

*L*ara Croft Tomb Raider:

SECRET OF THE LIGHTHOUSE

An Original Tomb Raider Tale by Hunter Wolfe

“Is this it, Zip?”

“Yeah, this is it.”

Lara Croft and her tech-man Zip examined a tall wardrobe backed against the wall of the attic of Croft Manor. Just a week ago Lara had returned from Nepal after destroying the Midgard Serpent. Crews of builders were now re-building her mansion to its former glory and Zip had discovered something that was indeed worth taking a look at.

He held a small gadget in his hands. He pressed a button and held it out to the wardrobe. Lara was surprised to hear a beep emitted from the gadget as she'd been up in the attic at least a hundred times and never had seemed out of the ordinary.

“What is it?”

“There's something behind that thing. Wanna' move it for me?”

“Oh, Zip...aren't you just chivalrous?”

Lara walked across a plank she'd placed just a moment before. The builders were working from the ground up since the blast had shaken the foundation. They'd not yet reached the attic so a gaping hole resided in front of them and the wardrobe.

Lara crossed the plank with no hardship and examined the wardrobe. It was oak, very common. Double-doors were attached to bronze hinges that clasped the side of the hand-crafted borders. She pulled the doors open by two little brass knockers and looked inside.

It smelled, that was for sure. There was a chest in the bottom, same she'd seen before. Hung on a pole at the top were some old jackets from her younger years. Obviously the wardrobe hadn't been opened in years for Winston always disposed of anything not worn.

Donated, of course.

“Same stuff, Zip. What should I be looking for?”

“Well the scanner is saying a magnitude level of seven meaning something in there has an extreme wave of electromagnetic energy. In conclusion you’re looking for an item of about size three because the dimensions of the wardrobe don’t match with the...”

“English, Zip?”

“A switch Ms. Tomb Raider.”

Lara smirked and then flicked on her LCD light. The wardrobe lit with bright illumination, and Lara began her search. She put her hands in the jackets and felt along the back of the wardrobe. Then she kneeled down and opened the chest. It was the same things in here she’d seen years before when exploring the attic. She remembered she’d wanted to tell Winston that it needed cleaning, but then forgot as she had been called moments later from the study. The wardrobe had been untouched since.

Inside the chest were old books. They were children’s stories...but none she’d ever seen...Why would someone’s stories be in this chest? Then, her eyes caught a glimpse of gold inlay. A book, at the very bottom had thin pages lined in gold, like an expensive bible or something.

“Hello.”

She picked it up and looked at it. Roughly three-hundred pages thick, leather cover and dusty beyond compare.

“Well open it already!”

Lara opened the book to find something she hadn’t expected.

A remote control!

“Is that a controller?” Lara asked him.

“Yeah, let me see it.”

She tossed it over the gap with a light overhand throw. Zip caught it with worried hands and then laughed. “Wow! This is cool. You say nobody has been in that thing for years, how many exactly?”

“Well I was only a girl when I had...”

“Fifteen years ago, this stuff didn’t exist. Controllers like this were experimental. This is a special controller designed to send signals halfway around the country. Bad if it serves as a garage-opener” Zip joked.

“There’s a button on the front. Press it.”

He pressed the button, the smile fading from his face. “Battery’s are dead.”

“Can you switch them with that gadget of yours?”

“Maybe...”

Five minutes later, they were in business. Zip pressed the button and a loud *THUNK* sounded across the attic. Lara turned.

It had come from the wardrobe. The wardrobe, as she hadn’t noticed before was pressed very tightly against the wall. Now it was shifted, the scratches on the floor around it proved that easily.

“Looks like Croft Manor is full of surprises,” said Zip.

Lara pulled the wardrobe out, it opened like a door. Then she pushed it into a new passage and it easily fit right into place along the side wall.

“Now we’re talking. Are you coming?”

“Do you find pleasure in pulling me into dark crypts, Lara?”

“Only when we have dark crypts to go into. I’m afraid this is an attic. You’re not afraid of a cob-webbed attic, now are you Zip?”

“Alright, alright. Keep *your* eyes peeled.”

They entered the passage, dust covering the wooden planks of the floor. It was dark, but Lara's light kept it quite bright. Several spiders scurried along the way, obviously running from these unknown predators. Then, the passage stopped. The light revealed a metal door. No hinges. No handles.

"What now?"

Lara pushed her hair back behind her ears as she examined the door. Then, she stood up straight and said over her shoulder, "Press that button again."

Zip, controller in hand pressed the button softly. A low hiss sounded from the metal door, and then it opened inward revealing a small broom-cupboard-sized room. In it was a wooden stand with on it a rolled up parchment.

"I'm confused. Why is this here?"

"I have no idea," she said as she closed her hands around the parchment. "Father spent his whole life dedicated to finding Avalon. In his earlier years he'd spent a few years doing digs alongside my grandfather. But...this couldn't be his work. Maybe grandfather? Or maybe...mother."

"What did your mom do anyway?"

"It's a long story." Lara unwrapped the parchment. On it was a map. Of course. Then a hard object rolled off the map and onto the floor stopping by Zip's foot. He picked it up. An orb, glowing blue.

"It looks like we're off on another adventure, Lara."

"Indeed. It looks as if we are."

More secrets.

Lara Croft thought about everything that had been happening over the past year. Mother and Father, Natla, Avalon... She had thought for days now that closure was finally upon her.

And yet someone still had more secrets.

“And the date is...?” Lara asked leaning over Zip as his computer scanned over the face of the map trying to date it.

“Got it...260 BC.”

“That old? It’s so preserved. Most documents and scrolls back from that day and age don’t exist. Even when they do most have ink faded beyond fixing.”

“That metal door must’ve prevented any air from getting out. A perfect preservation chamber.”

Lara picked the map off the scanner top and looked at it. “It’s a map of the Pharos Lighthouse, back in its payday. It’s not there anymore, but as always, I’m expecting it is. It was torn down twice throughout history, a king searching for a lost treasure beneath the surface.”

“How do you intend on finding the treasure with that map though?”

“I think this orb is a key.” Lara was putting her thoughts together now. “An explorer in the late thirteen-hundreds was tortured by pirates then thrown into the depths of Pharos Island. Under the water he saw a great portal of ancient proportions which he wrote in his journal as he escaped his watery grave. Eventually he was murdered by the pirates anyways, but they never found his journal...”

“And who found the journal?”

“*Father?*”

“Well it looks like our mystery man is Richard. How are we getting to Pharos Island?”

Lara turned to look at Zip. He was ready to get moving, alright. “First we need to decipher this map.”

“Decipher? But it’s a map of the lighthouse which isn’t there anymore.”

“No, the dimensions don’t match the research. This is a map of the catacombs.” She examined the map intently now scanning over the squares and rectangles of corridors and potential treasure holds.

“Then we should get moving. Boat or helicopter?”

Lara spotted Winston walking through the hall. He stopped by two construction workers and spoke to them about a vase they were pulling from under some rubble, his finger pointing to an empty desk further down the hall. As he left them, Lara called, “Winston!”

“Yes, Ms. Croft I have the gym in order and the swimming pool cleaned out. I have to say, though, the lights in the gym are due for replacement. One kept flickering so we had to shut down the power there temporarily for a man prone to seizures...”

“No, no, Winston. Zip and I are leaving for Cairo tomorrow. We found a map hidden in a room in the attic that leads to a missing Wonder of the World so we’re leaving for Pharos Island tomorrow morning. Although, I have to make a stop in Cairo to speak with an old friend about the island’s history, though.”

“What! I mean, so soon? Renovations are only halfway through and who’s going to tend to the news-people? Lord knows I can’t handle all those flashing cameras and the devils that turn our words against us.”

“Winston...do you know anything about the map?”

He paused, looked at Lara worriedly, and then shaved his worried face off replacing it with one of happiness. “No, Lara. I just am worried for your wellbeing with Allister gone and...the manor...”

Lara smiled, and then embraced him in a warm hug. Lara dispersed hugs sparingly, but Winston, even since she was a little girl, always got one when he cared for Lara. “I’ll be fine. We’ll be back within the week.”

“Be careful...” Winston said to himself as Lara walked back down the corridor.

CAIRO: DEPARTMENT OF ARCHAEOLOGY

Lara walked into the lobby of the Cairo Department of Archaeology where she had scheduled for an appointment with an old friend. Dr. William Peters was a friend of hers that attended a school near Wimbledon as Lara grew up. By chance, Lara and William had met and instantly became friends, but as time grew on, he had relocated to Egypt to study abroad, as he called it.

Lara hadn’t spoken to him in a good few years, but ancient world wonders was something she was inclined to ask him about. Lara approached the secretary’s desk that sat across the lobby. The floors were tiled in the design of a mosaic of a research expedition and green plants in clay pots resided in several locations around the room. A row of elevators rested behind Lara which would probably take her up to Dr. William.

“Excuse me ma’am. I have an appointment with Dr. William Peters, 2:30 sharp.”

“Ooooh...what a lovely British accent. Tell me...what is someone like you doing all the way out here in Egypt?”

“I’m sorry, but I don’t think interrogation of clients is part of your job description,” Lara retorted. She was wearing a pair of khaki shorts, her pistols tucked away and a

green tank-top to boot. She wore glasses as well, small circular ones that rested at the bottom of her nose, her eyes just visible above the lenses.

“Um...yes. Ms...Croft. Right away. First elevator, second floor, third room on your left.”

“Thank you so much.”

Lara walked back to the elevator, the doors opening automatically. Inside she pressed the necessary buttons and the doors closed. The elevator began to ascend. A window was on the side of the elevator. It opened into the outside, the Nile just beneath her. The center was built along the coast so excavation equipment could easily be shipped to and fro.

The elevator came to a rest on the second floor and Lara quickly began to walk down the hall. Dr. Peters would be able to tell her all about the Lighthouse of Alexandria.

She knocked on the door and waited a moment. There was a soft shuffle inside, and then the door opened to see Lara’s old friend standing before her. He was tall and skinny. His once-pale skin color was obviously gone as he was extremely tan. His green eyes were covered by glasses that had a cord to keep them around his neck. He smiled and then said, “Lara! So good to see you again!”

“And you William,” Lara said with a smile.

“Well come in, come in!” he said. “Don’t want you to wait we have so MUCH to catch up on.”

More than you would imagine.

He sat her down in front of large oak desk where papers were spread out covering every inch of the top. A window was behind the desk’s chair that also revealed the sparkling waters of the Nile.

“So...how’s the high-life of Lara Croft?”

“Could be better. My house is under reconstruction right now. The goddess of Atlantis burnt it down and raided my private collections murdering my friend in the process. Oh, and I discovered my mother in the Celtic underworld possessed by an ancient energy source, I have seen better days.”

“My Lord, I had no idea. The last I heard you’d discovered the fabled Dagger of Xian. A wonderful treasure, I do believe.”

“Yes well, how have you been doing?”

“Just...just...miserable as well. The college that funds my research won’t give me any more money because they think it’s a lost cause to go in search of the Rivers of Anubis.”

Lara would have to look that one up!

“Well. Maybe if you can help me, I can help you in return.”

“Ah yes, you said you’d discovered something. A map, was it?”

Lara pulled her leather pack off of her shoulders and opened it up in her lap. She pulled out the map copy and unfolded it on the desk of front of William.

“Do you know what this is?”

“My Lord, of course I do! This is a map of the catacombs of Pharos Island! Pharos Island, as you know housed the mythical Lighthouse of Alexandria.”

“Yes, but I was wondering if you could tell me anything about it.”

“Well, if it’s research you want, allow me to get it for you!” He stood up and walked over to a shelf where he stood on a stool to reach a large book piled on at the very top. William blew the dust off of it and then laid it down on the desk.

“This book covers everything involving the Pharos Lighthouse. It says here,” and he opened it up to read it to her, ‘June 2nd, 1974. My men and I have dug all around Pharos Island, but to no avail. We believe the site of the lighthouse is in an area of the

island we are restricted from entering. The site is documented under the name Richard Croft. Although it seems vacant, we have reason to believe someone *e/se* is working inside the area and we are determined to discover who.

‘Pharos Lighthouse is estimated at around two-thousand years old having supposedly been built between 280 and 247 BC. Legend tells that within it rests a treasure beyond compare that any man would claim as his own, but legend also claims that the treasure bares a curse upon those who taste its riches.

‘We have reason to believe that several offshore discoveries of sandstone buried beneath the sand indicate the presence of a structure about the size of the lighthouse. Once we can gain clearance, we are sure to find the treasure.’

“So, they really had no idea what they were looking for...did they.”

“No. But they knew the local legends which are, after all, your specialty?”

“Yes. What all do you know about the excavations that went on there?”

“Only that the man named Croft only set up there for a short time. Rumors told that pirates took over the site. But we have no reason to believe they are there any more. After all, that was a good forty years ago.”

“Yes. Well, thank you William. I am hoping to discover something on Pharos Island. If that is indeed true, you can expect to be contacted immediately. Do you know how I can get there?”

“Ah, yes. There is a local tourist ferry that leaves on Wednesdays. If you hurry to the docks you may be able to make it on time.”

“Thank you so much, William.”

“Also a pleasure, Lara,” he responded as they shook hands. Lara stood up, gathered the map copy and put her pack back onto her shoulders. Now she knew two things...her father had indeed had a site around Pharos Island...and Winston knows all about it.”

The sun was covered by the storm clouds in Egypt. It was cold, surprisingly. A chill passed through the Suez Canal. Lara put a tight SOLA wetsuit over her top, and then walked across the deck of the riverboat to Zip who sat with his eyes glued to his computer screen.

“What are you up to now?”

“I’m looking at the prints I made back home of that man’s journal you spoke of and, you’re right! There *are* catacombs down there. It seems as if he already knew about them, but was writing to deceive anyone who might have discovered his journal. And get a load of this...” Lara sat down next to him and examined his screen again.

“Satellite images. Of what?”

“Pharos Island.”

On the screen were images that moved in a slideshow format. Excavation equipment lay scattered around the site where the ‘great portal’ was. Broken and new were everywhere meaning somebody wouldn’t be happy that Lara was dropping by because somebody had set up shop.

“Lovely.”

“Still want to do this?”

“Definitely.”

An employee on the river boat came up to Lara. Zip quickly shut the lid of his computer so as not to imply any funny business. “Excuse me, friends, but there seems to be a problem. It seems there is a ship blocking the way to Pharos Island so Captain Regie has re-coursed us to go to Port Said.”

“A ship?” Lara asked.

“It appears to be...well, never mind. We’ll be turning then.”

He walked away leaving them with no answers. Lara was tempted to get up and demand him he tell the Captain they were GOING to Pharos Island, but instead kept quiet. She was ready to go to Pharos Island...no. She was going to Pharos Island.

“The map and key are water-proofed?”

“Yeah.”

“Weapons and ammo?”

“All in there.”

They looked out in the distance. A freighter rested between them and Pharos Island blocking off the course to the island. First. She would be paying a visit to the intrusion.

She tightened the straps on her pack, and then sprinted towards the starboard side of the ship, jumped atop the railings then swan dived into the water.

“That Lara,” Zip began. “Always likes to make a scene.”

Lara pulled herself up to the halted ship. It was a freighter, designed with a large panel on the back that would fall backwards making a connection from land to the docks. Basically like an automatic plank. At the time, the plank was down and the coast was clear.

She pulled herself onto the panel then quickly sprinted for a collection of fuel barrels sitting aside the railings. Pulling out her pistols and cocking them in one motion, Lara turned her head and waited for any signs of life.

The main hold entrance was a door built into one of the ship's metal walls. The door was slightly ajar. And then something interesting. On the opposite side of the freighter was a cage, tied down than lay hidden behind some crates. Checking to make sure the coast was still clear, Lara followed through with another sprint across the deck. The wind was extra cold, but her SOLA suit did pretty well with keeping her warm.

Light drops of rain tumbled onto Lara's camera as she pulled it from her sealed pack. She pointed it at the cage, and then observed its contents closer. It contained dead remains of what appeared to be humans. Only bones, though. Skulls and bones and a few scraps of clothing.

Something was going on on this freighter...

"This way!"

"I'm comin'. I've been runnin' all day trying to keep the fort held down and now Billy says someone's *on* the ship?"

Lara had already rolled behind the crates, her head peering cautiously around the corner. Two men had come out of the hold door and across the deck to a control box by the plank. One was wearing a cowboy hat and jeans, the other a casual shirt and shorts attire. They each had magnums around their waists, probably loaded, Lara inferred.

"Exactly, if you hadn't been playing solitaire on the mainframe computer, this wouldn't have happened."

"Hey. The quarters are still locked up and the vault is secure. I've got three men on it now."

"And the...others?"

Others?

"Don't worry...they're below deck too. Right now, we just have to search out the ship for this girl. Everythin's gonna' be just fine..."

Lara rolled out, one pistol aimed at each man.

“I suggest you take me to your Captain or I’ll have to blow the skin off your skulls so you look like them behind me.” The men both had hands on their magnums, but a raised eyebrow from Lara silently suggested they go nowhere near their waists.

She got up and walked to them.

“Hands on your heads, boys.” They easily complied and Lara grabbed the magnums from their harnesses throwing them over the edge of the freighter.

“I told you Billy was right.”

“Shut up, dude. It’s against our code to talk to her.”

“Code? What are you, pirates?” Lara managed to chuckle out.

They both looked at each other...then at her. “Oh my word, you’ve got to be kidding me. Such fine gentleman as yourselves? Pirates!?” Lara began to chuckle some more as she hit each one with the butt of her gun on their heads. They fell down in unison. Whatever pirates existed on the island back then were here now.

“Time for a little trip below deck.”

With the bodies hidden behind the crates from before, Lara had headed into the bowels of the ship. Her father had supposedly worked on Pharos Island and these ‘pirates’ must have gathered enough information about the excavation site that they probably knew more about her father’s work than she did.

But the one had clarified a mainframe computer was below deck, so there she was going. As she went further in passing the locked entrance to the sleeping quarters and doors leading into engine rooms and power rooms, the heavy rain began to pour down up top.

She was in a hallway now, metal, of course, with ornate objects hung on the walls. Swords and shields, maps and walking sticks. At the end of the wall, about ten feet away was a turn. Voices echoed from around the bend.

Lara stopped dead in her tracks.

“Shhhhh! It could be Illiandra!”

“Or one of those god-awful monsters from the cells.”

“Either way, talking is going to let whatever’s in this ship know where you two are. And more importantly, me. So shut it!”

“Now hey now, just because Illiandra hasn’t assigned YOU swabbing duty for the past month doesn’t make you any more special than me.”

Lara decided to have some fun. It seemed the Pirate’s Vault was around the corner. “AGGGGGGGHHHHHHHHHHHHH!” Lara screamed at the top of her lungs then fired five shots around her in different places to make it seem like this, Illiandra, was being attacked.

Gunfire let loose from the other hall. Right on cue.

“Go check it out.”

“Fine...because somebody has to,” one said cockily.

Hurried footsteps.

Lara scrambled for her tranquilizer in her pack.

They came closer.

Her fingers grasped the handle.

Shadows along the floor.

“What the...” Lara fired a tranquilizer at the man’s chest. Immediately into the bloodstream. The others came around the corner. Lara fired at the second, and then

smacked her tranquilizer across the third's face. He fell to the ground with his unconscious 'laddies'.

She bent down and grabbed the gun from the third pulling him close to her face.

"Hello there. Not your day for tea, is it?"

She pushed him up against the wall, and then kicked his friends' guns away. "Tell me who you are."

"I tell you nothing!" he spat out at her.

"Listen to me. I need to get to Pharos Island, and you're going to take me. We either chat now, or when we're up by the ship's wheel with a hundred foot drop between you and the water."

He reluctantly nodded his head...

Zip sighed as he scurried for shelter from the pouring rain. He hated rain. It was cold and made you feel drained. It also didn't exactly pair up with electronic devices such as his seven-thousand dollar laptop computer. It had only been a few drops coming down when Lara left for the freighter.

And now he was wet.

AND his seven-thousand dollar laptop computer.

A shout emitted from the ocean turned Zip to look over the side. A speed-boat was approaching...and fast. '*What on earth?*' Zip thought. It was approaching the river boat very fast. Others who had hurried under the boat's central awning turned to see an old man throwing a line over the boat's railings. Some were obviously worried. Others curious.

“Zip!” the man called again. Zip squinted through the rain to see a very familiar butler calling his name in the storm.

“Winston? What the hell are you doin’ here?”

“There’s no time! Lara is in grave danger!”

Zip nodded

“Where’s your Captain?”

“Off on the island. Please don’t throw me into the water. The storms bring the crocs out?”

“Mind your manners or you’ll simply have to walk the plank,” Lara retorted. She’d dealt with a very large variety of “sorry excuses for criminals”...but these guys topped them all.

Because the ship being anchored, the whole control deck was empty.

Good.

The wheel was large and wooden, the old one probably replaced for a more ‘scurvy’ appearance. In front of the control boards was a wall of windows that looked out into the distance between Cairo and Pharos Island.

“How do I turn this on?”

“The switch, over there, activates the engines.” Lara pried a switch into the up position. Immediately, a sound began of grinding from below. Several lights began to glow on the control board.

“Next?” The man was leaning back on the back wall by the door they’d entered through. He wouldn’t dare try to keep from her.

“Flip the switches with the glowing green buttons on the left panel.”

She flipped three switches. A low hum sounded throughout the deck. They were in good condition.

“Next?”

“Land ho, Captain.”

She laughed.

Lara turned the large wheel. They were heading for Pharos Island. Lara silently promised herself she'd discover just what her father was doing on Pharos Island. Had he already found the treasure? Or had he sworn to protect it by hiding the map and key? Soon she would know.

“See ya'!”

But not too soon...

Lara whipped around and fired at the now-sealed door to the cabin. She cursed herself for trusting him, and then she ran for the door and whipped it open. Before her was the metal stairwell she came up in. Rain now covered the entire deck...as well as twenty or so pairs of pirate boots. It looked like confrontation time.

“Fire!”

A woman's voice!?

Lara hit the deck as the bullets passed over where she had stood moments before. She jumped up and rolled back into the cabin pressing herself tightly against the wall, pistols at the ready.

“Lara Croft! Haha...the irony. I take it you're after the treasure too?”

“Not precisely!” she shouted. “Maybe if we talked face to face I'd give you what you need.”

“Don’t tell me you have the key, Lara Croft.”

So it was a key after all!

Lara pulled the orb from her pack and held it out the door. The pirates fired at her hand so she quickly withdrew it. “Cease!” the woman shouted at the pirates angrily.

“Ready to talk?”

“Aye.” *I suppose that means yes...*

Lara walked out onto the stairwell. A woman stood in a clearing through the crowd of pirates. She was of african-american decent with black dreadlocks, beads of dark colors on each. She had a bandana and a sword at her waist, sheathed. Her eyes were a piercing brown. “My name...is Captain Illiandra. And you are Lara Croft, I presume?”

“It’s a bit too formal for a pirate to be introducing herself...is it not?”

“I like to consider us...treasure hunters.”

“Well the loot you’ve raided from ships hanging in your halls down there suggest you all are common thieves.”

“But are you not a Tomb *Raider*, Ms. Croft.”

“I hunt treasures for other people AND with legal documents. There is a difference. But if you’re done interrogating me I’d surely like to get to business.”

“Fine. You give me the key and I let you live.”

“Or we do it my way. You’ve been to the island. What do you know about archaeologists who did work on the island?”

“Well any there now are all dead.”

“Before, Illiandra!”

“Well, I know somewhere along the line, a man found the two pieces of the key and I stole this one from him...you wouldn’t know him though.” She pulled out a red orb from her pocket.

“Try me.”

Just then, a chunk of metal hit the floor by the pirates. They all looked as it came from out of the water. For a moment, only the sound of the pouring rain, the crashing waves and the rolling metal could be heard.

“Is that a...”

“...Grenade!!!”

Lara jumped back into the room again as flames lit up the port side of the ship. Lara came out now with her guns aimed at the pirates. She fired two shots instantly killing two of them and then a third aimed at Illiandra. It missed her by a hair and instead flew into the chest of the pirate behind her.

“Kill her!”

“I don’t think so!” came an additional voice.

Zip came out of the flames of the ship’s side with an assault rifle in hand. He fired at, well, pretty much wherever he saw motion. This created a great distraction.

Illiandra was busy firing at a second character aboard the ship. *Winston!*

“Long time no see, Illiandra!”

“Did Demitri send you my regards?” Illiandra spat back firing at Winston. Winston ducked behind some barrels, his body already shrouded by a cloud of black and white smoke.

“Don’t worry. You’ll see him soon enough!” Winston fired out with a magnum he must’ve picked up from a body. Illiandra lashed to her side, only to be hit.

She instantly began to see her life flash before her eyes, but only from paranoia. She saw the pack containing the red key pour out its contents onto the floor, the key included.

She hadn't been hit after all. "NOOOO!" she screamed out. She dove for the key which rolled right into the front of Lara's boot that had come down with immediate pressure to keep it in place. Just as Illiandra looked up to see the person she *knew* was Lara, Lara swung her other foot down...

...Right into Illiandra's face.

There was only a little blood when Lara, Zip and Winston escaped the ship on one of the life rafts. The other pirates must've receded into the bowels of the ship, the flames dying out from the diminishing rain.

Lara still wondered what treasures laid in Illiandra vault and what 'others' those pirates had been talking about...

PHAROS ISLAND BEACH

Lara looked out at sea. The pirates were coming out on speedboats which meant they didn't have much time. Lara had so many questions to ask Winston now like, 'How do you know Illiandra' and 'What did you do before employment under my father?'...but she knew time was something that wasn't on her side this time.

If those pirates reached them three before they got to whatever treasure was in the ruins of the Pharos Lighthouse, there would definitely be trouble.

Then Lara took a glance at Pharos Island. It was sandy, with two large hills far north and a valley with a stream that cut the island in two. Palm trees were scattered across the beach and the rain wasn't coming down as hard now. Tall bushes popped

out of the rocky ground at random places leaving a sense of exploration in the pit of Lara's stomach.

"Winston, do you know where the excavation site is?"

"Lara...I'm afraid I can tell you no more than this. Can you respect that?"

"Winston...I've traveled halfway across the world to discover that this might really involve your work as well as Father's. You and Illiandra obviously know each other, so it's inevitable that I'll ask you eventually. But right now we just need to get to this treasure before those pirates do."

"Two miles around the island...that way, and we'll be there. Are you sure you want to do this?"

"Winston...I'm very sure now."

PHAROS ISLAND BEACH

"They went this way," Illiandra said to her forty-three pirates. They were all armed with various weapons, several carrying explosives in backpacks and others with the old-fashioned swords.

The freighter was parked on the beach. Off in the distance, the Egyptian Security Officers sped through the receding storm to the beach where the ship that caused such a local disturbance resided. Upon exploring the ship, although, they would find something much scarier than armed pirate mercenaries. They would find something much, much worse...as well as an engine room rigged with explosives.

“Understand this...you may kill Croft and her black companion, but leave the old man to me. We have some unfinished business to settle!” Illiandra commanded to her crew.

They all replied with a notorious, “Yeah!”

PHAROS LIGHTHOUSE EXCAVATION CENTER

“Is that it?” Zip asked Lara as they saw a large metal crane off in the distance.

“It would appear so. Keep your weapons tight boys, the pirates might be on land vehicles or something.”

“Aye, aye Captain.”

“Very funny Zip.”

They jogged to the crane, coming to an immediate halt. Lara did NOT expect this. A large crater had been formed on the shore. Or, a dug-out hole. Three metal walls were built into the sides of the crater. One was a dam that blocked off the inflow or outflow of water, completely isolating the site from the sea. Between the three walls, each several hundred feet long and about eighty feet high, was what remained of the excavation Zip had showed her. The randomly scattered objects were now thrown into separate piles down there. The pirates must've taken her father's excavation equipment and shipped it down into the crater for their own use.

“Did the pirates do this?”

“I guess so. We really underestimated their potential...but this isn't what the site looked like when you showed it to me. Those images must've been from when Father ran the site.”

“And there’s the ‘great portal’ I presume?”

“Why yes it is...”

The fourth wall built into the land was mostly dirt and grime, seaweed hanging from every nook and cranny. But in the center was a great circular doorway. On it was a Chinese dragon carved into its face with a line separating the two semicircular doors. The dragon’s tongue was stuck out of the carving creating a small hollow inside of the dragon’s mouth.

An elevator rested in the corner of the crater by the great door going from the top of the site down into the crater. Sparks were shooting from snapped cables at the top though so it obviously wasn’t in operation. But the crane...

“Zip...can you activate that crane?”

“You’re crazy...that thing does not look reliable at...”

“They’re coming!” Winston shouted. They both stopped talking, listening for as far as they could hear across the island. Then a gunshot echoed all the way back to them, native birds scattering in the air.

“We haven’t much time...can you activate it?”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

Zip climbed into the compartment which sat on a barren piece of land, only sand. Not very reliable at all. But it would have to do. The hook suspended from the crane itself would be her ticket down into the crater. It lay on the edge of the crater, not hung its full length and sprawled across the crater-side landscape.

“You two...are you coming?” Lara asked them tightening the laces of her boots and the pistols on her side.

“We’ll hold down the fort, Lara. The treasure is just inside. It shouldn’t take you too long in there to...to...what are you going to do in there anyways?”

“I’ll figure something out. But the treasure deserves to go to William and his excavators. If I have to temporarily...erm, trash the place, then so be it.”

“Well the best of luck to you. We’ll fend off the pirates until you get out.”

“Okay...be careful.” Lara felt bad for leaving them...but she’d feel even worse if those pirates got their dirty hands on such an important piece of history...whatever that was...

“It’s moving, Lara! GET ON ALREADY!”

This was true. The faded yellow crane was suspended over the crater-side and the slack cable was being dragged towards the edge. Lara sprinted for it as it began to fall down the crater. Then she jumped and grasped the cord with all her might, using all the muscles in her fingers to hold on to its thick circumference.

Soon enough, she was down into the crater, Winston and Zip up along the top somewhere. Piles of metal debris and digging equipment were scattered around the base. But what Lara needed was the ladder reaching from the base to the dragon’s mouth. It seems Illiandra had already tried to enter the Catacombs of Pharos.

“Hello there,” she said towards the dragon statue.

Lara climbed the ladder to the mouth of the red door and picked out the two keys from her pocket. She put them both in the hollowed area...but nothing.

“Come on.”

She pushed them in harder...

...Still nothing...

Wait a second. In Chinese myth, the dragon represents unity...togetherness. She pulled out the red and the blue orbs and with a quick, “Hope this works,” smashed the two orbs together. With a flash of purple light, a larger, purple orb formed which flung itself into the dragon’s mouth.

The dragon's eyes lit purple, and then its tail, which formed the circumference of the circular door, began to dismount from its foundation. The dragon began to vanish into a purple smoke which puffed out of existence leaving behind no trace of it being there at all.

"A vanishing seal. What will the ancients think of next?"

A gold knocker now hung from the place where the dragon's mouth had been. Lara pulled, the great door opening slightly. She jumped from the ladder, landing with a loud THUD and then pulled the entire door open in one swift motion knocking the ladder down into a pile of rubble next to her.

As did most ancient doors, an age-old breeze of age-old air wafted through the space filling Lara's head with a feeling of anxiety...

She was in the catacombs of the Pharos Lighthouse!

TOP FLOOR OF EXCAVATION SITE

"Winston...are you seeing this?"

"Yes...*but this isn't the first time*," Winston whispered to himself. The stone dragon had just vanished and Lara had already entered the catacombs. It was so ironic, the situation. After all those years and Winston was back at where it all started.

"You know...I'd like to go into one of those tombs someday...oh God!" A gunshot was heard from twenty or so yards away out in the arid beaches. It was fired at them, but missed by several yards rebounding off the crane behind them. Zip and Winston both turned to look and see the pirates about a quarter mile away on the nearby beach.

The pirates were here!

“Guns ready, Zip. I’ll walk you through this.”

“I sure as hell hope so, man. Where did you learn to fight anyways?”

They jumped behind some bushes as the army of scallywags crept up from the shore. Little did they notice Iliandra sneaking around the front line and swinging down the crane cable with her intense agility. Iliandra sprinted into the catacombs of the Pharos Lighthouse in an attempt to, not only beat Lara to the prize...but kill her where she stood...

CATACOMBS

Lara Croft loved the feel of adventure and the discovery of what lay lost for thousands of years. She had walked right into the heart of the biggest vault she had ever seen in her life.

True to its name, the Catacombs of Pharos had walls lined with hollows for coffins of all shapes and sizes. Each coffin had a name carved onto it and piles of gold mounded in front of each and every hollow filling the corridors with a magnificent glow. She had already begun to see famous explorers and pirates with their legacy laying on the ground before them.

She pulled out her camera and pressed the play button. “What I’ve stepped into in the catacombs is not simply just catacombs, but a vault filled with the treasures of ancient explorers. It seems as if when they died, their treasures were placed here, with their bodies. Legends of any curse are still yet undiscovered as I haven’t seemed to be affected by anything yet. Hello...what is this?”

Lara approached a door at the far end of the corridor. It was made of solid gold with inscriptions translated from different languages across its surface. Lara picked one out, in Grecian, and began to speak aloud into the camera again.

“It reads, ‘Only those who have wielded the ancient keys may proceed through to the truth.’ Of course I was allowed in, so why don’t I try to enter.”

“Because if you do...we will slaughter you...”

Lara whipped around fast, her guns drawn. The coffins were open and the skeletons inside were up and, so to speak, breathing. They had swords they must’ve picked up from their individual treasure heaps and scraps of cloth that had managed to be preserved for so many years.

They looked vicious, but for some reason were not attacking her.

“What are you?”

“We are the thieves who inhabit this place. You trespass on our ancient resting grounds and expect to take the treasure? Leave now and we will spare your life.”

They all shook their heads in unison, they looked at Lara.

“Sorry...time to meet the present, chaps.”

Lara unloaded bullets into each skeleton, the bones falling and snapping and shattering around the corridor. Two monstrosities from behind crept through the crowd with spears which they threw at her. She ducked, one spear sticking into the wall behind her, and the other collided with the golden door.

Finally they all lay scattered across the floor, their bones mixed with the treasures of their pasts. Lara blew the smoke from the top of her pistols, and then stuck her guns back into their holsters.

Lara, anxiety coursing through her mind opened the golden doors with a simple push with both of her dirty hands. As she gazed in upon the treasure room's beauty, she blew a lock of hair out of her face and pushed it back, enjoying every moment she could stare upon the beauty of her latest discovery.

The golden doors emptied into a chasm which did not have the typical stone walls she expected. Instead, fragments of the Pharos Lighthouse from thousands of years before had been built into the walls of the circular chasm, torches lit for eternity hung evenly around the walls of the chamber.

More and more heaps of treasures, relics and artifacts mounded high in the room, all surrounding a central structure that reached from the base to the ceiling about a hundred feet up or so. The central structure was a pillar of stone with ornate carvings on it.

“Beautiful.”

Lara, in awe approached the stone pillar with its multiple carvings and drawings upon its surface. Each seemed to tell the tale of a different explorer who had hidden their legacy within the catacombs of Pharos. She came across a portion of the text that read: ‘Catacombs of Pharos, Treasury of Thieves. Once built to provide light to those who sailed the ocean wide, the lighthouse finds its eternal resting place down under the water from whence it came.’

Then, on the opposite side of the pillar was something she hadn't expected. Another hollowed out area built into the pillar housed a strange orb, similar to the purple one she had used by combining the keys. It was pure white though, lights of different colors spinning around its surface.

“This must be what caused those skeletons to come to life. I've read about it, why could I not remember? The Orb of Pharos. Only those who could enter the catacombs were worthy enough to touch it without consequence. The keys were made of the same energy. This explains those people on the freighter! Illiandra must've allowed others to

touch the key...others who the legend claims would not be worthy of touching it. And the side effects cursed them...thank goodness I didn't run into them on the ship."

"You know...you are a persistent woman."

Lara jumped out from the pillar, crouching though with her guns ready.

"How did you get past Winston and Zip? Are they alright?!" Lara demanded.

"Oh Lara...of course they are. The nincompoops I call pirates are very stupid. They couldn't take out two people if they wanted to. I snuck ahead, smart one. So I see you've discovered the famed Orb of Pharos. A prize worth any bounty."

"Yes...and it would seem you would use it for the wrong purposes as you did with the keys. How many men down in that ship have been cursed by you? Ten? Twenty?"

"A few. Imagine their lives Lara. They mutate, nails turning sharp, eyes bloodshot. Their veins turn black and show across their skin. They go crazy down there because, unlike us, they were not worthy of the Orb."

"You are despicable."

"I know. But that's the pirate game Ms. Croft. Learn it."

"So what now? You'll take the Orb back to your men...back to the world and use its powers when you feel like it?"

"Why not. But first...I'll ask you to move."

"I don't think so."

"Fine then, Lara Croft. You can die now. I was going to wait until after I got the orb, but what's a little...agh!"

Lara had already fired at Illiandra. One shot directly hit her in the shoulder, the other colliding with a treasure heap behind them. "Agh! I'm going to slaughter you!"

Illiandra pulled out her sword, and then she raced for Lara. Lara stood and fired at Illiandra. Illiandra used her blade and expertly blocked each bullet with her sword. Then when close enough, she slashed for Lara's waist. Lara, not sure what to do brought her pistol down, the blade cutting slightly into the trigger of her gun.

It had missed Lara's finger by an inch. Lara brought a fist into Illiandra's face, and she fell backwards until she could regain her balance. Her nose bled a little, but not enough to slow her down. She came right back at Lara.

This time, Lara rolled around behind the pillar as the sword cut into the side. It had gone for Lara's head but hit the pillar when swung at the wrong angle.

"Try again, Captain."

Swiftly Lara reached into the hollow of the pillar and pulled out the Orb of Pharos.

"That's mine!" Illiandra screamed. Again she swung towards Lara's head. Lara ducked as it went into the pillar again, this time stuck. Lara swung up with her fist into Illiandra's gut which sent her flying backwards onto the ground.

"You want the treasure, Illiandra? Take it. Let's see if you are still worthy!" Lara threw the Orb of Pharos at Illiandra. She caught it, and then the orb went black. The colors went on the fritz and began to, instead, spin around her.

"What is this? No! You didn't play fair, Lara! You didn't play fair!!"

"Pirates don't play fair."

The lights began to darken, and then the transformation began. Her nails indeed got long and her eyes went bloodshot. Her back hunched and her hair began to fall out, her ears pointed and her body became scrawny.

"NOOOO! GET IT OFF ME!!! I'M WORTHY. I'M WORTHY!!!" Illiandra screamed as her skin began to turn pale and disgusting.

Unexpectedly, the ground began to shake. It seemed as if the thieves had set up a failsafe system so the Orb could not be stolen. Lara watched as an unconscious Illiandra lay next to the treasure she sought with such hunger.

“Nobody ever deserves that pain again. Rest in peace, Illiandra.” Lara fired a single shot at the Orb of Pharos which shattered into hundreds of shards, the lights turning a harsh white light.

Chunks of the ceiling began to fall, and Lara raced out through the tunnels as the white light caused her to close her eyes. She almost ran into the walls and tripped several times, but as she approached the great doors, she smiled through squinted eyes and gritted teeth as she jumped out into the excavation site unharmed, the white light evaporating into nothingness.

TOP OF EXCAVATION SITE

“Winston...I...I’m almost out of ammo. There are still more of them!” Winston ducked behind the bushes and ran out to a body that lay on the ground and unhooking the backpack off of his back.

“What the heck are you thinkin’!? You want to get killed!” Zip yelled. Several bullets sped by them reminding them to stay further down. Winston unzipped the pack to find inside grenades. Sweet. Glorious. Grenades.

“You’d have thought they’d used their own on us by now,” Winston said. He pulled the trigger and threw it out a large grouping of palm trees. “GET DOWN!” One had time to say just before it blew seven or so away into oblivion.

Winston and Zip jumped to their feet and began firing at every moving thing. Finally...they were done. The pirates were all dead, or had fled into the desert landscape of the island. The battle was won.

“Well I see you took care of this one, boys,” said Lara coming from the crane cable which was still swinging from her climb up.

Boom!!!

A pillar of dust and trees and smoke and fire burst into the air from the crater. Lara didn't turn, but Winston and Zip seemed quite shocked. *Lara enjoyed that one.*

“Yeah, and now there's a hundred tons of gold and silver brought up to the surface.”

“Arrangements have already been made...I contacted William Peters on the way up. His team of excavators will be on their way here ASAP.”

“Illiandra...is she?” Winston asked solemnly.

“I'm sorry. Whatever happened between you and her...it's over now,” Lara assured.

It's far from over my dear Lara.

“Lara. Uhhh...it looks like the police are on their merry way.”

“Those police...always late to the show.”

Just as the police arrived on the beach, the trigger detonated a bit too early. The freighter blew up harming nobody at all. The legacy of Captain Illiandra was one that would never be remembered. The Pharos Lighthouse and the Orb were almost gone from history. Although William would find the pieces of the lighthouse, he would never find the orb. It was just another site needing excavation.

It was just one more job done...for Lara Croft: Tomb Raider.

The doors of Yale University's historical wing were locked tight as Professor Hikes left for his old car in the parking lot. It had been a long day what with three lectures and two instructive meetings for a student-led digs in South America.

But as he slipped his keys into the key slot of the driver's side door to officially end his busy day, he only glimpsed the red-headed woman slipping through the once-locked doors.

Professor Hikes was reluctant to turn back for the building, but forced himself to despite his conscious's objection. He left his briefcase down next to the car door and cautiously approached the wing entrance. The door opened as if never shut, creaking very quietly until it stopped against the interior wall.

He walked as silently and stealthily as possible through the historical wing until he came to his office door...unlocked as well. Then he, with all of his courage, opened the door to find the woman sitting in his chair at his very own oak desk with her hands on his computer keyboard.

Her face was covered by the shadows of the dark room and she wore a dark cat suit. "Who are you?" Professor Hikes asked.

"I...am Madeline Hovan."

PART I. END