

Lara Croft Tomb Raider:

Come, Shadows, and Meet Your Maker!

*An Original Tomb Raider Tale Written by Hunter Wolfe*

What a glorious day!" Lara exclaimed as she sat innocently on her Ducati. "A few clouds, a steady breeze, even a nice downfall of sunlight for a slight tan. A woman couldn't ask for a better day to do some...exploring."

She was in Louisiana and the weather had turned out to be better than she had hoped for. The forecast called for a giant rainstorm that would ravage all of the southern Louisianan swamplands; it appeared, though, as if the weatherman had been wrong.

Lara nudged the kickstand down on her bike and then hopped off gracefully. She was wearing a black tank top, long denim jeans and of course, her signature backpack. A pair of circular sunglasses was resting on the bridge of Lara's nose and her dark brunette hair was pulled back in a formal braid.

Lara stood on the edge of the road she'd traveled, gazing across the swamp, the cypress trees, the Spanish moss that shrouded the northern faces of floating logs, and the white mist that lay precariously on the surface of the swampy waters.

Alligators inhabited the waters, lurking in the depths and waiting for the weary animal, or human, to walk by and become prey to their monstrous jaws and acid-frothing stomachs. But Lara could handle them. She had her backpack along, inside was a machete, a medi-pack, her grappling hook, several other more...dangerous items, and a small bottle of English Tea Winston had brewed for her that very morning.

Her pistols hung lithely around her waist, nuzzled inside their respective harnesses. Her backpack also carried unlimited ammunition for her pistols, but who cares about specifics?

With a brief release of air, Lara pulled out her machete and immersed her body into the murky waters of the Louisianan swamp.

And ambience of moans and creaking trees emanated around the water, bouncing off the trees and echoing through Lara's ears. Suddenly, she was a bit nervous, so she recited her notes to herself in an attempt to stay focused and not be frightened by a stray sound or movement.

"Back in the 1900's, Louisiana was the center of a country secretly ruled by Witchdoctors. They brought plagues and darkness upon the picturesque landscape, altering the

rolling hills into notorious swamplands. Their power was greater than any government or army in the world.

Their source of power was the sacred Talisman of Shadows, a charm no larger than an average bracelet, but containing thousands of years of dark energy. But when the power of the Witchdoctor tribes turned against them, the masses of Witchdoctors were killed by its mysterious energy and only few were not affected. The Talisman of Shadows was then lost to the swamps of Louisiana.

"A man by the name of Jebediah Hawthorn ran a riverboat up the Mississippi. It was called *The Shirley Queen*, the most grand and extravagant boat to ever ride the Mississippi waves. While porting in Louisiana he happened upon the Talisman which wafted between a patch of rocks on the untamed side of the river, according to his journal dating fifty two years back. But legend says that the night they left the port, a storm blew them off course and *The Shirley Queen* vanished into the swamps of Louisiana forever.

"And so the Talisman of Shadows was lost forever too. But recent findings have discovered strange signals emitting from somewhere off an undiscovered branch of the Mississippi cutting through the Louisianan swamps.' And I believe that this is where the riverboat is..."

Lara stopped in her tracks as something moved in the distance. Small blips were in motion in the misty swamp and approaching fast. Lara's pistols were already trained on the closest one. If she shot in vein, she might alert any nearby creatures as well. If she didn't, she might find herself prey to some *very* hungry gators.

*Splash!*

The water behind her erupted as an alligator snuck up on her and launched itself in her direction. She dodged right as fast as she could before firing at the gator. Lara had been successful as it landed into the water aside her giving a window of opportunity to open fire on its exposed underbelly. The first alligator went topside.

Two more alligators approached her from the left.

"Why hello there, uglies!" she said smiling.

Firing at their eyes, the alligators roared in searing pain. A maroon liquid oozed from their eye sockets as they lashed around in terror before receding into the misty waters. One of their tails caught Lara's right leg flipping her into the swamp.

"Ugh!" she exclaimed as the pain of the gator's tail set in. One last alligator approached her from the mist. It billowed across the air, launching itself right on top of Lara. She managed to roll out of the way with hasty speed. As she pulled out her pistols, the alligator roared and then whipped her hands with its tail. Each pistol sank into the water.

"Oh, no you d-don't!" Lara cried out as she wrestled the alligator. She wrapped her arms around the flat of the beast's stomach and squeezed her thighs against its hind. It tossed her around a bit, and then Lara saw the machete sticking out of a nearby cypress tree. She let go of the gator and pulled the machete out with ease, raised it above her head and then sank it through the alligator's head, the familiar maroon ooze now spitting out onto its hard skin.

Rolling off the gator, which now floated upside down on the surface she felt around the murky ground for her pistols and placed them back into their harnesses.

"Those gators are always the charmers," Lara said breathing heavily.

After pulling the machete from the gator's head, Lara walked on through the dense swamp. The mist thickened and the cypress trees became more decrepit and discolored as she traveled deeper into the swamp.

After three hours of walking the treacherous swamp, something began to change. The treetops were denser and let in little to no light, the crickets and the bullfrogs made no noise and the waters became even more terrifying!

*Whispers echoed over the water.*

Lara brought up her pistols and pointed them to her left and right checking both sides frequently and stopping dead in her tracks. The water was now waist high.

"Is anyone out there?" Lara called.

The whispers stopped.

Something moved among the cypress trees several meters back.

Black shadows popped from the water and grabbed Lara, pulling her down! They were a tangled mess around her arms and legs, binding them together. Her hair was thrown in front of her face as she was pulled into the water. She let out a short scream which was silenced as the water flooded into her mouth that was held open by the dark figures.

On the brink of death, Lara made a final attempt to dispatch the Shadows. Although she found that when she tried to grab one, her hand would pass through them!

And then, just as she was about to go into unconsciousness, the shadow holding open her mouth exploded into the black flames! Lara looked up to see an arrow lit with purple and black flames whizzing right over her face. It stuck into the Shadow and then, as the Shadow let go and rushed frantically to pull it out, exploded into a million black flames that sent the other Shadows scattering. It dropped a small smoky black orb that Lara was able to pick up and pack away fast.

She got to her feet unsteadily and was greeted by a, "Come on!"

A woman, short and round in the waist, with black beaded hair and abnormally colored scraps of clothes motioned with her hand for Lara to follow. She was wielding a bow and a quiver hung on her back with more of the lit arrows.

Even *more* interesting was the decrepit riverboat that lay shrouded in mist behind her. Twenty meters ahead was *The Shirley Queen*, half sunken in deep water and the other half rising into the air. Several stone monoliths circled around the boat. The woman was just inside the boundary of monoliths.

"Hurry up, they're coming! Once you are inside da' circle da' Shadows will not be able to touch you!" said the mysterious woman.

Lara turning her head to see hundreds of Shadows now coming for her, gliding over the surface of the water and flying across the faces of the dense cypress trees. She waded fast through the water, approaching one of the monoliths.

The Shadows were closer, reaching out for her, trying to kill her again.

The woman grabbed Lara by her hand and pulled her in just in time. Multiple pouncing Shadows hit the perimeter of the monolith border and, in a flash of blue, exploded into more black flames.

Lara and the woman climbed onto the sloped deck and laid down flat, both breathing heavily from the intense combat.

"My name is Lara..." she breathed out in staccato gasps. "And you are?"

The woman climbed to her feet, "Da; name's Ramona. And you and I are going to be friends for a *long* time."

Lara rose and said, "What do you mean by that?"

"All in due time, my dear," said a chuckling Ramona.

Ramona proceeded through a broken doorway leading into the hull. It opened into the ruined ballroom. Lara followed. The room was at a strange angle, as was the entire riverboat, the bow extending into the air and the stern descending beneath the water. Tables with moth-eaten tablecloths were scattered around the room amidst tipped chairs and broken glasses, with wine that had stained the threadbare carpet of a small dining space. She noted a makeshift bed composed of old potato sacks and some cut-out carpeting fortified behind a grouping of stacked tables.

Ramona set her bow and quiver down on the table and picked up an old bottle of wine. After popping off the cork, she sat down and propped her feet up on another chair, taking a drink from the stained bottle.

"Have you lived here long?" Lara asked, examining a faded painting in a broken frame nearby.

Ramona sipped her wine and said, "I have no idea. I lost count after da' first few years. What year is it?"

Lara relayed the year.

"Oh my, yes. It *has* been a long time. Let me tell you my story, Lara, if you'll listen. When I was a little girl, my daddy said that we was going on a riverboat to celebrate my momma's birthday. I was so excited when I stepped on board *The Shirley Queen*. All of da' men was dressed in fine suits and a man played a piano that you could hear all over da' river. It was so wonderful.

"But da' boat went off course along the river that night. And then, a thick fog formed across the decks and then da' Shadows came. My father died protecting my momma. That's when I discovered my momma's dark secret. She took her hands and drained da' life forces from da' remaining survivors and then created the monoliths that encircle *The Shirley Queen*. It was then that I learned that my momma was practiced in da' dark arts! Da' ship had sunken halfway into da' swamps by then, and I was da' last one alive. No family. No friends. Not even da' Shadows could end my misery."

She took another swig and then dropped the empty bottle to the table. It rolled off the edge and shattered on the ground. She chuckled softly, drunkenness taking over.

"Well then, sounds like we have some Shadows to take down. Do you know about the Talisman of Shadows?" Lara asked.

"Oh yes. Look at this." Ramona pulled out a small book with an old binding and an animal skin cover from one of her large pockets. "This was my momma's magic book. It is how I learned to make that enchanted fire that destroys da' Shadows. And from what this books says, da' Talisman is da' artifact that made those beings. Look here:

#### Talisman of Shadows

Origins: Unknown

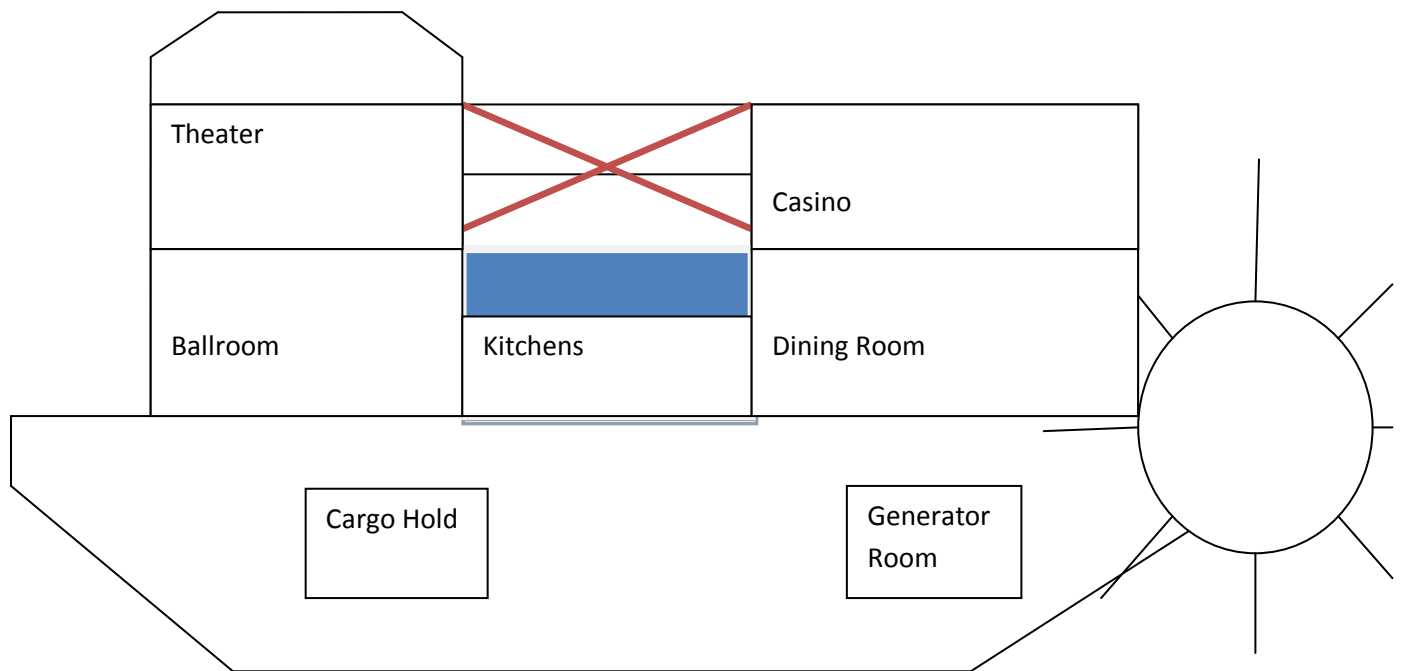
*A dark charm made by the Witchdoctors of another age. It contains the dark energies of thousands of pitiful souls. Its powers far surpass the darkness and allows its user to create beings with hearts as black as midnight. Darkness is drawn to this mystical artifact.*

"I've searched all over *myside* of da' riverboat...but I never found no Talisman of Shadows. I know it's here, though. I can feel its dark powers," noted Ramona.

"What do you mean *your* side of the riverboat? You've never explored the submerged rooms?" asked Lara.

"During da' attack, da' Shadows blew something up da' Kitchens and da' water flooded da' middle row of rooms on two decks. Da' other side of da' ship, da' submerged part, is still intact. Look, I drew a map a few months ago."

She pulled out another paper from her pocket to reveal a scribbled map of the riverboat and its flooded parts.



"I don't understand," Lara began. "Only the kitchens are flooded. Why not travel through the rooms between the theater and the casino? The water didn't breach them."

Ramona sat up and leaned forward in her chair to look at the map which Lara was now holding. "Because," Ramona said pointing to the two rooms above the kitchens, "During da' attack, da' Shadows destroyed something vital in da' kitchens and da' entire place exploded. Both doors are barricaded; there is no getting through."

"And the Cargo Hold?" Lara questioned.

Ramona paused.



"Ramona, have you tried the Cargo Hold yet?"

"Da' Cargo Hold is a death trap. I hear things from down there every now and then. All of da' generators and whatnot are down there, still on da' fritz. A few weeks ago, da' electricity even came back on for a brief few seconds!"

"Well, I think I'll be able to manage. Can you take me to the Cargo Hold entrance?" Lara asked tightening her gun belt.

"It's your death wish, Lara."

"Don't worry, I've made plenty of death wishes in my time," she smirked.

"Follow me, then."

Ramona stumbled to her feet and then grabbed her magical bow and quiver, tethering an arrow in preparation. She brushed her hair behind her head and then muttered words in the ancient tongue she had picked up from her mother's book. The tethered arrow lit with the familiar purple and black flame, and Ramona nodded at Lara to proceed.

They exited the ballroom through the same gap in the wall and then turned on the deck to follow the path running along the boat's starboard side. Lara could see that further down, the path sloped into the water. She could also see the silhouettes of Shadows teeming outside the monolithic border.

"Don't worry, Ramona. I will get you out of this swamp if it's the last thing I do," Lara assured her.

"If you say so, Lara. But I wouldn't make any...wah?!"

An explosion shattered one of the monoliths. It burst into Raging fragments of fire and stone and then all of the other monoliths began to emit dark green and black rays of spinning lights. The borders were down. They were unprotected.

And Shadows began to pour through towards *The Shirley Queen*.

"Lara! Where da' path goes into da' water is a door into da' ship. Take it. Turn right in da' hallway and open da' second door on da' left. It has a valve so you'll need to turn hard. Follow da' corridor to da' Cargo Hold and try to activate da' generators!"

"Ramona, are you crazy? I'm not about to leave you out here. I promised to get you out of this godforsaken swamp, and I didn't mean dead. Come with me!"

"No! I'll hold down da' fort. Just hurry. If you can turn da' lights on, da' Shadows won't be as strong! Now go!" Ramona yelled to Lara.

Lara faltered for a moment, realizing the Shadows were closing in on *The Shirley Queen*. Then she nodded as Ramona began to shoot arrows at rapid speed towards the Shadows who exploded, in turn.

"Be careful!" Ramona shouted. "Now GO!"

Lara turned and ran down to where the path sloped into the water. There was the door, just as Ramona had said. She stumbled inside, turned right following the hallway to the second door on the left. She twisted the valve door hard as Shadows began racing down the hallway. Lara grunted as she opened the difficult door and then slammed it shut behind her. The Shadows would have to find another way in before getting to her.

"And now, my job is only going to get lovelier," she said pulling out her pistols and holding them in an intimidating manner by her sides. She realized her pistols wouldn't help her with the Shadows, so she put them back in their holsters and continued down a metal staircase, an eerie creak with every step.

She turned a corner at the bottom of the staircase. It was pitch black now, so she pulled a flashlight from her pack and turned it on, illuminating the walls only to reveal that bloodstains were splattered everywhere. A foul odor filled her nose.

Most of the doors, she noted, hung open or slightly ajar, leading into engine rooms and cargo bays categorized by type of item. Some rooms held even Model-T cars and even an old wagon which stood boldly against the other items in the room. Another room was lined with crates that held perishable food items for the kitchen workers to use. She kept to the main hallway, though, searching for the Generator Room.

After a few minutes of searching, her light came across a door placed at the end of the hallway. It read, on a rusty gold sign: "GENERATOR ROOM: WORKERS ONLY."

"I might not be a worker, but I don't think anybody can stop me from entering now," she chuckled.

*SMASH! CRASH! SNAP!*

Lara turned swiftly to see the door to the Cargo Hold blast down the staircase she'd been on minutes before.

"Except for them," she added.

Lara bolted into the generator room, slamming the door shut behind her. She spun her flashlight around the room which glowed through several pipes, grates, and a system of pipes lining the ceiling until she came across the main generator. Metal rungs, built into one of the walls, led to a hatch that was slightly ajar. She could hear the Shadows slamming on the door behind her.

"Now, this generator hasn't been used in ages. If it was damaged during the attack, and I try to turn it back on, it will most likely blow up the ship. Maybe I'll get lucky and the lights will turn on..."

*BANG! BANG!*

"But it doesn't seem I have many options. Now where is that blasted switch!"

It was tucked away inside of an electric box faceted on the right side of the generator bulk. Open the box's door, its hinges snapped, so she threw the door off to the side.

*BANG! CRASH! SLAM!*

"I hope this works!" she called out, grasping the small lever inside and yanking it upwards into the on position. *The Shirley Queen* suddenly emitted a low hum that echoed all around her. The lights began to flicker and small lights lining the room's grates began to glow faintly. Then the lights turned on at full blast, illuminating the riverboat plenty more than Lara's flashlight had.

"Thank you, Edison!" Lara shouted out happily. As she turned towards the door, the banging and smashing finally ended-

"The Shadows must've receded back outside," she thought aloud. Now, for a short time, she and Ramona were safe. Lara turned, thankful, and climbed the rungs in the wall earlier, vaulting up professionally through the hatch door. She was now in a closet, blood stains on the wall and dead maggots littering a barren corpse slumped against the wall.

"Lovely..." she grimaced.

She exited the closet and found herself in the dining room. Tables were flipped and their table clothes were drastically moth-eaten. Fine glass windows were impossible to see out of between the mixture of grime, dirt, and blood that splattered their faces. A grand piano, multiple leys cracked or missing, slumped at an odd angle towards the ground. A slow stream of water leaked from the blockaded kitchens across the floor through cracks in the debris. A hole in the wall by the debris had food from what seemed to be a pantry pouring out across the area.

She walked to the piano and let her hand slide across its remaining keys. A strange emotion began to overcome her. It was grief of the strangest type. And then, a flash of white caught Lara's peripherals and she twisted, pulling out her pistols, training them on the vision.

It was a ghost. A woman in an evening dress, a pearl necklace across her neck and a smile etched upon her pale white face. She seemed to look straight through Lara.

"Excuse me; I don't think we've met." Lara tried to start a conversation, but the ghost yielded no response until a man, pale and dressed his finest, passed through Lara's body and joined the woman's arm with his. They proceeded across the room, where they sat on a table which had magically upturned. Smashed and rusty ware became like new. Suddenly, the room reinvented itself and Lara watched as maybe a hundred ghosts gathered in harmony in the dining room. The tables were organized in rooms; shards of glass fitted themselves together again in their respective window frames, the piano stood upright once more, being played by a smiling old man dressed in his finest suit. A row of glass windows in the rear boasted a view of the wheel that moved the ship along the river. The room began to lose its dreamy look and transform into reality. Music from the piano snapped and the harmonious laughs of the ferry guests began to echo around Lara's ears. It was as if she'd been transported back in time.

"Excuse me, ma'am. Do you have a seat tonight in one of *The Shirley Queen's* dinner tables?" asked a young waiter.

"No," Lara said, shocked by the situation. Something strange was occurring on *The Shirley Queen*.

"Well then, allow me to escort you," he said with a friendly smile. "There is a very lonely and single gentleman over in the back table."

"That's okay. I think I'll just—"

But her words had not been heard as the man took her hand and lead her to a table with not just a very lonely and single man, but a very *attractive* man.

"Why hello there, miss. Are you dining with me this fine evening?" the man asked her kindly.

"I suppose so," Lara jested at the waiter, who'd begun to return to the Kitchens.

"So what are you doing this evening all alone and without a man?" he asked her.

"Oh...I wouldn't know where to begin. How about yourself Mr.....?" Lara's voice trailed.

"Jebediah, ma'am. Jebediah Hawthorn. And yourself?"

"Lara Croft."

"Well, Ms. Croft, it's lovely to have you dining with me tonight. In this room, I mean. The architect I had hired to build this riverboat made sure to put his best effort and hardest work into its construction. Do you know, these tables were crafted by—"

The lights flickered off, and the wheel, visible from the row of windows lining the rear of the room nearby, suddenly slowed and then came to a complete halt. The solemn whispers from the passengers alerted Lara as to what was going on. She was about to see the last night of *The Shirley Queen*.

"I'm sorry, Lara. I must go attend to this. What in blazes is happening?" He stood up to walk away, leaving Lara alone at the table. And then, the night's events began. Shadows came through the windows and began to flood into the dining room. The horrified screams of the innocent passengers filled the entire riverboat.

Captain Jebediah Hawthorn pulled from the inside of his suit the Talisman of Shadows in all of its glory. The power of the Talisman emanated from it as a fiery red glow.

"The Talisman!" Lara shouted.

A crewman sprinted past, but a Shadow reached up from the surface of the floor and grabbed the cuff of his shirt. It pulled down, slamming the man's head into the ground, causing blood to pour out of his head, ending his short-lived life. Other similar scenarios were occurring

around Lara. A Shadow slit one passenger's throat with a shard of broken glass. Another man was picked up and thrown into the piano, the leg of the instrument broke and the piano came crashing to the floor. A woman and child knelt behind a table until the table was overturned and smashed against them. The both fell to the ground.

"This is madness!" Lara shouted out.

Then, a black woman with beaded hair, a casual dress and jewelry lining her arms, raced to the Captain. A young girl and man waited close by as if under a protective umbrella. The Shadows were not coming towards them. The woman held Ramona's book in her one hand and a sharp knife in the other.

"That must be Ramona's mother!" Lara exclaimed under her breath. She realized she was about to witness everything Ramona had told her of. Ramona's mother took the knife and stabbed the Captain in his chest, the maroon liquid gushing from the sever, and his eyes rolled to the back of her head.

"I'm sorry," Lara could hear Ramona's mother whisper, tears forming in her eyes.

"Now run!" she shouted at the young Ramona and her father. Lara followed them out of the dining area and into the hall leading to the kitchens. They were halfway to the kitchens when an explosion shook the walls and ground.

Lara stopped and watched as the Shadows, passing through her, culminated around Ramona and her mother, who kept the Talisman tight in her grip. The father, however, had fallen outside the protective radius and the Shadows were showing no mercy in smashing his head against the countertop.

"Papa! PAPA!" Ramona cried out.

Lara was standing now, tears forming in her eyes. The scene was terrible, and she knew what was going to happen next.

"Ramona, my darling. Take my book of magic and run! I will hold them off. Hide in the ballroom, or wherever da' Shadows cannot see you and you will be safe. I have protected you as best as I can," she said, streams of tears streaking her sullen face.

"But, Mama—"

"Go, Ramona!" she shouted this time. "Go and don't turn back!"

Ramona grabbed her mother's book of dark spells and ran through the kitchens. Suddenly, another explosion occurred. This time, water flooded into the ship. Ramona turned at the end of the kitchens and watched as her mother put her hands in the air, summoning the power of the Talisman of Shadows. Through intact windows that were almost submerged through the surface of the river, Lara and Ramona could both make out the stone monoliths forming in all of their dark beauty.

Ramona turned as her mother collapsed to the ground, the water rising to the top of the room. The last thing Lara saw in the vision was the Talisman of Shadows as its illuminating red glow stopped shining.

And then Lara was pulled back to reality. She was inside the dining room, sprawled on the floor. The rows of glass windows that had shattered all of those years before were shattered, the bloodstains were old again, the wood was warped, tables turned, and chairs flipped. The room was at an angle in the water, so much that an air bubble had trapped all of the air inside this room since the night of the attack. The hallway door was sealed tight, Lara noted, due to the water pressure on the other side.

"There it is!" exclaimed Lara gazing at the Talisman of Shadows which was lying amidst a bundle of moth-eaten curtains. Lara slid across the floor to the very bottom; the wheel that propelled the ship hadn't activated when the generator was turned on, but she could still see it just below the surface.

She grabbed the Talisman, which she guessed must've given her the vision she'd seen just moments before. Its main surface was a skull and thick strings with beads and feathers and bones hung from it. The red glow was very, very dim in the sockets where the skull's eyes would have been.

"All of the years and it still had a little juice left! But why would it show me that? Maybe something I saw will help me out. Let's see, I saw Ramona and...her mother! Her mother cast a spell to expel the Shadows. Maybe another spell can get rid of them! I need to get this to Ramona. Perhaps the spell to vanquish the Shadows is in her book!"

Lara quickly looked for a way out. She couldn't go back into the cargo hold. Then she noticed a blown hole in the ceiling above leading into the Casino. "Always good to have a

grapple gun!" she said. After putting the Talisman of Shadows in her backpack, she pulled out her grapple gun. High up above was a chandelier visible on the casino ceiling; she clicked on the trigger of her gun and the grapple cord shot up tangling itself securely around the chandelier. Lara tugged it once to make sure it was stable, and then began to climb up into the Casino.

She pulled herself onto the casino floor and clicked on the retract button on her grapple gun. The magnetism was turned off and the cord untangled itself automatically from the chandelier.

She was now in the casino, a large room with toppled slots machines, cards strewn across the floor and, old poker chips resting in mounds of moth-eaten clothes.

"Well, isn't this a shame. All this money is just sitting right here..." She decided that once she rescued Ramona, the several million dollars in poker chips lying around would set her for the rest of her life in the real world. After a few minutes of hunting down poker chips and gathering them into her backpack, she sealed the top pack's leather flap and turned towards a set of double glass doors that once gave entry for all of *The Shirley Queen's* passengers.

The double doors were blocked by a significant amount of debris, but that wasn't anything a well aimed grenade couldn't handle! Lara had recently added low-detonation grenades to her artillery and it was time to see if they would pay off.

She pulled one from her pack, chucked it in the debris, found cover behind a fallen slot table, and pressed the large red button on her remote trigger. An explosion ensued and the powerful explosives blew the debris apart. Flames licked what remained of the retro casino carpeting and shattered the nearby windows. "Hmmm...Winston was correct. These *do* pack a punch!"

Lara peered out on the mysterious upper decks. The explosion that had killed Ramona's mother had completely torn apart the middle section of *The Shirley Queen*. The top rooms that led to the theater were blown apart, revealing the tops of the tall trees that surrounded the boat. The frames of what used to be rooms were still there, but the upper deck was void of walls, windows, and a ceiling. She had a clear view of the surrounding swamps, the remaining monoliths and the Shadows that teemed towards the boat again. They had already adjusted to the light—.

BOOM!



A monolith on the starboard side exploded, showering rock around the upper deck. She covered her head with her arms.

BOOM!

Another exploded. Lara grunted as a small shower of rock shards rained down on her as the monoliths all began to explode in rays of black and green twirling beams of light. A small addition of purple flecks spat on the portside. Ramona was still holding them off with her bow as they flooded through the magical border, exploding upon impact from the magical arrows.

Shadows began to climb up the sides of *The Shirley Queen*, and suddenly the procession of arrows ceased. "Ramona!" Lara shouted. What if Ramona had been hurt?

Sprinting across the deck, Shadows began to crawl onto the upper decks and chase after Lara. Since the upper deck was elevated into the treetops, Lara had to brush several thick branches out of the way.

She hadn't any idea where she was going. It looked as if there once was a staircase down into the riverboat on the side of the deck, but it was blocked off now by blood-stained debris.

Just ahead was a large glass dome; beneath it, the theater. Lara had an idea to get rid of the Shadows pursuing her. The dome had several metal bars that created the frame, each one fitting its own slab of glass. Leaping in the air, Lara landed with accuracy on top of one of the metal bars, pulled out her pistols and, as the Shadows jumped onto the dome, shot the glass slabs one by one. Each Shadow shrieked as it fell into the theater below.

Now she had to get down to Ramona. She had the Talisman of Shadows, but only Ramona's magic book could activate it.

"Time for a swan dive," she said with a smirk etched across her face.

She sprinted forward and dove off the top of the glass dome and into the swamp, arching her back perfectly and meeting her arms together precisely at the right moment before entering the water.

She ascended to the surface, swam across to *The Shirley Queen*, and climbed onto its surface. Ramona was kneeling on the ground, surrounded by a circle of Shadows. They were probably debating which chunk of meat they were going to gouge from her first.

"Ramona! The book!" Lara cried out. "I need your mother's book!"

"Hurry, Lara!"

Ramona pulled out the magic book and slid it underneath the Shadows and over to Lara. Lara began to flip through the pages, Shadows circling around her, as well.

"Here it is!" she exclaimed in a mixture of excitement and anticipation.

Lara read the spell that would save them from the Shadows.

Nothing happened.

The Shadows moved in closer.

"Wait! The Talisman isn't working because it isn't charged! It feeds off the dark energies, of course!"

Lara pulled from her pack the dark, black orb that she'd picked up while entering the monoliths earlier and inserted it into the mouth of the Talisman of Shadows.

The Shadows pounced for them...

"Dark forces, hear my cry, in the place where demons lie!" and then she ordered her command, as the book of magic instructed. "Vanquish the Shadows from this place!" Lara yelled at the top of her lungs as several Shadows pinned her to the ground.

The Talisman did nothing.

Suddenly, it began to glow a vibrant maroon red. A thin beam of white light shot from the eye sockets of the talisman's skull, illuminating the night sky, clearing the shadowed treetops, and filling the swamps with a blissful light. Lara closed her eyes as the white light's radius grew larger, encompassing the entire Louisianan swamp.

All was still.

All was quiet.

She reluctantly opened her eyes, peering across the deck for signs of the Shadows. But there was nothing.

*The Shirley Queen* rested on a clear, blue river that expanded along the horizon. For some strange reason, the sun was setting, casting a golden-hour glow along the river. The boat was like new again. The blood stains were gone and there were no signs of damage to the sleek wood that lined the decks. The windows shined while reflecting from the sunset. Then Lara noticed small silver and gold sparkles raining down on the ship.

Hundreds of ghosts, like the ones in her vision, began to materialize in their tailcoats, broaches, hairpins, dresses, and top hats. Ramona lay across the deck. Lara's feet scuffled against the floorboards as she stumbled over. She leaned over her, kneeling down.

"Ramona!" she cried out, noting the blood stain under the side where a Shadow had stabbed her. Ramona was wheezing violently, taking her last breaths. Tears streaked her eyes.

"It...It's time, Lara. I'm going...going home. Make...make very sure that...nobody ever gets the Talisman of Shadows...Lara..."

"Ramona!" But it was done. Ramona lay silently. "Agh!" Lara shouted angrily.

And then, Ramona's spirit, a white form of her as a young girl, rose from her earthly body. Lara stared in awe as she ran across the deck and jumped into the warm embrace of her father's ghost. Her mother held them tight to them both.

Ramona looked at Lara and silently mouthed the words, "*Thank you.*"

*The Shirley Queen* began to fly up into the sky. As it ascended, it took the darkness of the swamp away. The muddy grounds transformed into a lush rolling landscape centered with a small lake. The cypress trees grew tall and stretched to the sky casting innocent shadows across the sunset hills. A crisp fall wind rolled over the landscape, refreshing its inhabitants for the first time in many years.

Lara, who had magically been left on the ground, watched as *The Shirley Queen* rose into the sky and continued forth into the sunset until, at the very end of her vision, the ship flashed streaks of gold and *The Shirley Queen* was gone forever; the ghosts trapped for all of those years were finally at rest.

Lara sat quietly with her journal on her lap as the sun almost faded from the horizon.

*"My adventures in Louisiana ended in tragedy. Ramona was slaughtered by the Shadows and I was not able to save her. But then again, maybe I did. Ramona was a prisoner to the swamp for so many long years. And what made it worse was that she had been all alone. Even I, who travels solo on the majority of my travels, cannot imagine eternal solitude like Ramona had.*

*"The Shirley Queen is gone and so is the mystery behind it. Ramona's dying words were for me to protect the Talisman of Shadows from evil hands. And that I will make sure to accomplish. All that is left of my adventure is the Talisman and Ramona's book of spells, which I will lock away inside of the vault back home.*

*"If there is one thing I learned today....it's the sacrifice one pays to be alone. Maybe I've gone about exploring all wrong. Taking silly risks, and all that. Maybe I should learn to depend on someone else. No...how very absurd. Forget that. I'm Lara Croft, and traveling alone is what I do best."*

It wouldn't be until Lara got back to the manor that she would remember the several million dollars of poker chips she had stashed inside of her backpack...

This is an original Tomb Raider Tale written by Hunter Wolfe and edited by Danie Martin. All of Hunter's Tomb Raider Tales are original works. (2010)