. "Is that it?"

"Yes."

Natla approached. Dupont continued to act as her silent shadow, but he couldn't resist a smirk at the Englishwoman.

That needed Lara. She could picture flipping back the sheepskin and blasting Dupont. The way he would claw at his face as his eyeballs turned to granite first, and then tore from the fleshy tendons keeping them in their sockets.

Natla correctly read the archaeologist's glare.

She sighed, "Please don't try anything, Lara."

The businesswoman waved her hand, and the brute holding Sam pressed a pistol to her skull.

Lara was stone herself after that. She scowled as her captor trailed her fingers through the soft wool.

"Why don't you pull it back and have a proper look, Natla?"

The businesswoman chuckled, "Nice try."

Natla turned to her closest troops and two men trotted up to scoop the shield and its contents from Lara's arms. The archaeologist felt her muscles tense as she was stripped of the Aegis, but somehow she managed to resist the urge to cling on, and fight back. She clenched her agonisingly empty fists and turned her head to look at Sam instead.

They shared a miniscule smile that was supposed to be reassuring but instead only telegraphed their apprehension.

They were at the end now; together, no matter what happened from this point.

Natla started to drone the corporate jargon that Lara had been fortunate enough to dodge her entire life.

The blonde addressed her unwilling employee, "I'm impressed, Lara. Truly. That was a job well done. You even delivered ahead of schedule. But then again, I'm a firm believer that incentives are the best motivators. I only have one more thing to say..."

Lara's gaze snapped back to the CEO. The woman's glacial smile did not reach her eyes.

"Thank you, Miss Croft."

Natla tugged Dupont's pistol from his shoulder holster.

"However, your services are no longer required."

She shot Lara in the stomach.

Chapter 42

Lara staggered backwards, clutching her gut. Weirdly, she was more aware of Sam's scream than her own pain.

The archaeologist stumbled onto one knee. She chanced a glance at her hands then, saw the smear of oily red, and looked up again at Natla.

The woman had already lost interest in Lara. Her head was turned; her gun arm raised.

In Sam's direction.

No.

Lara propelled herself off her planted foot.

The momentum placed her in front of Natla as the businesswoman fired.

The second bullet caught Lara in the chest, directly below her right breast.

The adventurer's desperate lunge ended with her lying on her side, her head resting against a limp, outstretched arm.

Her back was to Sam but she could hear her companion's shriek.

"Laaaarrrrraaaaaa!"

Natla scowled at the collapsed Englishwoman. "Fine," the blonde hissed, petulantly. "Have it your way. Neither of you will leave this place anyway."

She added with a fresh smirk, "You have no idea how good it feels to know I will never have to see your face again."

As she turned from the archaeologist, Natla handed the pistol back to Dupont.

Lara expected the Frenchman to use it to finish the job. An executioner's bullet between the eyes. Instead, he holstered his weapon. He didn't even deliver a kick to Lara's stomach. He simply gazed down on his nemesis coldly. "I hope it hurts, cherie."

Then he turned away too.

It did hurt. But not as much as Lara's realisation that she'd failed Sam. She should have risked possession by Himiko. That would have guaranteed Natla's demise. But the archaeologist had prioritised evil queens differently.

It wasn't like she didn't expect this end. Natla did not tolerate disobedience or betrayal, and Lara had spat in her face repeatedly. The Englishwoman had simply hoped she could sneak Sam out a back door before the shit hit the fan.

So much for that.

There was some kind of commotion behind the adventurer.

A man's roar of pain. Mercs barking warnings. Lara's name being yelled over and over by Sam.

Then the filmmaker was crouched before her companion. "Oh, thank God. You're still alive."

Sam took the archaeologist's face in her hands. When she caught sight of Lara's wounds, relief drained like the colour from her face. "Shit!"

"I'm sorry," Lara murmured.

"No. This isn't happening."

The Englishwoman smiled faintly. "I'm afraid it doesn't work like that, Sam."

"Yes it does. You have to hang on. You have to be okay. Because you owe me."

"I owe you?"

"A date. A proper one. Not a late afternoon stroll through the British Museum either. I expect to be wined and dined. And chocolate; chocolate's good too. So you can't die..."

Sam's description actually made Lara laugh.

Jokey ramblings had always been a pivotal component of her best friend's coping strategy.

While she was talking, Sam grabbed hold of her sleeve and ripped it free. She wadded it in her fist and pressed it to her companion's abdomen. Lara almost cried out, or blacked out; she wasn't sure.

She was more certain of Sam's winced apology, before the filmmaker took Lara's hand and clenched it over the bunched cloth. "Hold it there," Sam instructed.

Somewhere in the background an argument was ongoing about what to do with the two women. Lara was finding it difficult to focus her eyes consistently long distance, but between her faulty vision and still functional hearing, she could work out that the debate involved one of the mercs, Dupont and Natla.

The latter was too busy stroking her hand over the sheep's wool to care. She was in the Aegis's thrall just as Lara had been.

"Leave them, kill them, whatever," the blonde grumbled dismissively. "They're unimportant now. What can they do?"

What can they do?

"Sam," Lara said. She was surprised how suddenly her voice had shrank to a whimper. "She has to use it, Sam?"

"What?"

"She has to use *it* now. She can't... We can't let her..."

The more she spoke, the more Sam's eyes widened. Clearly the filmmaker thought her friend had already slipped free of her senses.

"She can't leave this place with it... Help me, Sam."

Lara tried to sit up. The effort made her woozy. It didn't help when Sam seized her arms.

"Lara, no. You need to stay still."

"Please," Lara mouthed.

"But – "

"Please," the archaeologist pleaded. "I can't do this without you."

Sam's mouth snapped shut on her disagreement. Still frowning, she hopped over Lara, hooked her hands under her companion's armpits from behind and straightened.

Standing wasn't easy. Lara almost howled as the flesh of her punctured abdomen was stretched taut. The action tore her wounds, and more blood streamed down her front.

Don't look, Lara. Don't get side-tracked.

There were other concerns beyond her failing body.

The young women went unnoticed for now. Lara was being underestimated as usual. Excluding Dupont, there were ten other mercs in the room, but just then every pair of eyes was focused on Natla and her treasure.

That wouldn't last, of course. For every second the women stood, they risked being spotted. Then they would be shredded by rifle fire.

Further reasons necessitated urgent action as well. Lara was mostly dead weight, and Sam, despite her improved conditioning, couldn't really support the both of them. The filmmaker's breathing was shuddering as much as her limbs.

Lara reached for the bow over her head. She'd become the Tin Woodsman. Every joint was rusted. Her arm felt heavy and uncooperative as she lifted her weapon free.

The disconcerting sensation was forgotten a moment later as a tsunami of agony slammed into her from the waist upwards. She must have passed out for a second. The next thing she remembered was her head lolling and her fingers loosening.

"Lara?" Sam whispered.

The archaeologist responded by groping for an arrow. The action winded her. In the end Sam had to shift all of Lara's weight to one arm, and use her free hand to direct a shaft into her friend's slippery fingers.

One shot.

That was all Lara had in her.

Her periods of clear vision were becoming fewer and further apart. She was dangerously slowed. She had to correct for both as if they were a crosswind.

While she was still enveloped in mist, she nocked her arrow by muscle memory.

Even before the haze cleared, she lifted the bow.

"Natla!" she yelled.

Lara's world sharpened the split-second before her fingers released the string.

So she was able to appreciate the businesswoman's shift in expression as the shaft sank into her chest – in the exact spot where her second bullet had struck Lara.

Annoyance.

Anguish.

Anger so intense that for a moment Lara thought she was already being subjected to Medusa's glare.

The blonde shrieked as Lara groggily grinned back.

How good it feels to know I will never have to see your face again.

After that, things became difficult to follow.

Lara's arms flopped first.

Then she tumbled from Sam's arms and sprawled in the expanding pool of her own blood. Eyes closed.

Her companion dropped with her, and Lara had to acknowledge how selfish she'd been – leaving Sam to be the focal point of Natla's retaliation.

Maybe it wasn't too late?

"Run," Lara slurred.

"No."

"Go. Now."

"No."

Lara felt herself being rolled over. It was too gently done to be the mercs.

"Sam, leave me," she growled.

In response, her head was hauled into her lover's lap.

Cradled like that, Lara continued to resist opening her eyes. She didn't want to look at the filmmaker. Sam had never been good at hiding her feelings, and Lara didn't want to see reflected on her face the typhoon of emotion she'd barricaded herself against.

"Please, Sam."

"Lara, look at me..." The murmur became a bawl. "Look at me!"

That pried the archaeologist's eyelids open.

It was worse than she expected. Sam's eyes were already swimming. The way her breath hitched on every inhalation; it snagged the same spot in Lara's throat.

She tried to look away. And failed.

"I'm not leaving you, Lara. Not when we've just found each other again. And *you're* not leaving me. You survived a week with a septic fucking hole in your side. Remember how you used to always pull that face when Roth went on about you being a Croft? Well, you are one. A complete badass. You – "

A fist seized Sam's hair. She howled as her head was yanked backwards. In the space where her face had been, Dupont loomed instead. He had his pistol out, although he wasn't focused on either young woman. Yet.

He addressed his employer, "Shall I finish them, Miz Natla? Starting with the Jap?"

"No," was the acid response. "I want them to be the first."

Why won't you die, you witch?

Lara shifted her weight, rolling herself free of Sam's lap. Curling into a foetal position made it hurt a little less. She was once again on her side, facing the expanse of the antechamber.

A dozen feet away, Natla clawed at the sheepskin. She was still on her feet, even with the arrow protruding from her ribcage. The burly substitute medic was trying to help her but she kept snarling and elbowing at him.

"Turn away," Natla ordered the men holding either side of the burdened shield.

They obeyed.

With her back to the room, the blonde lifted the Aegis, and dropped it over her head.

Her moan was even more carnal than Lara's had been.

The archaeologist knew why, and a part of her twinged with longing. The sensation of silken liquid flowing through every muscle, like just-heated cream. It would sink right into the marrow of her bones, where it would proceed to warm her from the inside out.

And Lara had only brushed her fingers across the surface of the Aegis. Natla was enveloped in its embrace. Entirely.

The businesswoman's fist closed around the arrow shaft. With no cry – not even a cringe – she tugged it from her flesh. It came away easily. She dropped it from shoulder height, dramatically, and then glanced over her shoulder.

Her irises were as golden as Lara's had been, except the colour spilled beyond them into the sclera. Every second that passed, the whites of her eyes darkened as if the precious metal was being poured directly into them in liquid form. The effect of pupils floating in gilded pools was massively unsettling.

Inhuman.

Natla's gaze met Lara's and her smile was as full of malice as her eyes were full of gold.

Behold, a mad god.

"Sam," Lara rasped, "close your eyes. Now."

"What?"

"Do it. Don't open them, no matter what."

Natla turned.

She didn't give a rat's arse about anyone anymore; not even her own men. She was above everything. Gold fingered out from her eyes across her face, and down her neck. She purred at the caress, and then laughed loudly.

Lara was battling the temptation her archaeologist's curiosity sparked within her. She wanted to let her gaze sink below Natla's face. She wanted to see Myth made Reality, in all its terrible glory.

No doubt Natla's men were staring directly at the Aegis. Yet nothing fantastic had happened to them. Lara eyes darted between the mercs. Some maintained frowns cultivated by years of brutal battlefield immersion. Others had cast aside their stoicism and were gaping at the living, breathing magic before them.

Dupont was in the frown camp. His eyebrows lifted. "Natla? Your front. *Mon Dieu!*"

Lara looked then. She couldn't help it.

Just as a golden skin spread over the woman's body, so too did a sheet of blood down the right side of her torso.

Natla was staring too. Her ascendance, and all the haughtiness that went with it, was severed at the knees.

From her fresh fear surged lip-quivering rage.

Her glare found Lara. "YOU?! How have you done this?"

"Pay the price," Lara murmured.

"What?!" Natla roared.

Then her roar became a scream.

"Jesus! Fuck, what is it?!" The businesswoman clutched her skull in both hands. "Fuck, it's burning. It's *BURNING!*"

Some of the mercs began to back away from their boss.

Dupont was one of them – his years as a soldier of fortune having made him especially sensitive to downslides in his employers' prosperity.

He shoved Sam to the ground and started to retreat.

The Englishwoman felt her companion's hands paw at her.

"Lara, can I open my eyes?"

"No. Don't look, Sam. No matter what you hear."

At that moment, Natla's screams leapt an octave.

She dropped to her knees, raking at her head, and then the Aegis.

Lara couldn't look away.

The garment was glowing. It wasn't snakeskin anymore. It was molten gold, still in the smelter's crucible. Stitched in the middle of the Aegis, the otherwise unimpressive scrap of human skin made a silhouette against the brightening background.

Within the empty eye sockets and mouth of the face, though, the Aegis glowed even brighter.

Blinding white.

Fire burst around Natla.

First aflame was her clothing where the Aegis touched fabric. After that, the scorching branches snagged in her hair. Meanwhile, her bare flesh blistered and broiled.

In the fire's flickering light, the painted women on the antechamber walls seemed to be dancing.

That wasn't the full extent of the horror though.

Emerging from the eyes and mouth of the stitched face were tendrils of smoke. Except their movement was nothing like smoke as Lara knew it. They didn't ride the hot air upwards in dissipating clouds. They kept their form. And they were reaching out; seeking. Each as alive and hunting as an enraged black mamba.

An increasing number of tendrils crawled from the face, but Lara chose to focus her attention solely on the first batch – heading towards the mercs closest to Natla.

The men were wide-eyed; their jaws hanging loose. No one moved to help their employer. No one moved as the dark vapours drew near.

Suddenly Lara remembered one of the metaphorical interpretations of the Medusa myth. To look on the gorgon was as much an illicit temptation as opening Pandora's Box – except for a vastly different reason. With the Box, the allure lay in the mystery of the container's contents. With Medusa, the viewer knew exactly what awaited their gaze.

Death.

Curiosity killed the cat and all that.

The Gorgons were guardians of terrifying places. Mortal Medusa was a guardian between realms: between the worlds of the Living and the Dead. She existed at that intersection, prowling around the entrance to the Underworld.

She gave the fearsome, intangible concept of Death physical form. She gave the impossible a face.

There was no literal turning to stone. There was simply paralysis as one gazed on life's greatest mystery. And paid the price.

Fatal curiosity.

Lara watched the smoke serpents crawl down the men's throats. Suffocating them without any fight.

There were even more of the insubstantial creatures now, fanning out from the Aegis.

One was weaving towards Lara.

She realised it actually had a sound. It drowned out Natla and the flames even.

The archaeologist's world shrank down to the serpent's call.

Her parents' voices, and Roth.

"Lara, darling, we're here. It's Mum and Dad."

"We're waiting for you, Ladybird."

"Lara, it's alright, girl."

Lara murmured their names in response.

If she could hear them, they had to be there somewhere. She had to keep looking. Any second, they would appear.

Sam grabbed Lara's jaw and wrenched her companion's face towards her. "Lara. No!"

Obedient for once, the filmmaker's eyes were still clamped shut.

The archaeologist tried to jerk her head free.

She was still fighting when Sam kissed her.

At the sensation of a soft mouth against her own, Lara stopped resisting and finally closed her eyes.

This was real.

Not the voices.

The warmth of Sam's skin. The sensation of her tongue teasing the length of Lara's lips, nudging them apart and stroking teeth.

Her tongue and not shadows forcing entry.

The way the filmmaker's body was shuddering as she hugged her lover to her.

The concrete palpability of it all anchored Lara in reality once more.

A kiss to break the spell...

She could hear the dull thud of dead men dropping around her.

Followed by a *whoosh* as their bodies caught alight too.

Natla's wails had stopped.

Lara felt dazed.

It was done. It was really done.

"Lara."

She felt herself being shaken in darkness.

"Lara, wake up."

Evidently she had let herself doze in Sam's arms.

"Mmmm..."

Even before she lifted her eyelids, her body plunged back into sensation. The sound of fire, shouting and coughing men. The smell of burnt flesh, smoke and, ever so faintly, blood. The taste of blood too.

The strongest sensations radiated from her own body. All the punishment it had been subjected to the past few days was apparently being redelivered fresh. All at once. She just didn't have the strength to vent her agony through a scream. A grimace was the most she could muster.

Sam was crouched over her, stroking her hair. "Sweetie, we need to get out of here."

"I'm not going anywhere." Her voice seemed to have retreated down her throat.

Sam frowned at that. "Lara, it's going to be alright. There's that medical kit outside, right? We can patch you up, call for help and then all we have to do is wait. You're gonna be fine. It – It's not that bad."

"You're a terrible liar."

Sam ignored her. "It's chaos right now. No one's gonna stop us. You just need to hold on, okay? We'll get you help and it'll be fine."

Fine.

The only thing *fine* was that she was going to die in a long-forgotten sanctuary. A tomb. That was fitting.

Sam correctly interpreted her companion's muted expression.

"You're not allowed to give up, Croft."

I'm not giving up. You can't give up when you're finished.

"I kept my promise, Sam."

"You haven't kept it. Not until we land at Heathrow, and walk off that plane hand in hand. Then there's the matter of our date..."

Stop making this hurt more than it already does.

"Lara Croft will not die like this," Sam insisted. "Do you understand me? Lara Croft has a glorious adventurer's death decades from now. An amazing old lady with her white hair in a braid. Fighting a fucking dinosaur in the midst of a Lost World or something. She doesn't bleed out in some cave before her twenty-seventh birthday."

Sam retrieved her torn sleeve and pressed it into Lara's hand, so the archaeologist could apply the compress once more.

Lara's breathing was too shallow. Every inhalation was accompanied by an audible wheeze. She wasn't getting in enough air. Disregarding the blood loss she refused to assess, she was light-headed, and increasingly dizzy. Even lying down, the world was rolling beneath her like she was on a ship.

There was no way she was going to make it. But the desperate look on Sam's face – the way her pupils were once again shimmering behind tears – Lara couldn't let her know. So she let her companion continue with her fruitless rescue efforts.

The truth was that Lara had long ago accepted her death would play out in a manner and setting just like this one. The only difference was that she had always thought she'd die alone. Her body would lie undisturbed and unmourned, until it was discovered decades, or centuries, later by better explorers – at which point the passage of years would ironically earn her the description of relic.

Somehow Sam got her companion upright. She was taking most of Lara's weight, with one of the Englishwoman's arms draped over her lover's shoulder. Using her free hand, Lara clutched the rag to her abdomen. She had to choose which wound to apply pressure to, and of the two punctures, the hole in her gut was haemorrhaging more heavily. Not even a minute had passed and the cloth was soaked through.

You're not going to make it.

She heard it in her own voice and she scowled as she imagined her double making the same pronouncement. Delivering it so disdainfully.

Lara's self-directed anger was good for one thing at least. Sam kept glancing at the archaeologist's face, and the sight of fighting spirit seemed to reassure her.

The women staggered towards the antechamber's entrance.

Sam was right about the chaos. It was utter bedlam. Bodies still burned and remaining mercs from outside appeared with assorted agendas. The more loyal were intent on helping their compatriots, dying or already dead. Others, realising Natla was among the flaming corpses, took one look and departed. Probably to check that the last cheque from their benefactor had actually been cashed. Or to loot what they could to improvise a severance package.

As a result, Sam and Lara's movements were unobstructed. They might have been invisible they were so completely ignored. Some men even knocked into them.

Ten feet into the tunnel, the women found Dupont. He was propped up against one of the walls, resting his forehead against the stone.

He had resisted Death's call too. Or he had avoided looking directly at the Aegis in the first place.

Either way, the Frenchman was uncharacteristically pallid and sweaty.

At the sight of Lara and Sam, he jerked away from the wall and centred himself in their path. Shaken as he was, he surprisingly didn't reach for his weapon.

He simply scrutinised the pair.

Sam spoke for the two former flatmates. "Get out of our way."

Dupont sneered in response, "You're wasting your time." He pointed at the adventurer. "She's dead. This particular pussy has finally used up all her lives."

To Lara directly, he added, "Serves you right, chérie. I hope you enjoy Hell with all the men you killed. They're waiting."

Lara rallied as much of a glare as she could. "A bientôt, Dupont."

The Frenchman smirked, turned on his heel and loped away.

There was no way to keep up with Dupont, even if for some bizarre reason they wanted to. Their going was incredibly slow. Traffic in both directions died while they staggered and stumbled towards the promise of light and fresh air.

Lara was all too cognisant of the smeared footprints she was leaving. She had dropped the sodden rag early during their escape attempt, and since then wetness had crawled ominously down her right leg.

They were about two hundred feet along the tunnel when the Englishwoman fell.

She slipped out of Sam's arms and landed hard on the ground. It continued to sway beneath her.

For a second she tried to push herself up with her arms. But then she realised she couldn't feel her legs anymore. She flipped onto her back and stared at them.

Useless.

Sam was staring too.

The archaeologist's voice was feeble; shameful. "I can't..."

Sam's face remained frozen. "Lara, get up."

"I can't."

The tang of blood in her mouth.

No princess's kiss would get the knight back on his feet this time.

The filmmaker hadn't moved. Her expression remained unchanged. "No." Then she started yelling. "No! Get up, Lara. Get up!"

The American grabbed Lara by her armpits, and attempted to drag her along the concrete floor. The action stretched out Lara's body, ripping the gunshot wounds further.

Searing, blinding pain, as if she had been caught in Natla's blaze after all.

Lara screamed. It was a sound she had never made before in her life.

Immediately Sam stopped.

She dropped to her knees alongside her companion.

Shuddering, it was Lara who apologised from between clenched teeth. "I'm sorry."

Her body was going into shock. She could feel it. She couldn't stop shivering. Every muscle was clenching like she was lying on a block of ice. It was getting harder to speak. "Sorry. For. Everything."

"Sweetie..."

Sam was stroking the archaeologist's face, brushing the fringe back from her clammy forehead.

There were tears on Lara's cheeks. She couldn't tell if they were hers or Sam's.

Her companion was holding back her sobs, she could tell. Sam's mouth was trembling even as her eyes darted up and down the tunnel.

Lara could guess what she was thinking – would it be better to just leave the Englishwoman and come back with help? Would Lara last that long?

"My. Fault. Again."

Lara's tongue was being uncooperative. But she had to say it all; get it all out before it was too late.

She turned her head to face the ceiling. Addressing it was easier. "Always do this. Hurt... you. Never meant..."

"Stop it, Lara."

"Better this..."

"Stop it."

"Right..."

"Stop it!" Sam exploded. "Jesus Christ, just fucking stop it!"

Lara ignored her. "Go."

"No! I'm not leaving you." Sam's face was suddenly above the Englishwoman's, glaring down at her so she couldn't look away. "You're not going to die, Lara. You can't. I mean, it's *you*..."

"Too late..."

"Bullshit! Don't you dare do this again! Do you understand? We didn't go through all this for you to give up now. I won't let you. Listen to me, Croft!"

Oh, Sam, you can't always get your way through force of will alone.

Lara laughed. And immediately regretted it as pain bear-trapped her middle. She coughed, and recognised flecks of blood fly from her mouth.

So did Sam. Her anger was replaced with wide-eyed desperation. She pleaded, "Lara, don't do this. I'm begging you."

The archaeologist continued to smile weakly. It was kind of nice not to have to get up again, for once. She was just so tired.

Something must have betrayed her mind-set because Sam had started shaking her. "No, Lara. No. You can't. Stay with me. I can't lose you."

"Steven." *You have Steven. It's alright, he'll always be there for you. He'll never hurt you the way I have.*

"I need YOU!"

"Happy... Him... "

Lara's eyes rolled in her head like she was about to doze off. Just a quick microsleep.

So, so tired.

"Lara? Lara?! Look at me! Just fucking look at me!"

One last thing to do.

Lara reached up and touched Sam's cheek. But she couldn't feel anything. Sensation had fled her stained fingertips.

The tears on her cheeks, though; Lara could feel those still and she knew for certain they were her own.

"I love you..." Her hand fell away. "Always."

Sam's whispered, "No."

It wasn't so cold anymore. It didn't hurt so much.

"Lara, no! Don't. Please. I love you. I love you..."

Lara being shaken again.

"Come back to me. Please! I need you, Lara; I love you! Please! Without you I can't – *Pleaaaassseeee!*"

Sam's mouth against hers. The Englishwoman couldn't even feel that any more.

Sam pounding her chest with her fists. She didn't feel that either.

Sam screaming and bawling, her lips curved in an ugly arc as she hit Lara's limp form over and over again.

Lara couldn't hear her. Then she couldn't even see her.

Blackness.

I'm sorry...

Chapter 43

All the lives that could have been hers.

Dozens passed before her, like she was buckled into a meandering, toothless theme park ride. Crawling along a track, her cart continually paused before different scenes acted out by doubles from her past and present.

Two alternate lives stood out.

Another life, where her parents hadn't disappeared.

In this world, Lara Croft grew up as an obedient daughter.

Inspired by her parents, nurtured and adored by them, her existence revolved around meeting expectation; pleasing the man and woman who had given her so much.

She wanted to be the perfect daughter.

She attended her father's prestigious alma mater. And excelled.

She stood next to Richard Croft on podiums while their peers jeered and laughed at his theories.

She was never given the opportunity to explore and present her own ideas. For one thing, she was forever accompanying her father on his expeditions. For another, he was always too busy to listen when it was about anything but his pet projects.

He promised that one day he would give her his undivided attention, but that never happened.

She came to accept it.

Meanwhile, she dated the men her mother considered suitable, like-minded matches.

She even slept with a few of them in the hope that having them physically inside her would maybe finally touch and trigger something in her heart. Still, she felt nothing but a curious disconnect.

Her mother wanted her to be happy, so Lara would smile for Amelia – feign enthusiasm – but the only thing that ever generated any kind of excitement within the younger Croft was her work.

Until that passion inevitably drained out as well, through the cavity in her chest.

Then all she was left with, was a terrifying hollowness.

She was Lara Croft but she didn't know who she really was.

She had always wanted to be her parents. In pursuing that, at some point she had been subsumed.

She had faded until she was no longer a real person. Just a shadow trailing behind Amelia and Richard as they stood in the light.

Lara Croft lived and breathed, but she may as well not have existed at all.

She left no mark.

Another life, where she hadn't run.

Where she had accepted the risk of including Sam in her life post-Yamatai, and they had manoeuvred around it.

It wasn't that they didn't have arguments about the extent of the filmmaker's involvement. There were many nights of Lara sleeping on the couch or sulkily pounding the pavement until her temper cooled.

But they made it work.

Sam always tagged along, even if she didn't always venture inside the tunnel, tomb or temple that was the focus of that specific expedition. Lara made the call. It was the trade-off for her companion staying at her side.

Over the years, they got used to it.

They developed little routines and rituals.

The night before an exploration played out exactly the same way. Every time.

As if it had been scripted.

If she had been alone, Lara would have simply lain in her tent, or sat by the campfire, reviewing her research notes with a flask of whisky at her side.

With Sam there, the evening started out similarly. Until the filmmaker plucked Lara's beloved journal from her fingers, and melted her lover's scowl with a long kiss.

From that point, they were silent.

There was nothing to say.

It was better to leave dark possibilities of separation unsaid.

Teething her bottom lip in mock coyness, Sam would hook a finger through one of the belt loops on Lara's trousers and lead the archaeologist through to their shared sleeping bag.

Their lovemaking was earnest and intense.

Making it count in case they never had that opportunity again.

Fists clenched in hair. Naked limbs gliding against one another as insistently as if they were trying to start a fire. Nails digging into hips and thighs. Heads thrown back. A contest to administer the most impressive hickeys across throat, breast and inner thigh.

Just before dawn, Lara would untangle herself from her deep-sleeping lover.

She'd redress, remembering to slip her wedding band onto the cord around her neck, next to the jade pendant she'd worn for decades.

After shouldering her backpack and strapping it into place, there was time for one final thing.

Lara bent over and kissed her wife on her soft, barely parted lips.

Then the Tomb Raider would stagger, still partially sex-drunk, towards the ruin.

And her other true love...

Answers.

Every time, it played out the same.

And every time Lara came back.

Usually a bit battered and bleeding, but she came back.

To her Sam.

The array of *what if's* ended.

Lara was no longer touring the funhouse of alternate lives. All the light and warmth of those visions was gone.

She wandered in darkness.

Or floated.

It was hard to tell. She had a powerful sense of detachment from her body. It was there – she could look down and see it – but after being immersed in pain the past few days, growing hypersensitive to the varying shades of hurt, the sudden lack of sensation was strange. She felt numb.

Then again, she'd never really speculated about what death would feel like. She'd thought she would simply be *gone* the instant she closed her eyes for the last time.

She hadn't expected this desolation.

Was she in Purgatory?

She'd feel happier if she had her pistols. Knowing they were strapped to her thighs always made her feel safer.

More in control.

The soothing reassurance of steel.

But she had nothing.

Only the tattered, stained clothes she'd died in.

Far ahead of her, a patch of white glowed.

Shielding her eyes against the blinding contrast, Lara approached.

As she got closer, figures took shape in the spotlight – transforming from white to grey and then full flesh-and-blood colour.

Her parents.

Just as she remembered them.

Lara broke into a run. "Mum! Dad!"

On the edge of the illuminated disc, the young Englishwoman collided with an invisible barrier. She ran her palms over the smooth surface. It wasn't cold enough to be ice. Thick glass perhaps, or pure quartz?

Frustratingly, she couldn't find the edge.

"Shit!"

She was so close.

Richard and Amelia Croft were right there, smiling in her direction.

Though not directly at her, she noted with a pang in her throat. Their contented gaze remained unfocused as if they couldn't see her.

They turned from Lara then as a dark-haired girl ran at them from the opposite side of the blackness.

Richard bent down and swept the child up in his arms. He lavished kisses across her cheeks while Amelia beamed at the pair.

Lara was Peter Pan, staring into her old bedroom window and learning that she'd been replaced. She pounded the glass with her fists, trying to get her parents to acknowledge her.

"Mother, Father, it's me! It's Lara."

But the Crofts only had eyes for the sweet little girl with pigtails. So innocent. Without all the bloodstains and scars.

Something brushed against the archaeologist's feet.

Lara looked down.

Water was lapping at her boots. Even as she watched, the water level climbed. In a blink, her toes were covered.

Lara took a step away from the barrier as liquid swirled around her calves. The darkness was filling fast.

She backed into the open space she'd approached from. Almost immediately, her shoulders collided with something. She spun and found her nose inches from another clear barrier.

Her eyes darted to the left and right, and she realised she was encased – trapped in an eight-foot by eight-foot tank, walled on every side.

Fuck!

She'd been forced into an escape artist's stunt.

Water rushed around her thighs like it had on the Endurance.

Five seconds later she was hip deep.

You can't die if you're already dead, right?

Her survival instincts activated, regardless.

She waded between walls, testing their strength with her fists and shoulders; jabbing her fingers at the corners in the hope of poor construction she could pry apart. She even attempted a few kicks.

Nothing gave.

Her heartbeat began to pound in her chest and ears.

Her panic was rising faster than the water.

She dropped down to investigate escape options along the ground. Her palms slid over yet another plane of smooth glass.

Sod it!

She surfaced to find that the water was now skimming the bottom of her breasts.

If insanity really was repeating the same action in the hope of a different result, Lara was ready to shamelessly embrace her daftness.

She raised her hand for a fresh round of hammering on the side panels. As she did, she spotted three figures in the dimness outside her prison.

Grim, Roth and Alex.

"Help!" Lara pleaded. "Help me!"

The men stood clustered, gazing at Lara blankly.

"Roth, please!"

She knew they could see her.

They were simply ignoring her.

She knew why.

"I'm sorry!" she yelled. "I know it was my fault –"

Liquid flooded her mouth.

She spat it out.

"ROTH!"

She pounded on the glass.

The water continued to rise. Lara rose with it, kicking to keep her face clear.

Her forehead bumped an invisible ceiling.

She was scratching at the surface as the water finally cleared her crown, and displaced the last bit of oxygen from the tank.

She'd taken her last breath. Now it was simply a question of how long she could hold it for. Simply floating would preserve it the longest. But she had to keep trying.

The nightmarish thought struck that perhaps this was to be her afterlife – dying over and over in the most terrifying ways imaginable.

Punishment for her many, many sins.

Lara threw her weight against a side panel. Or tried too. Completely immersed, she could build up no real momentum.

Hands clamped around her ankles, and she expelled a stream of bubbles in surprise.

She was yanked downwards.

There was no longer a bottom to the tank.

Down she went, deeper and deeper.

More hands spidered over her flesh. It felt like dozens, clasping and groping.

She tried to kick and elbow – and got in a few strikes – but finally they had her immobilised.

She swung her face in every direction, trying to determine who exactly her attackers were.

Scowling men.

Brutish and muscled, most of them.

Their faces stoked no memories but their clothing did. Black mercenary uniforms. Mismatched militia wear. The soiled, white-smearred tatters of the Solarii.

No.

Killers, every one of them.

Killers, like her.

Killed by her.

She felt beard prickle and lips brush over her neck. Her eyes darted to the right and collided with the rotten-toothed leer of Vladimir.

Her first.

The man who took her innocence.

Her knee-jerk reaction was to head-butt and writhe.

For a second, rage overruled fear.

"Get off me, you bastard!" she yelled.

Curiously, her voice came out clear under the water.

Vladimir was completely unfazed by her ferocity. She was a kitten baring milk teeth as far as he was concerned. He simply chuckled.

While the other men continued to tug at her legs, Vladimir alone had her arms restrained – hooked behind her back by the elbows.

Lara was still struggling impotently when a shape loomed before her.

Hooded. Cloaked in rags. Bare footed.

She knew who it was even before the hood fell back to reveal an aquiline nose and thin, self-righteous lips.

Mathias.

He was inches from her, staring through her pupils right into her soul, just as he had on the island.

Lara cringed. The probing was more repugnant than Vladimir's nuzzles.

More of a violation.

Mathias reached out and trailed the back of his fingers over his prisoner's cheek.

He smiled coldly, "Welcome home, creature."

Again, weirdly, she could hear perfectly despite her immersion.

She wanted to make sense of it, but she knew attempting to rationalise her situation would initiate an unbearable pressure in her skull to match the suffocation already clogging her chest – like someone had forced blankets down her trachea.

As much as he was clearly relishing the young woman's anguish, Matthias let his gaze dip from Lara's face.

She followed his eyes south.

Billowing out of the bottomless darkness beneath her was a cloud of blood.

At the sight of it, her body surrendered. The breath she'd been holding was expelled in a single white-flag release. Her desperate lungs sucked in water.

Her thrashing became reflexive; her body fighting death on its own without any conscious cerebral contribution.

In Mathias's place, other images flashed.

Roth, Alex and Grim still unmoved by Lara's suffering.

Richard and Amelia Croft finally alerted to their daughter's presence, but looking on her with disapproving scowls.

No. Please...

The roiling blood consumed her.

Chapter 44

This circle of Hell looked suspiciously like a hospital ward.

Lara took her time opening her eyes, letting them adjust to the natural light after so much darkness.

Once she could lift her lids with only intermittent grimacing, she assessed her surroundings.

Off-white walls.

Lilac curtains drawn back on a single window.

A view beyond of autumn foliage and, behind the splay of tan and copper, even more brown in the form of brick-and-stone buildings. Beige, weather-battered and unimpressive, the blocky structures could slot into essentially any European city. So if she was hoping for urban architecture that gave away her exact location, Lara was shit out of luck.

The archaeologist decided to focus on her immediate environment to ferret out an answer to that particularly bothersome question.

She was lying in a hospital bed, but with nothing attached to her except for a drip, and pulse oximeter pinching her left index finger.

At least there were no restraints pinning her to the mattress. That made for a pleasant change.

Apart from a gown, the only other thing she wore was an identification wristband that correctly showed her name.

Wherever she was, they at least knew who she was.

Not that she was getting much in the way of special treatment for an infamous British countess and unwilling celebrity explorer.

Her no-frills room accommodated three beds. The one closest to the window was empty. However, the cot immediately to her left was occupied by a white-haired woman. She looked to be in her eighties at least, judging by her heavily lined, flaccid facial skin. Regardless, she was fast asleep, rasping with great open-mouthed breaths. The way her lip drooped in one corner suggested she'd recently had a stroke.

Lara redirected her gaze to the ceiling. She frowned at the plywood panels, trying to make sense of her situation.

She started with the easiest item for her to process: the state of her body.

The truth was that she felt... good.

Actually, no, amazing.

She couldn't remember the last time she'd felt so perfectly on form, physically. No muscle stiffness. No lingering twinges from still healing sprains or fractures. No constant low-grade stinging as scrapes and cuts sealed themselves, fending off inflammation the entire time.

Lara inhaled deeply, and found that she could expand her lungs fully without the tear-triggering obstacle of broken ribs.

She caught herself smiling.

That was another thing. She actually felt happy. Lighter, like someone had excised a tumour from her spirit.

That was the most puzzling sensation of all. She'd pretty much forgotten what contentment felt like.

Despite the many pinnacles of exhilaration she reached over the years, her mind was always immediately grappled by worries. Every time. Concerns would seize her and tug her down – exactly like the men she'd killed; working together to drag her to Hell.

At that memory, she scowled.

This didn't make sense.

She'd died.

There was no way she could have survived her injuries.

But what if by some miracle she had actually made it? How long would she need for a full recovery?

How long had she been out for?

Her right hand sought her hair, where it lay loose and splayed over her pillow. She twirled her index finger through it to single out a lock, and then drew it out to its full length. Free of her ponytail, it was as long as she remembered. It was the same rich brown too, so she could discount the absurd possibility, and momentary panic, that she'd become one of those narcoleptic fairy tale princesses trapped in a coma for decades.

Her left hand pressed over her stomach.

Then tightened white-knuckled around the fabric of her gown.

She yanked the fabric up to examine her midriff.

Nothing but smooth planes of flesh.

No wounds.

No bruising.

No scars.

No scars whatsoever.

What the fuck?!

Even the self-mutilated mess she'd made above her left hip – the worst and first of the blemishes – was gone.

This wasn't the body she remembered.

Lara shot upright in bed.

Her heart was pounding in a bizarre perfection-triggered panic.

She grabbed her gown and jerked it aside, forgetting about the tie at the back of her neck until it nipped her.

Still, she hardly felt it in the frenzy of self-examination.

"Fuck. *Fuck...*"

She tugged her flesh in different directions; handled it roughly like clay. Her fingers left furious stripes on her thighs and back and triceps as if she'd been flagellating herself.

Still, no matter where she looked, she couldn't find a single imperfection, faded or fresh. She couldn't even identify the tiny white streak she'd had on her right baby toe since she was a toddler and stepped on a chunk of broken bottle.

Her skin was pristine.

A nurse entered.

At the sight of Lara sitting there, half-naked and wildly groping at herself, the young brunette jumped.

The archaeologist was equally surprised.

Frozen, the women simply stared at each other for a second.

"Excuse me," Lara eventually forced out, drawing on British manners battered all the way down to her genetic code. She hoped she sounded more rational than she looked. "Would you mind telling me – ?"

The nurse interrupted.

She spoke in hesitant, heavily accented English. "Wait here."

Then she darted from the ward.

Why was it always so bloody difficult to get answers?

Lara could have waited for the doctor, or whatever authority figure the nurse had gone to call. Except the Englishwoman still wasn't entirely sure that she was safe wherever she was. Also, she'd had quite enough of obedience – particularly when forced at gun or needle point.

So she plucked off the pulse monitor.

Then, gripping the safety rails, she used them to slide herself from the bed.

As soon as Lara's bare feet touched the cool linoleum, she glowered at her legs. They were strong and steady beneath her. After being Natla's brutalised marionette for so long, the effortlessness with which she stood and moved actually felt suspicious.

God, she was paranoid about her own body.

So much so, that when she saw a nearby tray of medical supplies, including a hand mirror, Lara lunged for the latter.

That restored some sense. She may have forgotten what it was like to see herself sans scrapes and split lip, but the face gazing back at her was still definitely her own.

With that reassurance, Lara proceeded to the next order of business.

She yanked the IV needle from her inner elbow and wadded the puncture with a fistful of cotton wool from the medical tray. There was a small roll of adhesive tape and Lara snatched it up. Repeatedly she wound it around the wool and her arm, before tearing the end off with her teeth.

It was a hatchet job – her first aid efforts under pressure usually were – but it would fulfil its purpose.

Finally she added another layer to her get-up with an overwashed grey robe she found hanging behind the door.

Lara stepped out into the hallway, forcing a hunch to stay as inconspicuous as possible.

It didn't work as well as she would have liked. She still received stares from fellow patients, visitors and staff alike. However, despite the shared whispers and nudges, nobody made a move to intercept her.

She felt like a tiger that had just escaped from the zoo. Everyone was giving her roaming space until the army pitched up with their rifles.

Still, there is always one fearless idiot who thinks they can soothe the beast with words alone.

So Lara was blinking at the massive amounts of corridor signage in both Cyrillic and Latin alphabets, trying to translate it, when she heard a voice behind her.

"Miss Croft?"

The archaeologist turned to find another nurse centred the passageway.

The woman was older, squatter and evidently harder to faze than the wide-eyed sister who'd caught Lara back in the ward. The older nurse stood with a clipboard cradled in her left arm, and her right hand held out to the adventurer, palm up in a gesture of peace.

"Miss Croft, are you looking for your friend?"

My friend?

Realisation slapped her and Lara blurted, "Sam?!"

"Samantha Ni...shi...mura." The woman stumbled over the unfamiliar sounds in the Japanese surname. "Yes."

"Is – Is she hurt?"

The nurse approached, and gently took Lara by the forearm. "Please come with me."

The archaeologist knew the woman's expression – one half fatigue, one half melancholy. It was the same tired-slightly-sad mask donned by every healthcare professional, or authority figure, when they had bad news to deliver.

Lara recalled being on the receiving end of it most vividly on the day of her parents' disappearance. She remembered her sense of powerlessness, frustration and anger as information was repeatedly kept from her by her teachers "for her own good."

The memory of it rooted her feet to the floor. She managed not to yell but her voice clearly rose enough to startle her companion. "Did something happen? Is Sam hurt?"

The nurse was still trying valiantly to placate the uncaged predator. She murmured, "The doctor will want to speak to you about what exactly took place. He hoped you would know."

Oh my God.

Lara found herself shaking her head in defiance. Her inner monologue was repeating a desperate, breathless reassurance. *She can't be hurt, she can't be. She was a bit knocked around, but that was it. You were the injured one. She was fine. They've got it wrong; mucked up the results. You'll see.*

She'd been so distracted by her thoughts that she lost track of how long she'd trotted alongside the nurse until they stopped outside a door.

"My daughter is a fan of yours," the nurse explained then.

Lara half expected the woman to hold out something to be autographed but her professionalism remained intact. "Your friend is in here. She's supposed to have minimal visitors but you can see her while I get the doctor. No touching. No noise." She added, "No going anywhere."

Clearly the adventurer's reputation had preceded her.

Lara simply nodded, not trusting her voice to prioritise politeness over impatience.

The nurse opened the door and the Englishwoman entered.

The space featured the same colour scheme as the room where Lara had woken, except this was a private ward. There was only one bed in the room, flanked by medical equipment and monitors.

In the bed, at the nucleus of all the cables, tubes and apparatus, was Sam.

There was a joke there about the American being the centre of attention as usual – even in unconsciousness – but at the sight of Sam lying so pale and unresponsive, Lara's sense of humour was blasted from her like the air from her lungs.

"Oh my God," Lara gasped. "What have you done?"

The filmmaker's face was just as Lara remembered from Athena's shrine: one cheek mottled brown with bruising, and her bottom lip marred by a scab that looked like someone had stroked over the plump flesh with a marker.

It was the state of Sam's body though that physically jolted Lara; that sent her groping for the support of the bed's safety rails.

"Sam, Christ..."

Gauze dressings covered the filmmaker's arms from fingertip to mid-bicep. Peeking from the edge of the bandaging though was angry vermillion skin, peppered with blisters. Similar raised patches were visible above the neck of her hospital gown.

Lara had dished out and been on the receiving end of enough immolation attacks to recognise burn types and intensities on sight. Sam's visible injuries were second degree. What was under the bandages, however, was impossible to gauge.

Lara raised her face to the ceiling. That denied her tears the gravity they needed to spill. "You stupid, stupid cow."

The archaeologist kept wanting to seize Sam's hand in reassurance but she couldn't. Instead she tightened her grip on the steel bar until the muscles in her forearms ached. Eyes and teeth clenched, she muttered to her unconscious companion, "I told you not to. Goddammit, you never listen."

Lara might as well have been addressing herself.

She thought she'd finally broken the cycle. Her death meant Sam would be safe. But somehow it had happened all over again. The one person she cared about more than anyone else on the planet was seriously hurt, and it was Lara's fault.

Somehow.

She didn't understand it but there was no denying it.

She could feel the culpability in her bones, like the unmistakable onset of flu.

Except she didn't know how to make this right.

It was so much easier when the solution involved scaling mountains and bursting into thug-packed rooms, guns blazing.

That she could do.

That she had done. Repeatedly. While she teetered on the brink of collapse.

But this?

She glared at her hands. She was back at full strength, physically. Yet there was nothing she could do with her gift of health.

She was so impotent when it came to saving Sam now that she may as well have been lying comatose as well.

Sod it all to Hell.

Defeated and despondent, Lara eventually sighed, "I don't know what you've done, but I'm here, alright? I'm waiting. However long it takes. I won't leave you. Just... just concentrate on getting well."

She bent over her companion.

"I love you."

Gently she pressed her lips to Sam's.

A flash of colour caught the very edge of Lara's peripheral vision and her head popped up.

Steven was standing in the doorway, holding a bouquet of Chrysanthemums. He looked terrible – unshaven, hair tangled, eyes raw and ringed with red behind his glasses.

Lara took a step away from the bed but it was too late.

The penny had dropped.

She could see Steven's Adam's apple sliding up and down his throat as he tried not to gag on his feelings.

"Steven..."

He interrupted her with a hiss. "You're in love with each other."

Chapter 45

"You're in love with each other."

It wasn't a question. Steven was simply processing the discovery out loud; talking his way towards comprehension that wasn't tangled in a confusing, overwhelming knot of feeling.

Still, Lara felt the need to explain herself. To try and plug the cracking dam with her fingers while Sam couldn't defend herself.

"I'm in love with her, Steven; I always have been. But it's just me. She loves you."

"No, you both love each other. That's what happened between you two; that's why she held on to her anger for so long. I've been such a fool. Fuck!"

"You're wrong."

"No." He dropped the flowers on the foot of Sam's bed, and frowned at his fiancé.
"Whenever she has nightmares, it's your name she calls, Lara. Always, even now."

Caught in her own lie, the archaeologist tried a placating back-peddle. "She – She loves both of us."

"And if she had to choose...?" He burst into tears. "How can I compete with you? What do I do, Lara?"

His response was truly terrifying. The Englishwoman didn't know what to do, or say. This was completely outside her skillset. She shot people, for Christ's sake; not consoled them.

And she certainly had no experience being one of the vertices in a bizarre bisexual love triangle that comprised best friends and fiancées.

Lara's gaze drifted to the bed. Sam would have known how to handle the situation. She was naturally empathetic; ever the people's person.

Steven must have misinterpreted the archaeologist's look of longing, because an instant later he charged her.

Lara was slammed against a wall.

Steven spat in her face, "This is all your fault! You fucking untouched which she's there..."

His temper gutted for a second as he blinked his eyes clear. Then he yelled fresh, his fists twisting in the fabric of her gown. "You think this is fair?!"

Lara's body responded on autopilot.

Her elbows popped up between Steven's arms and came down hard on his median nerve line. As his fingers loosened, her knee sprang up into his gut, creating enough space between their bodies to wedge in her heel.

She kicked out.

Sam's fiancé reeled backwards and landed on his arse. The jolt evidently reached his brain. His face crumpled as he looked up at Lara. "Jesus. I'm sorry. I've never –"

It was the archaeologist's turn to explode. "You think I don't know it's my fault? You think I don't see this is unfair? Of course I do. Fuck! For this – for *everything* – I blame myself." Her voice fractured on the last syllable.

She was shaking with the effort needed to not break down. She didn't want to cry. Not then. Especially not in front of him.

Steven's voice had also shrunk to a shame-drenched whisper. "What happened, Lara?"

"I don't –"

"Just what is going on here?"

Frozen in position, both of Sam's lovers turned to the door. A scowling doctor stood within the frame, tailed by Lara's nurse escort, and a lanky man in plainclothes who radiated law and order.

"Miss Croft," the doctor muttered, "we need you to come with us."

First was the grey-haired doctor, Andanov.

Patient-physician confidentiality meant Lara saw him alone, which suited her just fine. She was still shaken by the sight of Sam's injuries, and the tussle with Steven had left her too twitchy to deal immediately with a police interrogation if she hoped to maintain her cool – and not sound like a lunatic.

Andanov answered her questions and she answered his.

The process was paired with a thorough physical examination, which was most effective of all in smoothing away Lara's edginess. Andanov was a pedantic, not unpleasantly brusque man. His methodical handling of the check-up helped to reassure the archaeologist that she was indeed operating once more in the real world – and not simply trapped in another nightmare.

Unless, she had actually landed in an especially devious Hell. One that mirrored reality with the exception of a few key details, designed to continually niggle, like a tooth cavity.

Lara shuddered at the thought. And then recommenced scratching at the spots where she'd been shot by Natla. Her nails also kept wandering to the locations of her missing scars. The phantom wounds itched.

Andanov was no fool. Just as his forehead had creased at the sight of the Englishwoman's bandaging attempt, his eyebrows knitted over her compulsive fingers.

"Is something wrong, Miss Croft?"

"No."

The truth was that she was still processing everything she remembered happening in addition to everything the doctor had told her.

She was in a hospital in Bitola, a city located in southern Macedonia. Three days had passed since she was admitted, unconscious and impossible to rouse.

Three days to resurrection. How Biblical.

Of course, while Lara had arrived comatose but untouched, Sam was badly hurt. Somehow she had managed to avoid third degree damage, but most of her arms and torso had been scorched to the point that surgery and skin grafts were being considered.

When asked about the cause of the burns, Lara mumbled something about remembering a fire before she passed out. It was a safe, generic response in comparison to the impossible truth.

Because Lara understood it now.

Sam had used the Aegis. She'd taken it from Natla's charred corpse and used it to save her best friend – her love. The price for that was searing agony for Sam. Then and now.

Yet she'd paid the cost without blinking. To help Lara.

God, had she even realised what she was bringing down on herself?

The more she brooded over the question, the worse Lara felt.

Sam was creative. A sensorial creature. Her hands.... She was always using them; always appreciating the tactile.

Their night in New York. The way Sam cooed and theatrically bit her bottom lip as she ran her fingertips over the archaeologist's invisible-to-the-eye abdominals.

"Miss Croft?"

Andanov paused halfway through the process of unwrapping a blood pressure cuff from Lara's bicep. "Would you like to talk to one of our therapists? You look a little..."

Shell-shocked.

"I'm fine."

The doctor produced a *harrumph* from the base of his throat. "Well, that concludes my evaluation. You are in perfect *physical* health, Miss Croft. Given the unusual nature of your coma, however, I would like to keep you admitted for one further evening. Just for observation."

She nodded.

Andanov added, "I think you realise that your presence here is very... disruptive. Disregarding your reputation for trouble, several news crews are stationed outside right now. Your privacy is a priority, but I request you maintain a low profile during your stay. Please try to avoid doing anything that garners further attention. Our facility treats many other patients

beyond yourself, and we can't have anything that compromises the level of care they receive."

Like the altercation in Sam's room.

"I understand completely. Thank you, Doctor, for everything."

Lara's interview with the police filled in even more of the blanks.

Given the high profile nature of the kidnapping – truthfully, Sam's media mogul father held more sway than Lara's celebrity status – INTERPOL had leapt into action. Kicking down doors, roughing up suspects and all that.

The detectives questioning her though were surprisingly considerate. Then again, the expectation of brutality was likely her own mental creation. Physically they reminded her of Natla's mercs. She kept expecting them to club her in the side of her head. That imagined prospect made her jittery, and she had to consciously clamp down on the vein of defensive insolence pumping within her. In case she did something stupid.

Vasilias Nomikos, the lanky plainclothes agent from earlier, did most of the talking. Meanwhile, Lara sat docile, playing the good girl as she sipped on a horrid cup of coffee from the vending machine.

Even though Stone's disappearance had earned Lara an extra round of beating, it turned out that the good doctor hadn't deserted Natla's captives after all. As soon as the redhead was safely reunited with her son, she contacted the authorities. She immediately gave them the GPS coordinates squeezed from Lara's riddle solution.

It had taken a few days, but in the end the timing was perfect. It meant that the police arrived in the forest clearing in the aftermath of Natla's disastrous dual attempt at immortality and vengeance. There were a half dozen mercs to arrest, and a pair of unconscious young women to rush to hospital.

As Lara was unsure what Natla's employees had said, and what exactly the authorities had found, she decided to keep her account of events confined to narrow-minded reality.

"Natla was sick; desperate. She believed there was an ancient artefact that could heal her, and that I was the only one who could find it for her."

She added an extra dash of dismissiveness to her statement with a sigh. "It was all nonsense of course, but she refused to listen. She kidnapped me and tried to secure my cooperation by holding my friend hostage. The whole situation spiralled further and further out of control, especially after Stone left. I think Natla was quite mad in the end."

A devious reinterpretation of events played out before her eyes. It was a lie, but a highly believable one. She tried not to smirk as she added, "I don't remember much of what happened later, but I know it had something to do with a disagreement between Natla and the commander of her little army, Pierre Dupont."

Nomikos's brow pinched at the mention of the Frenchman's name.

Lara hopped the lure a little more energetically across the riverbed. "You might want to talk to him if you haven't already."

Nomikos nodded to his silent companion, who immediately jotted something in his notebook. Then the senior agent returned his frown to Lara. "Miss Croft, these are very serious accusations being made about a prominent figure like Jacqueline Natla. Do you know where she is now?"

With any luck, being torn apart by Cerberus every day for all eternity.

When she didn't respond immediately, the detective prompted, "Like Dupont, Ms Natla has evidently gone into hiding. Nobody can find her."

A chill radiated from Lara's gut as if she had downed an entire jug of ice water.

"What do you mean? She's dead, isn't she? You found her body."

"No. We didn't."

"Down the tunnel?"

"The... tunnel?" Nomikos shared a glance with his partner. "What tunnel, Miss Croft?"

She was aware how rapidly she was heading south as a witness. Plummeting in credibility. Yet she couldn't stop her fall.

"The one where you found Sam and myself."

"There was no tunnel, Miss Croft. You and Miss Nishimura were found lying in the clearing, side by side."

Lara's head had begun to throb. "But the tunnel? The antechamber?"

Nomikos looked at her blankly.

Something was very, very wrong.

Eventually the cop grumbled, "You aren't the only one to mention a tunnel, Miss Croft. Or," he rolled his eyes, "Ancient Greek hoplites scampering about in full armour for that matter. But we found nothing. Just trees and dirt and a solid cliff face. I was there."

"So there was no, uh..." *Choose your words carefully, Croft.* "...big snakeskin draped over me when you found me?"

Both officers gave her a pitying look. Nomikos actually placed a hand on her shoulder.

"Is it possible you were drugged?" he asked.

Rather unsurprisingly, they clipped the interview at that point. Lara was ready to wander back to her room, so that she could shake herself out of her daze. If she could lie down for a bit in quiet, she knew everything would be alright. She could mentally splay out all the

information – her memories and the authorities' data – and then rearrange it so it all fit together.

"Natla was quite mad in the end."

Right then it felt like the blonde wasn't the only barmy one.

Except, before Lara could reach her haven – or asylum, if she wanted a more accurate word – she was intercepted by a nurse. The Englishwoman had to field a call from Mr Dorchester despite her mental murk, and reassure the solicitor that she was alright.

Lara could hear the relief in his voice. Although she was certain it didn't stem from concern about her physical welfare. Rather, its source was the fact there'd be a mountain of paperwork, and a complicated ancestry probe, if she managed to get herself, as the last Croft, killed.

Having finally satisfied Dorchester, Lara was able to escape once more.

Her next setback was ironic.

The Tomb Raider could successfully navigate a massive subterranean labyrinth first time; yet completely disorientate herself in a standard four-storey hospital.

"Bugger."

The plus side was that her wanderings ejected her into a small courtyard. High walls shielded it from the outside world on all sides, but a sense of claustrophobia was countered by the large amount of sunlight bathing the space, and the larger amount of greenery filling it. Vines crept up the walls, hiding the brickwork, and a garden occupied the centre of the yard. A path bisected the lush patch of vegetation, although a wider, paved walkway skirted the perimeter and was studded with stone benches.

Even with a full blast of sunshine, the courtyard was chilly. That would probably explain why Lara had the place to herself. She lowered herself onto a seat, and momentarily glared at the dozen cigarette butts around her feet. The picturesque area didn't deserve to be treated like an ashtray.

The archaeologist lifted her head then, stared through the shrubbery, and let her mind do what it did best: solving riddles.

She was struggling to get a grip on the truth. Doubt kept flickering before her, blinding her like dappled light reflected off water. It was bloody frustrating.

She started scratching at her AWOL scars again.

If all the evidence aligned, she wouldn't be distrusting her senses like this.

Except it didn't.

She was playing with a child's tilting puzzle – trying to manoeuvre multiple tiny silver balls across a board and into various shallow indents. All at the same time. But once a ball was settled, it was nearly impossible to keep it there and continue moving the other pieces into place.

She scowled.

It was real. Everything had happened. She had the wounds to...

No, she didn't.

Sam had the wounds to prove it.

But if the Aegis was real and used to save Lara, more people would have died. The police would have crumpled on arrival, as soon as they looked on it.

Unless it was taken in turn by someone else. That was a terrifying thought.

Still, Nomikos had said mercs were spouting the same story about secret hillside tunnels and Ancient Greek warriors.

To Lara there were just two options: One was that everyone in Natla's camp, Lara and Sam included, had succumbed to one doozy of a mass hallucination. Two was that in the chaotic aftermath the Amazons had cleaned up completely, retrieving the Aegis and sealing off the sanctuary in the process. All evidence was erased.

And for some bizarre reason, that included all of Lara's scars as well.

The archaeologist threw back her head and growled at the sky.

She couldn't shake the ominous feeling that she was overlooking something. Something crucial.

She found herself outside Sam's room.

Without knocking, she opened the door.

Steven was sitting hunched at his fiancé's bedside. He turned as Lara entered.

"Hi," she said.

"Hi."

"How is she?" Lara nodded in the filmmaker's direction.

"No change."

Steven stood and faced the Englishwoman. "Lara, listen, I'm really sorry about earlier. I completely overreacted. Since Sammy's disappearance, my sense of powerlessness had just been building and building. There was nothing I could do. Seeing her like this, then seeing and hearing you – all that frustration exploded..." He shook his head. "Taking it out on you, I've never done anything like that before. So I can't apologise enough. And the worst thing is that I can rationalise it as much as I like but it still doesn't make what happened acceptable."

Lara folded her arms. "I was right about you..."

Steven stiffened. She watched him take a miniscule step backwards.

"You're the first boyfriend of Sam's that I actually like. A genuinely decent bloke."

She cracked her mock sternness with a simple twitch to her lip.

In response, Steven chuckled away his unease.

Lara added, "We can work this out later, when she's better."

She extended her hand. "Truce?"

Steven's fingers closed around hers. "Truce."

Together they looked at Sam's unconscious form. The writer murmured exactly what the archaeologist was thinking. "She needs both of us right now."

The gravity of that realisation made Lara lower her head. Of course Sam needed them. And of course the reason for that need was Lara in the first place.

The archaeologist tried to lighten the mood; more for herself than Steven. She released the handshake. She shrugged, "I would have brought you some coffee as a peace offering, but believe it or not, this heiress is actually short on cash right now. And clothes."

"Please," Steven grinned. "You could get any man in this building to buy you a drink if you simply flashed..." He ran his eye up and down her hospital gown. "...your smile."

That made her laugh. "I'll bear that in mind."

Steven prodded his glasses up the bridge of his nose. "Actually, if you don't mind, would you sit with her for a bit? I'd like to stop by the cafeteria; stretch my legs."

"Of course."

"Can I get you anything?"

She couldn't actually remember the last time she ate solid food, but she refused nonetheless. "Unless you can find some Jaffa Cakes or a Twix, I'm alright, thank you."

After Steven was gone, Lara plonked herself in his seat.

She settled her eyes on Sam's chest, and let the rise and fall of her companion's ribcage become her meditative aid. She even synced her breathing to Sam's in the hope it would soothe her.

It did, to a certain degree.

That was until each inhalation and exhalation paired with one of the questions rolling around in Lara's skull.

Who are you going to choose, Sam?

Who are you going to hurt?

Over and over they repeated.

The Englishwoman closed her eyes.

It was hard to believe she had woken a few hours earlier, ready to turn cartwheels.

A sad little whimper snagged her attention.

"Lara...?"

The archaeologist sprang to her feet.

"Sam?!"

For a second time, Lara almost seized her companion's bandaged hand. She stopped herself at the last second, redirecting her palm to the filmmaker's forehead instead.

Sam was awake. Still heavily lidded, her gaze zigzagged over the Englishwoman's face.
"Lara, it's really you?"

The archaeologist couldn't help it. Despite Sam's obvious pain, Lara was so relieved she was practically laughing. "Yeah, it's me."

"Christ, everything hurts. It hurts so much," Sam winced. She lifted her arms. Immediately, her eyes widened at the sight of all the dressings and skin the colour of bubble gum. "What the fuck happened? What's wrong with me?"

"You got burnt. But it's going to be alright. You –

"Where are we?" the American blurted.

"It's okay. We're safe. In a hospital in Macedonia."

"Macedonia? Like in Europe? What are you doing here?"

Lara chose to ignore Sam's escalating panic. It was just the painkillers talking. Everything would click into place in a second, once her grogginess melted off like morning mist.

Lara felt a fresh smile settle on her lips. "You saved me, Sam. I'm alive because of you."

"Saved you? What are you talking about?" The filmmaker looked to be on the brink of tears. Her whole body was shuddering.

"With the Aegis." Lara explained. "You did it."

The archaeologist was leaning in to kiss Sam when her companion jerked away.

Sam started shaking her head frantically. "I don't understand this. I don't understand any of this... Lara, I haven't even spoken to you for five years."

Chapter 46

Lara's head snapped back.

Breathless, she forced out the question nonetheless – even as it tore her throat like a regurgitated razor blade. "What's the last thing you remember?"

"Being in the UK. Working at some event. A gala fundraiser I think. I keep seeing tuxes and evening gowns; it's really weird..." Sam's voice trailed off. She looked confused.

"What's the last thing you remember of us?"

"That's a strange question."

"I know, Sam. But it's important. Just humour me. When was the last time we saw each other?"

The filmmaker didn't hesitate. "New York."

Oh my God. All their healing undone.

Lara couldn't hide her horror.

Sam continued to murmur her memories out loud. "It was the day of your interview. You were acting odd all day. I thought it was nerves mixed with the usual Yamatai posttraumatic stress. Afterwards, you went for a run and you never came back."

"What?" Lara gasped. "No club? No... afterwards?"

"What are you talking about?"

"No –? We never –?"

Sam's face framed by pillows. How beautiful she looked. The way her lips barely parted and she arched up into Lara as she came. It was like making love to a Renaissance sculpture, but one made irresistibly flesh and blood. Pygmalion.

In the present, Sam's face was framed by another set of pillows. Her expression though was very different – scrunched in recalled bitterness.

"Never what? Lara, you ran off. Literally. I tried to contact you over and over but you refused to speak to me. Phone calls, emails, fucking handwritten letters. You never told me what the problem was. You just disappeared from my life."

"No."

Chunks of their personal history had been ripped from Sam, like the scars from Lara's body. The worst and best parts. The most important parts – the lead-up to, and actual moment they had revealed their hearts to one another. The same parts that explained the past half-decade of Lara's callous behaviour towards her best friend.

Also lost was evidently everything Lara had done to repair the savage break.

She was an inexcusably selfish monster once more.

The woman who walked out.

"Lara?" Sam whimpered. "Please tell me what's going on?"

The archaeologist stumbled backwards, away from the bed. She knocked over the chair in the process. She tried to right it but her arms were trembling too much. She felt like she was going to faint, or violently vomit.

She couldn't do that here.

She was limping for the door when it opened before her.

Steven.

Immediately Sam called from her bed. "Steven, oh thank God you're here."

She hadn't forgotten *him*. Or what he meant to her.

"Sammy?" Steven's face brightened immediately. "Sammy!"

He ran to her.

There was laughter, and tears and relieved, snotty kisses as he took her face in his hands.

Happy lovers reunited.

Lara?

She was a dead. She was a ghost. Ebenezer Scrooge forced to watch a present where it was immediately obvious that happiness was only possible when she wasn't part of the picture.

Yet she couldn't bring herself to leave. She remained frozen, three feet from the entrance.

Her gaze dipped to the floor.

Steven had found a Twix after all. He'd just dropped it when he rushed to his fiancé's bedside.

A discarded chocolate bar. That's what she and Sam were as a couple. A pair of fingers waiting to be trampled. Utterly inconsequential.

Still, she didn't go.

She continued to hover invisible in the background even while Dr Andanov examined Sam and gave his diagnosis.

The handling of the burns was straightforward enough, but the physician couldn't explain the memory loss. Sam had suffered no head trauma. The most he could suggest was that it had been triggered by the stress of her ordeal. With that the case, remembrance would only

return on its own. There was little they could do to speed up the process. Even reminder therapy, filling in the blanks, was unlikely to have an effect.

What was most curious about the whole situation though was the targeted nature of the memory gaps. The fact that they centred on one single person.

Andanov, Sam, Steven – they all turned to the archaeologist then.

A question was forming on the filmmaker's lips.

Lara didn't stay to hear it. She finally fled.

She found herself back in the courtyard.

It was early evening by then.

Without sunlight, the lush haven was substantially colder. But even though her body was shivering under her hopelessly lightweight robe and gown, she didn't really feel it.

She ground her palms into her eye sockets, hoping to displace the pain from her chest.

It didn't work.

Lara had lost Sam. She'd lost the love of her life.

That ominous niggle she'd felt the last time she sat here – that crucial missing piece of information – the Tomb Raider had found it and examined it and finally understood its significance.

She remembered Amelia's words back at the sanctuary.

Even when given, use of the Aegis always has a price.

The burns were Sam's price.

The memory loss was Lara's.

The archaeologist started to sob as her dreams played out in reverse.

Releasing a toddler's pudgy little hand.

Removing her wedding band from the cord around her neck.

Skiping out the way before her wife could splash her with seawater during their Thai honeymoon.

There were so many snapshots from an unlived life.

A future rewound and erased while she watched.

All of it gone.

She was left with a single real memory. One that stabbed deeper than any fantasy.

Sam's head popped up from under the duvet.

She grinned, "Guess who's an official lesbian? Achievement unlocked." She pumped her arms in the air, palms up. "Whoop whoop!"

"Christ," Lara panted. "Sam, that was... Oh my God."

The archaeologist hadn't thought her body was capable of that on the best of days. Just then she was exhausted after 60-plus sleepless hours; including one night spent treading the streets of Manhattan. Plus, she'd already climaxed once that evening. Silently but epically.

She'd always thought she was more like a bloke in that regard. Sam had however refused to accept the claim. And in the process, given the archaeologist one helluva toe-curling surprise.

My God, it had been incredible.

Sam was busy kissing up the centre of Lara's stomach, and then between her breasts.

The filmmaker chuckled, "Sometimes a sequel does beat the original."

Lara didn't have a response. She was splayed limp on the mattress while Sam crawled over her like a cat, gliding every inch of her body against her companion's bare skin.

A cat with hard nipples just begging to be...

Stop it, Lara.

It was like Sam could hear the Englishwoman's thoughts. "What's the matter?" she teased. "Cat got your tongue?"

Not yet... But the night's young.

The truth was that the filmmaker owned Lara and she knew it.

Pressed flush against her lover, Sam trailed her index finger along the length of Lara's collar bone.

The American pouted, "You know, I've heard you cry my name a hundred times but you've never sounded so deliciously desperate as you did a few minutes ago. I'm guessing none of the guys you slept with did that?"

"Not like that. Never like that. Oh my God." Lara let her eyes roll in her head as her companion seized her throat between her teeth and proceeded to administer a vicious hickey.

"I think you mean *Oh my Sam?*"

"That too."

Sam pecked the Englishwoman on the lips, still grinning. "You know, it's a good thing you're my best friend because otherwise I'd be really jealous."

The admission startled Lara. The last thing she expected of Sam just then was insecurities, even if jokingly delivered. It kind of soured the mood; sobered Lara out of her post-coital bliss.

The archaeologist sat up, frowning. "What do you mean?"

"Is there a single inch of you that isn't beautiful, Lara? Jaw droppingly..." The filmmaker winked, "...tongue lollingly beautiful. Even your pussy is pretty."

"Sam. Jesus!"

Lara flushed bright red. She was already feeling exceptionally embarrassed about her friend going down on her. She'd cringed as Sam disappeared under the covers.

"And it tastes –"

"Shut up!"

Lara grabbed a pillow and batted her lover. But they were both laughing. Sam seized her own pillow and hit the archaeologist back.

It didn't matter what had happened on the island – how much the Englishwoman had changed – Sam had a way of finding the awkward girl Lara had once been, and hauling her out the battered body where she was hiding. Then the archaeologist would transition from hardened survivor to shy wallflower in an eye blink.

Lara switched tactics and wrestled her companion to the mattress, so Sam was squealing and pinned beneath the wily Tomb Raider.

After confessing it the first time, it was easier to say.

"I love you, Sam."

"I love you too, sweetie."

Lara bent down and kissed away the filmmaker's grin. She knew what was coming – what had to come – but for that night, they had each other.

She'd finished crying.

The reset button had been pushed. That was the Aegis's gift to her.

It hadn't just returned her to life; it had given her a new one.

With an erasure of all her scars.

A fresh start.

She knew that if she really wanted, she could turn her back and run all over again.

She could shatter her relationship with Sam for a second time. Because she was afraid of getting the filmmaker hurt through association.

She was honestly still terrified of that prospect.

But she refused to run.

So she was left with two alternatives.

She could march back into that room and tell Sam how she felt; tell her everything that happened between them in New York, as well as everything that was said and done during the past few weeks.

Or...

She could filter the truth and have Sam back in her life simply as her best friend. Sam would be safe. Happy. The anger the filmmaker felt just then in her hospital bed would be far easier to soothe than the hatred Lara's heartbreaking desertion had provoked the first time.

Lara would always harbour the memories of them once, briefly, having and being more, but their bond would be as it had been. Before Yamatai. And before the complications Lara stirred up with her longings – jabbing a stick into a riverbed.

Having Sam as her best friend again. Sharing stories and adventures, successes and failures, hugs and smiles; crisscrossing their careers where appropriate. The only thing they wouldn't share was a bed. Before Yamatai she had accepted that.

She was still brooding over her choices when a body sank onto the bench next to her.

Steven.

He looked as troubled as the archaeologist.

He stared off into space alongside her. "So what do we do?"

"What do we do?"

"You're not the only one affected by this, Lara. You're thinking about not telling her about the two of you, right?"

He was surprisingly perceptive. She nodded.

"I thought as much," he sighed.

"And I thought you'd be thrilled about that. Did you really want the pistols at dawn alternative with me?"

"How can I be thrilled? What do I do if tomorrow, or three years from now, she wakes up and remembers that she loves you? Am I supposed to go ahead with the wedding and then

spend my entire marriage on tenterhooks, waiting for the day that time bomb goes off? Then gracefully step aside when she wants to be with you."

Lara shook her head. "That won't happen. She'll never remember."

"How do you know?"

"Because it's the price."

"For what?"

Lara didn't answer. She simply stood.

She'd taken a few steps when she turned back. "You were right, Steven. She needs both of us. So I'm not going anywhere. I will be here for her. As her friend. I will never encourage anything more, for her sake."

As she aimlessly trod the hospital hallways, a part of her hissed, "This is the coward's choice, Lara. You can have your cake and eat it if you just grow a pair. But you're too soft and scared."

She could see the doppelganger glaring at her.

She glared back.

A new life. A new start. That meant no more doubting or judging herself.

No more wallowing.

She remembered her conversation with Roth on Yamatai, standing on that ledge while the pilot's parachute and smoke signal billowed. She'd been itching to go, to the point that her mentor physically restrained her; forcing her to listen to him.

"Sometimes you've got to make sacrifices, Lara. You can't save everyone."

"I know about sacrifices."

"No. You know about loss. Sacrifice is a choice you make. Loss is a choice made for you."

She murmured out loud, "You're wrong, Roth. I know about both now. Truly."

A voice behind her.

"Hey, Lara."

The way the two syllables of her name were sung; it could only be one person.

Her fists clenched reflexively as she slowly turned to face the speaker.

Mo.

Her only consolation was that the tabloid journalist looked horrid. The rifle butt he'd taken to the face back in Delphi had broken his nose, and while it had clearly been reset since, the swelling was still at its apex. The flesh from his cheekbones upwards was purple and puffy, and he sported a pair of decidedly nasty black eyes.

His smirk instantly sapped the archaeologist of all sympathy, however. She felt herself stiffen.

"What are you doing here?" she growled.

He held up a bandaged left hand. "Accident with a kitchen knife. Plus my face is really aching again. I just had to seek treatment."

Lara was willing to bet Croft Manor there was nothing under the home-applied dressing.

She arched an eyebrow, "In this hospital, of course."

"Just a happy coincidence," Mo shrugged. Then his smirk stretched into a leer. "So... How are you doing? And how's your girlfriend? How's *Sam*?"

At the emphasis he placed on the filmmaker's name, the icy defensiveness in Lara's limbs seeped into her words. "Don't, Mo. Not now."

"I hear she has a fiancé. And an Emmy Award winner at that. That must be quite a mess."

"I'm warning you..."

"Is it difficult being the other woman?"

"Mo." She took a step towards him.

Still, the bastard wouldn't stop. "Actually, that's a great headline," he added. "I gotta write that one down. Lara Croft: Tomb Raider and Home Wrecker."

He was getting off on it – riling her up when she was supposed to be on her best behaviour.

"Stop. Now."

His grin said it. *Or what?*

He continued, cocking his head. "Unless... you all have an arrangement? You know...? Sharing is caring."

Lara decked him.

He went down, wailing.

She looked at him for all of a second before spinning on her heel and striding away.

She could still hear him though.

"My nose. Fuck. Fuuuuuck! Lara Croft broke my fucking nose!"

For a second time, actually.

Dorchester was going to kill her.

Her knuckles were smarting.

But she was also smiling.

That had felt good.

Better than good.

It felt bloody marvellous.

And right then, it was exactly what she needed.

Chapter 47

She switched off the engine, and sat for a minute just watching the spatter of raindrops on the windscreen.

Puffing out her cheeks, she eventually settled on a strategy to overcome her twitchy procrastination. She'd pick a droplet. Track its progress. When it reached the bottom of the glass she'd do it.

No more excuses.

It had been two months since Greece.

She had kept her promise. To Steven and, more importantly, herself.

Even after she was discharged, she visited Sam every day.

Slowly, she rebridged what they once had.

Her explanation for leaving remained the same. It clearly hurt Sam to hear it but without the extra layer of bitter emotional desertion, the filmmaker seemed to grudgingly accept it almost immediately. By the end of that same visit she was smiling and laughing with Lara once more.

It also helped that the deeply apologetic hotel had forwarded on Sam's camera equipment in addition to a lavish fruit basket and Lara's luggage. The video footage gave the archaeologist something to discuss with her companion, but it also helped to reassure herself that the events of the past few weeks had all actually happened.

Of course, the time spent with Sam wasn't easy on Lara's heart.

She kept wanting to kiss and touch the filmmaker in ways that were completely inappropriate for *just friends*.

In a short time the boundary-free physical intimacy between them had become instinctual, and suddenly Lara had to break the habit. Go cold turkey. And she doubted there were any Twelve Step programmes designed for her particular compulsion. Not unless she was seeking conversion therapy, and that thought made her feel ill.

Meanwhile, she had sworn to give Steven and Sam space. She wouldn't complicate the healing process, physically or psychologically. So when Sam was cleared to leave the hospital, the archaeologist left too – and headed in the completely opposite direction to the filmmaker and her husband-to-be.

The Tomb Raider found herself perched on a mountain slope that formed part of the Bhutan-Tibet border. Lynch was still hovering above her in the helicopter she'd leapt from. She could see him through the cockpit glass, flicking his tongue between v-fingers.

"Piss off!" she yelled.

She chucked a handful of snow in his direction. Then chuckled at her own stupidity when the wind churned up by the rotor blades splattered it back in her face.

Lynch gave her a final mock salute, completing the jest of their exchange, and flew off.

Lara was still smiling as she wiped the powder from her cheeks.

"Right, let's do this," she said to herself.

She detached the skis from her backpack and fitted them to her boots. Ski poles in hand, she paused for a moment then, and surveyed her surroundings.

She remembered a childhood insistence that she was going to see the world. All of it.

A few months ago she would have sneered, and dismissed the statement as a little girl's naiveté.

Now though...

She realised she was actually living her dream. And loving it.

This wasn't the hollow thrill of distraction that she regularly felt before Delphi and Macedonia. Those thrills went away, leaving her feeling emptier than before.

Right then, high in the Himalayas, she felt whole.

She inhaled deeply. The cold air was practically solid in her chest and throat. It hurt to breathe, but it was a good, pure hurt.

This was what it was to be alive.

Alive and in the light; as opposed to alive and wading in darkness and blood.

For so long she'd thought the latter was the only option open to her.

But she'd been freed from her scars, and the weight on her soul – Himiko's parasite, she had begun to theorise. It had kept her bound to the shadows as effectively as a prison shackle.

She raised her face to the sun and laughed.

And, God, she really had fun that expedition. She may have embarked on it as a much-needed distraction, but in the end the whole thing proved deeply fulfilling.

Exhilarating.

And not just in terms of the risks she took – the leaps of faith between mountain faces, hoping that her climbing axe would catch onto something before she ran out of rock and ice.

There was the cerebral reward too.

A beautifully apt metaphor that could be applied to the entire adventure.

Because it was the expedition where she found Shambala.

Not that she got to stay long before horrified guardians chased her out of the valley. But still.

She'd be back.

And at least it hadn't come to violence.

In fact, she managed to avoid combat the entire trip except for an incident where she fell into a snow leopard's den.

Even that experience had been enlightening.

As their glares locked in the cave, she realised that if she had a spirit animal, it was this fierce, bristling creature.

During their inevitable grapple, she managed to avoid killing it, but she was clawed in the process. The rake tore straight through her parka, and thermals, and across her side.

Sometime later, she found herself breathless, bleeding steadily and hunched under an overhang with the contents of her medical kit strewn about. After dousing the gashes in alcohol – and much cursing – she stitched and bandaged them herself.

The injury was a further reminder of how much the Aegis had changed her. Her body was different. She was certain its very chemistry had altered. She could never talk to anyone about it but she'd been touched by a god. She was certain of it now. She was stronger. Faster. More agile. More resilient. No matter their severity, her wounds always healed as if they had never happened in the first place.

It had been a week since her tussle with the leopard, and already her torn flesh had knitted together. The entire healing process hurt less than plucking out the slapdash stitches left behind.

Still, performing first aid with shaking, bloody hands was preferable to this.

Time was up. Her chosen rain droplet had reached the windowsill.

Lara wanted to be back in the Himalayas.

She sighed.

You do this to yourself, Croft.

Then, with trembling fingers, she picked up her phone and selected the name from her contacts list.

Please don't pick up.

Almost immediately the call connected.

Well, shite.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Sam, it's Lara."

"Lara? Hey, I thought it was you."

The utterly platonic way Sam's voice brightened was like a vice tightening around the archaeologist's chest. Lara winced, glad that she was hiding behind a phone.

"How are you? How was the trip?" the filmmaker asked.

"I – I'm good. It was... eventful; worthwhile. But what about you? How are you feeling?"

"The skin on my hands still feels a bit weird and tight, but overall, I'm doing a lot better."

"That's good. That's good."

And that was the small talk exhausted. The archaeologist was tempted to comment on the weather next.

You can wrestle snow leopards, Lara Croft, but you can't talk to the woman you have feelings for.

"Sam, uh..." Lara pinched the bridge of her nose. She exhaled slowly, trying to flush the nervousness from her system. "I, um, was calling really in the off-chance you're still in the London."

"Yeah, we're still here. Probably for the next three weeks or so, while Steven nails down everything on the new show."

"So, uh, I'm back in the UK for a bit as well, and I was wondering if you'd like to..." She couldn't believe she was saying it. "...catch up sometime. Over coffee. If you're free."

"Yeah, of course. That would be great, sweetie. When were you thinking?"

"Uh, Thursday. Say 11, at Beans on Toast."

The café had been one of their favourite hangouts during their uni days, particularly after a big night. At some point around lunch time the next day, they'd stagger out of their flat as hangover zombies in search of caffeine and a greasy fry-up. Beans on Toast never failed to deliver.

"Perfect."

The archaeologist could hear the smile in Sam's voice. She was no doubt reminiscing at that moment just like Lara.

The American woman suddenly added, "By the way, have you given any more thought about coming to the wedding? I'm trying to work out seating plans."

"I – I'm not sure, Sam." *I really don't think it's a good idea right now.*

Lara had been practicing stoic acceptance when it came to seeing Sam and Steven together. But if she was a recovering alcoholic trying to rid herself of cravings, attending the wedding would be like going on an all-you-can-drink brewery tour.

"I understand you don't want to be the Maid of Honour. But I really want you there, Lara. You're still my best friend for God's sake."

An intended "I can't" somehow emerged from the archaeologist's lips as "I'll think about it."

She could never refuse Sam.

"Great. We can talk about it on Thursday. See you then, babe."

"Cheers, Sam."

"Love you."

Lara ended the call.

One down, one to go.

The fact that the phone call was the less stressful of the two things she'd been avoiding made her cringe.

"A fresh start," she repeated out loud – to reassure herself.

She'd been saying it a lot the past few weeks.

No more fear.

No more guilt.

No more grief.

She was finally ready to accept who she was meant to be.

Not that it was an entirely smooth process.

Out in the field, it felt effortless and unquestionable. But back in the urban everyday, she still routinely found herself cornered by anxiety – with swirling doubts, sweaty palms and a soundtrack composed of her own frantic heartbeat.

But she was learning to fight her way free of that paralysis. It was a bully, but this little rat had developed an effective strategy for dealing with those. So it was getting easier. The patches of insecurity were becoming fewer and feebler, just as with snowfall during the transition from Winter to Spring.

Lara swallowed. "Here we go."

She shouldered her backpack and picked up the bulging gym bag from the passenger seat. She'd have to come back for the boxes cramming the back of the vehicle. Make a few trips.

She climbed out of her dinky old Jimny and trod up to the front of the building.

Given what it represented, the sight of it was always intimidating. Even now – when she had stopped running from the associated expectations and memories.

You can do this...

She keyed in the security code and pushed open the monstrous front door.

"Winston," she announced into the vast, echoing space. "I'm home."

Epilogue

Eight years later.

"Auntie Lara!"

"How's my favourite goddaughter?"

She caught the little girl barrelling towards her under the armpits, lifted her and spun her full circle.

"Goodness. You've grown so big."

The four year old wrapped her arms around Lara's neck in a hug. The archaeologist squawked a mock-choke, making the child giggle.

Lara was grinning back when she realised a second figure was approaching from across the lawn. That sobered her.

The Englishwoman and the newcomer both regarded each other a little shyly.

"Hey, Lara."

"Hey, Sam."

They exchanged polite pecks on the cheek.

In Lara's head, that was the point where she would sweep Sam into a long open-mouthed kiss. It didn't matter how much time had passed; how much their relationship had evolved. The fantasies still crept up on her from time to time. And then she would have to force a smile until the leaden sensation of longing released its hold on her.

More effective just then in hauling the Englishwoman out of her fantasy, though, was the sensation of Sam's daughter wriggling in her arms. Lara lowered the little girl to the ground. Immediately, the child latched onto the archaeologist's leg with both hands.

Lara ruffled the girl's dark hair with a grin, and then turned to face her mother.

"It's good to see you, Sam."

"You too. Although I don't think I'm as happy about it as someone else right now." Sam crossed her arms. "Isn't that right, Hannah?"

The girl seized Lara's hand and tugged on it. "Auntie Lara, ponies!"

"That's right, I said there would be ponies the next time you visited. Well come on then."

Not that Lara had to lead the way. The fenced off paddock was visible from the front lawn, and Hannah had already spied the horse tied up there.

Lara was practically being dragged by the child.

Sam kept pace, clearly amused by the situation. She murmured to her best friend, "You know, she idolises you, Lara. She won't take that damn backpack off." The filmmaker pointed at the grubby pink bag swinging from side to side on Hannah's tiny shoulders. "And it's all your fault."

Lara winked, "It could be worse. It could be matching thigh holsters."

Sam chortled. "That's true."

The women had thought Hannah was too focused on her hooved prize to be listening, but the girl glanced over her shoulder midstride. With all seriousness she announced, "Mommy, I want to be an explorer just like Auntie Lara and Dora."

Sam burst out laughing.

Despite her vast library and vaster mental reserve of knowledge, the reference was lost on Lara. Bemused, she asked her companion, "Who's Dora?"

There wasn't time for a response. They had reached the paddock.

Hannah's jaw dropped at the sight of Lara's snooty black thoroughbred. The archaeologist had almost named the animal after her similarly uptight grandmother, but she eventually settled on something more appropriate for her line of work.

She was still smiling over that thought when she realised Hannah was frozen; her excitement trampled by trepidation. The mare was so much bigger than her after all.

Lara decided to soothe the child's nerves with a formal introduction.

She lifted the girl onto the paddock fence, and encouraged her to reach out and stroke the mare's face.

"Hannah, this is Hatshepsut. Hatshepsut, this is Hannah."

It was far too complex a name for a four year old. After rolling the unusual slithering syllables around in her mouth like marbles, Hannah eventually managed to expel, "Hot chicken soup!"

The horse snorted, indignant.

Lara laughed and palmed the animal's muzzle. "Sorry, girl."

Hatshepsut was haughty, but she was a lady down to her bone marrow. Obedient. She would bear the insult with silent disgust, just like she would bear riders she felt were beneath her bloodline. Later, maybe, she'd try to throw Lara while they galloped across the estate grounds. But not now; not while she was on exhibit.

"Would you like to ride her?" The archaeologist whispered against Hannah's ear.

"Can I?"

"Of course."

There was an access gate a few feet away but as usual Lara couldn't be arsed with such things. She simply clambered over the fence, and then helped Hannah after her.

"Upsy-daisy."

Hatshepsut was already saddled and bridled. It was simply a case of plonking Hannah on the animal's back and then joining her.

"Sweetie?" Sam's voice rang out.

Lara turned at the same moment the little girl did.

That left the archaeologist with a wry smile on her face.

Sam was frowning. "Please be careful."

That was perhaps the most amusing change that motherhood had made to Sam. Lara remembered her flatmate living perpetually in the moment; always looking for a good time – to the point of doing some truly reckless things that Lara usually had to rescue her from. Since the birth of her daughter, though, she had become caution personified.

Other things went unchanged, however. The filmmaker already had a camera in her hands, ready to record every moment of this milestone.

"It's alright," Lara called. "She's with me." She added jokingly, "What's the worst that could happen?"

At that, Sam's face fell.

Lara flashed a smile, "Relax, Sam. I promise I'll look after her."

She plucked up a riding helmet hanging from the nearest fence post and plopped it onto Hannah's head. At least she had estimated the size correctly. The girl was growing fast.

While Lara was fastening the helmet under Hannah's chin, the child found her confidence once more. Hands on hips, she mimicked Lara right down to her accent when she yelled, "Yeah, relax, Mommy!"

Lara chuckled.

And that was exactly why she was an appalling role model for children.

Before Hannah's smart mouth could get her into trouble, Lara placed the girl on the saddle and mounted behind her.

They trotted and cantered around the paddock for a bit. Hatshepsut was dressage-trained and with a squeeze of Lara's thighs the thoroughbred was encouraged to show off her fancy footwork.

Hannah was delighted.

Lara was smiling the whole time too. She bent and pressed her lips to the little girl's crown.

Before Hannah was born – before Lara held her for the first time – the archaeologist had thought she would hate the child. Every time she looked at her chubby, contented face, Lara expected to be stabbed through the heart. And the thrust would always be doubled. The first jab would be the obvious jealousy in that Hannah was a living, breathing product of Sam and Steven's love. The second jab would be the reminder that Lara was an awful person to loathe an innocent baby.

But then she had met Hannah and her worries evaporated.

How could she not love her? She was made from Sam. She was beautiful, buoyant and adorably brassy, but with a streak of Steven's introversion that made her far more contemplative, and therefore cautious, than her mother.

Lara had already decided that she was going to name Hannah as her heir one day.

After the ride, they had tea on the lawn. They sat at a table set up under one of the giant oak trees that had stood tall and proud on the estate before even Lara's great-great grandfather was born.

While the former flatmates chatted, Hannah sprawled on a blanket nearby with her upended backpack and its revealed contents: a box of Band-Aids, toys, string, plastic jewellery and an assortment of colouring-in pencils and crayons. Just then the girl was drawing Hatshepsut in the notebook her godmother had given her for Christmas.

Lara kept glancing in Hannah's direction. She had to admit she was utterly flummoxed by children's eating habits. The tea spread included sandwiches, sausage rolls, scones and cupcakes, but all Hannah was interested in was some grated cheese and several slices of cucumber. Nothing else took her fancy. Sam wasn't at all perturbed by it. She simply shrugged and insisted it was her daughter's current phase.

While Lara was pouring another cup of Earl Grey for herself and her companion, she commented, "Thank you for coming by the way."

"Thank you for the invitation. We haven't quite found a routine yet since we've been back in London, and I was going a little stir-crazy in the apartment with Tiny Tot Tomb Raider over there."

That did have a nice ring to it.

Lara replaced the teapot on the tray. "You know you're welcome here, anytime?"

Sam cocked an eyebrow over the lip of her cup. "What? Is eccentric adventurer Lara Croft lonely?"

The archaeologist lowered herself into her seat. "Never. I'm far too busy for that. But this house is huge. There's more than enough space for you. For all three of you if you like. You can have a wing each."

While Lara sipped her tea, Sam piped up. "So, I heard about that business in Egypt. You seem to have yourself a proper rival now, to give you a run for your relics as it were?"

"Carter Bell, yes. He's actually very good – excellent credentials, solid instincts. Of course, I should start to expect up-and-comers. Heirs to the kingdom and all that. I'm not exactly as young as I once was."

"Lara, you're what? Thirty four? You seriously think you're past your prime? Look at you. It's really not fair."

Lara blushed as she leaned back in her chair. She had been coolly accepting appreciative comments for years. When Sam made the remarks, however, it was different. It turned the world-famous Tomb Raider into a self-conscious teenager without fail.

Just then, though, Sam seemed to be curiously coy of the pair. She brushed her bob behind her ear as she continued, "I have to confess. It's not just Hannah. I'm kind of crushing on you right now. Stunning, elegant and utterly in control. I feel like I'm having tea with a tiger."

"Oh, for heaven's sake." Lara slapped her thigh, incredulous. She was trying to ignore how hot her skin was feeling. "You know I'm still the same socially awkward bookworm you first met?"

Sam didn't stop. "You look amazing."

Given the day's activity, Lara was sitting cross-legged in riding breeches and knee-high boots. She'd put her hair up in a French braid to keep it out the way. She thought it was all rather practical and uninteresting but the look Sam was giving her suggested otherwise.

Lara's heart thudded jarringly.

To dampen down on a sudden ridiculous hope, she fired back a return complement. "As do you."

Sam waved her hand dismissively. "Please. All I am these days is a frazzled working mommy."

"You always take my breath away, Sam."

That brought a flush to the filmmaker's cheeks. "Lara Croft, stop flirting with me."

She'd been one hundred percent sincere but if that was how Sam was reading the exchange, the archaeologist would play along. She flashed some teeth. "You started it. Besides, you know you like it."

"I am a respectable married woman."

Lara gave her own Hatshepsut snort.

Sam tactfully ignored her. She lifted her chin. "...A respectable married woman who is asking her playgirl best friend if there is anyone special in her life...?"

Lara laughed. "It is truly the End Times if Samantha Nishimura is calling herself respectable. That's a load of twaddle. The stories I could tell about your college exploits..."

Sam winked, "Not within earshot of my daughter, please."

Lara grinned, "I'm far less of a playgirl now than you were back then."

Sam lowered her voice. "Bitch, please."

"Please..."

The filmmaker attempted a conversational redirect away from herself. "So, I see you're avoiding the question? Are you seeing anyone?"

Lara rolled her eyes.

The inevitable question. Even wild child Sam, once she had married and spawned, wasn't immune to what Lara had labelled the Conformist Hive Mind. She herself seemed to be resistant to its effects, but she had watched so many others around her uncritically succumb to social expectation as if it was a tapeworm that every year inched further and further into their brain.

The archaeologist raised her cup again to her lips.

"I saw someone just last week, actually."

"Really?" Sam's eyes gleamed at the prospect of gossip.

"A translator. We've worked together a few times, and, well, I was a little out of practice with my tongue. She helped get me up to speed."

"Lara!" The sound that escaped the filmmaker's lips was half gasp, half laugh.

"I didn't take you for a prude, Sam."

"So, is there potential there?"

Lara shrugged, "I like her and we have fun together, but she knows what it is. It's like I've told you, I only play for sport."

It had taken a few years to build up the courage – even longer than it took her to embrace the full scope of the playing field again – but eventually the archaeologist had come out to her best friend about her rather egalitarian attitude to lovers. As well as the pragmatic approach she had adopted to satisfying her needs when they niggled.

It turned out that Sam wasn't at all surprised. She had sighed, "Babe, I always thought you were either asexual or horribly closeted. Now do you want the names of the eligible queer women I know or not?"

The filmmaker sighed as well at Lara's present day admission. She reached for her camera, flipped open the preview window and turned it to face her companion. On the screen, Lara was on horseback with Hannah. They were cantering, and the archaeologist was showing the little girl how to hold the reins.

"Regardless of what you may think," Sam commented, "it really suits you, you know."

"What does?"

"You with a sprog."

God, another Hive Mind flare-up.

Lara frowned, "I'd be a terrible mother."

"I don't think so."

Lara glanced in the direction of Hatshepsut. "Dark horse, Sam. That's what I am; that's what I'll always be. Motherhood would be an ill fit. I'm much better equipped to be a fun aunt who always spoils her charge. Besides, I already have a family. You and Steven and Hannah."

People she loved deeply and who lived safely across the Pond for half of the year, until work drew them back to the UK. If any enemies were watching Lara's interactions, Sam, Steven and Hannah were situated just far enough on the periphery to be considered inconsequential. Lara had carefully cultivated the illusion that there was nobody she truly cared about. If her foes wanted to hurt her, they had to hurt *her*. She had set it up so there were no vicarious alternatives – platonic or otherwise.

"Well," Sam coughed. "That family's about to get a little bigger."

That snapped Lara away from her dark thoughts. "What?!"

"I'm pregnant..." The filmmaker looked slightly sad. "It wasn't exactly planned, but oh well."

"How long?"

"Just passed the two month mark."

Keyed by Sam's ambivalent expression, Lara found her voice lilting up. "Congratulations?"

Her companion laughed. "Yeah. It's a good thing. Except for another two to three years of diapers and sleepless nights." She rolled her eyes to the sky, "Steven is ecstatic of course. The whole chest-thumping *look how virile I am even when I'm not trying* thing."

Lara smiled, "I'm happy for the both of you, Sam."

She genuinely was. The surprise was like razor wire being dragged through her ribs, but the fact she could share such moments with Sam was a gift. If her life was a display case, for five years there had been a gaping, grating hole where her best friend – the love of her life – used to sit.

Then Lara had recovered that lost treasure, and slotted it back into place. Miraculously, it was free of the damage she had done when she tugged it from the case the first time. The priceless artefact was where it was meant to be, and it deserved to be cherished every day even if she forbid herself from caressing it.

After tea they ambled through the gardens, appreciating the roses and hedge sculptures in the afternoon light.

Lara and Sam walked side by side.

Hannah scampered ahead, ever the boisterous puppy until her batteries ran suddenly dead.

Sam called after her daughter, "Sweetheart, don't run off too far, alright?"

"Yes, Mommy."

Snark glinted beneath the obedience in her voice.

Lara smirked at her former flatmate, "She seems to be becoming quite the handful?"

"You have no idea." Sam scowled, "I think it's karma for the hard time I gave my parents. I bet the next one is going to be even worse."

They laughed together.

The back of Sam's hand brushed against Lara's, and the archaeologist's skin prickled.

She was aware that she lived as Midas now. Fabulously wealthy. Admired. Lusted after. But she could never really touch anyone.

As a result, she was painfully aware from that point of her desire to take Sam's fingers in hers, and continue their stroll physically united.

She tried to distract herself from the longing with other thoughts. Thoughts about how grateful she should be.

Simply to have Sam in her life, for one thing. They had even worked together on a few projects, fulfilling the vows of their bright-eyed and bushy-tailed student days.

There were other things to be thankful for too.

At times her life felt like a constant performance. Icy sneers or fiery snarls were expected of her; and they admittedly produced results. But she was no actress, and sustaining such a formidable persona was exhausting.

Here though, as on isolated expeditions, she could cast off the costume.

Intimidating Lara Croft could lounge around in panda slippers and eat Nutella straight out of the bottle for breakfast, and no one was the wiser.

Croft Manor was her haven. And tranquil moments like this elevated it to Nirvana.

Though most days she still doubted that she deserved even the most fleeting moments of contentment.

She was a killer after all. She still was. She had retained a volcanic temper, and she routinely took the lives of the men, beasts and monsters that tried to stop her achieving her objectives. She had also seen the Hell awaiting her. She wasn't sure that she wouldn't end up there again after the next curtain drop, so life's pleasures were to be enjoyed as much as the marvellous truths of this world were to be uncovered.

Sam broke Lara's contemplative silence. "So where to next for the great Tomb Raider?"

"Have you ever heard of Themiscyra?"

"Didn't Jennifer Lawrence star in a movie set there?"

Lara pulled a face.

Sam laughed, "Sorry, I forgot to renew my subscription to Dust and Dirt Monthly. Care to fill me in?"

"It's a long lost island..."

It was Sam's turn to pull a face. "Christ, *again*? You haven't had enough of those?"

"It's a long lost island of women..."

Sam chuckled, "Oh, I can see why you'd want to go there then."

The cheeky comment needed Lara. "I still bonk guys, you know."

"On occasion. But you love the ladies, Lara Croft; when you're not crawling through the bowels of some long-forgotten temple that is."

"Yes, well, that is my one true love... Ruins rarely disappoint."

"I guess that would be one of the biggest problems for you. Never finding anyone who could keep up with you."

Lara suddenly felt very tired. "There have been a few who could. But it never worked it for one reason or other."

Mostly because my heart wasn't in it. Or their heart was elsewhere.

Sam stopped. She turned to face her companion. "Lara, it's alright to admit you feel lonely, you know? You can tell me if you are."

"I'm not lonely, Sam."

No more than usual. Loneliness had been her most frequent companion since childhood.

"I was sorry to hear about Winston."

It took a moment for Lara to find her emotional equilibrium after that. It had been four months, but her eyes still started to sting whenever she thought of the old man. She tried to rationalise it as she always did; addressing her feet in the process. Her words were stuttered to begin with, before the needle found its groove.

"In a way it was a relief. He was very senile towards the end. He kept insisting I was my mother, and asking where little lady Lara was. But I just didn't have the heart to retire him. I found him face down in the walk-in freezer. He died serving the Crofts; I think he would have wanted to go out like that."

She had cradled his body for half an hour before dialling 999.

"Hillary is more than competent but I miss the dodderly old fart. He was family. As much as you are."

"Oh, sweetie." Sam seized her companion in a hug.

Lara squeezed back.

Winston's death hadn't been a surprise, but the intensity of the remorse she felt was. She had vowed to never let the emotion grapple her again, but regret sprang out and smothered her even as she still held him.

For her entire life, Winston had been there; caring for her. After Roth, he was the closest thing she had to a father. And she had mistreated him more often than not. Dismissing him, teasing him, taking full advantage of the master-servant relationship. She recalled times where she dumped duffel bags stuffed with filthy expedition clothes in his arms before she traipsed off to the library. Never once did she tell him what he meant to her. She had taken him for granted in the worst possible way.

The fact she was the only one at his funeral didn't make up for that.

And with Winston gone, Lara had to acknowledge that she'd lost the last link to her parents. The butler had been a living repository of stories about their relationship, and her father's youth – an endless stream of tales about what Richard Croft was like at his daughter's age.

Sam was truly the only person Lara had left – from that time in her life before...

The archaeologist released the hug and just looked at her companion.

Sam's perceptiveness pierced straight through the stare to its source.

The filmmaker said sadly, "You know, I realised the other day it's been thirteen years since Yamatai. Can you believe that?"

Lara remembered a pair of grinning girls, giddy with excitement as the SS Endurance finally passed out of the harbour and into open water.

"So much has changed since then," the Englishwoman murmured.

"I owe you everything, Lara."

The archaeologist winced, "Sam, so much was my fault."

"No." Lara's hand was seized and pressed to Sam's warm belly. The American woman frowned, "No more blame. I thought we were over that? If it hadn't been for you, I wouldn't have lived to meet Steven. I wouldn't have lived to have my children. None of it would have happened if it wasn't for your sacrifices."

Pay the price...

Sam continued, "And if it wasn't simply for your belief in me, I doubt I would have my career. I would have listened to everyone who said I was kidding myself, and quit then and there."

Everything that I am and have now is testament to your goodness, regardless of what you stupidly insist in thinking about yourself."

Lara gazed down at their entwined fingers, with Sam's wedding band on top.

For a moment she let herself imagine that she had put the ring there and that this blissful scene was her everyday – a fantasy a few degrees offset from reality.

Just as lies were more convincing when they branched off from truth, imaginings were more powerful when the possibility had a real world counterpart.

Lara shook her head to clear it of tantalising possibility.

"You may not remember it, Sam, but you saved me too. You gave me a second chance when I thought I would die as I lived. In darkness."

It was a morbid admission but it prompted a soft smile from her companion.

"I don't think I have ever said it before, but I love you, Lara. I don't think you realise how much."

"Oh, I think I do."

The archaeologist leaned in.

And pressed her lips to Sam's forehead.

In a nifty little ballroom twirl, the filmmaker rolled into her friend. The move ended with her slotted under Lara's arm, and her own arms closed around the Englishwoman's waist.

Lara had to chuckle. Motherhood certainly hadn't sapped Sam of her playful spontaneity.

Together, linked, they looked off in the direction of the setting sun as they had done years previously.

Lara felt Sam relax entirely against her. She was practically purring.

Just then, the archaeologist felt exactly the same.

Just a few moments more... Please.

"We always made one helluva team, Croft."

"We still do, Nishimura. And we always will."
