

*L*ara Croft Tomb Raider:

WHAT HAPPENED TO MADELINE HOVAN

An original Tomb Raider Tale by Hunter Wolfe

Lara checked her watch. 9:30 AM. Any second now, the security officers would change shifts around the perimeter of the Zephyr Estates. Lara was in the outskirts of London, England, her home, where a band of thieves resided inside a run-down manor. Just this afternoon they had stolen the Silver Relic of Nepal from the great British Museum.

And of course, the museum had called Lara.

It wasn't much of "welcome-back-to-home" Lara had received when the museum had left three messages on her answering machine. She was quite annoyed, in fact. There were police in London! Other archaeologists who specialized in her field. Why was it so hard for them to pick out a regular team of cops to bust through Zephyr Estates and apprehend the villains themselves?

She had no idea.

So she lay in the bushes at the bottom of the brick wall that surrounded the estate. "9:30," Zip had told her. "Change of guards. You got that?"

Her black attire covered everything but her face. Lara stood upright and cleaned the dirt off her shirt as well as a small red bug that had been crawling all around her back for as long as she'd been down there. The spot she had chosen along the wall was where a large crack had formed running from top to bottom. Easy to climb and get in fast.

Taking a deep breath, Lara began to ascend into Zephyr Estates.

THUD

The drop from the top of the wall to the bottom had been too loud. If the guard due west of her had been but another three feet closer, he would have heard it easily. Lara examined the estates in a low crouch. The guards were changing shifts...right on time. The manor in the center of the area was very, very old. The shutters on the windows were falling off if they had not yet fallen onto the brown grass. The attic had a

large hole in it where rain must've found its way in. There was a porch with a faded green set of double doors.

But Lara's way of entrance?

The basement.

A small window, still intact resided on the left side of the house hidden by bushes as Lara's reconnaissance had shown. She'd loosened the bolt hours earlier so she could swiftly get it and out unnoticed. The Silver Relic of Nepal was hidden in a room on the first floor; the door blocked off by a table of men playing cards.

Lara began to sprint.

She ran through the darkness until she came towards the front porch. She ducked off to the side of the house and began to follow the wall around. Several stone statues, pieces from the bodies missing provided all the cover she needed as she swept around the side of the house towards the small window.

She got down and looked inside. All clear. Lara had successfully gotten past the guards without breaking a sweat. As much as she wanted to say, "Lovely", she didn't for the obvious reason of blowing her cover.

Lara opened the window outwards and, after switching to a position on her back, slid right into Zephyr Manor. The Zephyr's were a long time aristocratic family about fifty years back. A tragic accident sent the only heirs of the estate into a watery grave as their car swerved into a lake not far away. The house was beautiful then, her data had shown her. But it was too costly for any one person.

Exception of Lara, anyways.

So the band of thieves had set up camp about two weeks ago and stole the Silver Relic of Nepal. No problem.

The basement was rather large, but filled with empty crates and cardboard boxes and newspapers. The carpet had been stripped and the walls were barren stone blocks.

In the corner of the room was a spiral staircase, rusted from the rain water that probably drained down to the basement. What a pity for a home with such great potential.

Lara, now inside, reached for her pack. She pulled out a map of the electrical system. Wires hung from wooden beams in the musty ceiling that went up through holes to in the floor above. She studied the map, and then scanned the ceiling until she found a series of thick cables streaming up into the central corner of the house.

She found the hole where the thick cables ran up through and pulled out a pair of electrical scissors which would prevent her from shocking herself. Quickly she cut the lines and a small BEEP died out like, well loss of power.

The Relic was protected by a glass case with heat sensitive sensors inside that would sound off an alarm when activated. Now there were no sensors and no alarms! Footsteps began upstairs to find the cause of the mess, but Lara wasn't concerned about them and the only exit out of the room.

She looked towards one wall, opposite the wall with the window she'd entered from and walked to it. Little did the ones up top know, but a secret passage resided in the stone bricks that led her straight into the room behind the Relic, but not the one with the card-players.

She examined the brick wall, and then found what she was looking for in the dark. A small hole in the base of the wall ran back into the room. The hole was large enough for an arm to go through, so Lara did just that. She stuck her arm through and grabbed the lever on the other side.

That's right. A lever. One small enough to activate a series of gears and ropes that would rotate the wall just enough that she could fit through. Zip had acquired documents of almost ANY secret passage in London from her very own house to Buckingham Palace.

So Lara pulled the small lever, disgusted at having to put her face so close to the decrepit floor. Then he gears beneath the floor clanked as expected, also causing a stir

upstairs. Lara quickly went into the secret room, where another spiral staircase stood, and kicked the lever with her foot. The passage closed again.

This time, Lara was in total darkness. To keep the passage a secret, the builders had sealed off any light coming into the room so the hole in the floor wasn't obvious. Lara silently said, "Lights, on," and her LCD headset lights flickered to life filling the small room with more light than it had seen in ages.

Lara quickly began to ascend the stairwell until she entered into the dark room above. The hidden room.

Old paintings lined the five walls of the room and a carpet, still fresh lay across the wooden floor. A small pedestal with a bust atop it was in the middle of the room. Those thieves had stolen a priceless artifact when what looked like a decoded painting depicting the Garden of Eden could have sold for twice as much! Or any of the paintings for that matter.

But what Lara wanted was the smallest wall of the five sides. It wasn't really a wall at all, she had discovered, but a sheet of wooden that would slide into the wall next to it if moved in the right position.

Lara moved it easily to reveal the last room where in a high-tech casing on a computer desk resided the Silver Relic of Nepal.

"Lovely."

"Bernard! Get the power back on!"

"I don't think we can, Rich said a cable was snapped!"

"Those damn rodents..." said a card player outside the door. Lara jogged to the caser and pulled out the Relic with no problems. Now Lara would have some fun.

She secured the artifact in her pack and then walked towards the door to the main house. Quietly it opened, the card players had all gotten up and left for other

locations. Lara walked around the table and then down a dark hall that led to the front porch doors.

They would never release she had snuck under them and then walked out the front door with the relic they had spent two weeks trying to steal. She, now at the front door, pulled it open by a small brass handle where before her was the Zephyr Estates. She walked onto the porch and along the dirt path then put a finger to her headset and said, "Alright boys, you can come out now."

Suddenly, a flash of light beamed down to Lara from the dark skies. Sirens began to blare along the outer walls scaring the guards to death. Inside, the thieves were going crazy as police officers began to storm through the front and take on the criminals.

Cop cops burst through the main gates followed by a black van. The cars parked around the perimeter, the buzz of cop-talk echoing around the place. Of course she'd called the police beforehand. Like she would simply let the criminals get away.

Haha. Yeah right.

Zip and the museum curator popped out of the black van and came towards Lara. "You busted em'?" Zip asked her.

"Of course. And here is your very own Silver Relic of Nepal," she said handing the artifact to the curator. "Oh Lara, I know we at the British Museum can always count on you."

"I know," she said under her breath.

"I'm sorry?" The curator asked.

"Oh nothing. Just a cough."

"Lara...we have to talk," Zip said sincerely. Lara looked him in the face and thought to herself, 'And yet *another* mission I sense. Lovely.'

CROFT MANOR

Zip had told her last night something that really perked her ears. Madeline Hovan was an assistant to Lara years back. She was an achieved driver and pilot and was more knowledgeable about ancient cultures than just about everyone except herself. She was also a great friend when Lara needed her.

But then one day she vanished. Madeline Hovan had gone off the charts and, for some reason Lara's resources were not able to find her. And so Madeline Hovan was gone.

But Zip had told her last night of a decrypted file in the Croft Database sent from four years ago by none other than Madeline. And Lara knew she had to find her.

Zip sat into his chair and slid some papers off of his wireless mouse. Then he clicked open a minimized window on the computer screen. It was a video player that filled the full screen. It was paused at the beginning showing only the computer chair where they were sitting themselves.

Then Zip pressed the 'play' button and the film began to roll. Madeline Hovan walked out from behind the camera she was recording through and sat in the chair, hands together at her lap and a scared look on her face.

"Lara, if you are getting this then it is time you knew the truth. I've had this file locked away inside the computer to come out in a few years so you cannot come find me...but you deserve to know the truth, Lara.

"I have a brother...Jonathan. He was only a few years older than I, but he got himself into a bad deal with a bad man. A Chinese business man named Bingwen Chang. Jonathan was a...um, archaeologist. He bought an artifact from Bingwen and then the man discovered it was worth something.

“Jonathan refused to give it back. He said it was a fair deal they had made and then he would not give it to a bad man like Bingwen...although at the time I had no idea what that meant.

“Then one day the business man sent his men after Jonathan and the artifact. I was with him. The day before was the last I had seen you. Bingwen’s men took us and put us away somewhere. Jonathan helped me escape, but I knew I couldn’t come to you...for help.

“Please understand, Lara. I didn’t want to involve you because those people were...doing things! I knew you had your own problems to worry about so I returned to Croft Manor one more time when you were gone and I recorded this. Please understand. What I saw is dangerous and Bingwen is sending his men after me. If I don’t leave, you’ll be in his way. And I’m just so...”

A ring came from Madeline’s pocket. Her cell phone was ringing. She looked at it and then her expression turned grim. She leaned towards the computer and the video stopped abruptly.

“My god! Madeline...”

“Was she here before me?” Zip asked.

“Yes...in fact I hired you not long after her disappearance. I searched everywhere for Madeline...but never did I imagine she had gotten into something like this. A Chinese business man desperate enough to claim an artifact that he’d kidnap a person!”

“I take it you’re going after him?”

“Yes. But I’m going to need help. Call for a jet. I am heading to Hiroshima, Japan.”

Winston thought of himself as a faithful friend to the Croft family. For years he had bent to whatever wills Richard Croft had asked of him, and did so with a smile. For many years ago, when Winston was young and adventurous, Richard Croft had helped him when he needed it the most.

So Winston clipped the hedges in front of Croft Manor as a team of builders passed by and disappeared around the corner. Then he saw Lara, and immediately finished the branch he was on, shut the clippers and walked towards her.

“Winston. I’m going to Japan tonight. We’ve found Madeline.”

“You found her? Where! This is great news.”

“She’s gotten herself into a bit of trouble with a Chinese man. Her brother was kidnapped a few years ago and we think this man might be up to something that isn’t so peachy,” said Lara.

“Oh my. Don’t tell me it’s Bingwen Chang,” said Winston shaking his head with a cautious look.

“Why do you say? Might you know him too?” Lara asked referring to Winston’s knowledge of the Pharos pirates.

“Lara. I am sorry but what I know I have promised to never bring up again. I wish you could just accept this.”

“I’m sorry Winston. But the mission to Pharos just doesn’t feel over yet. When I get back from this mess I hope you will be able to speak to me about it.”

Winston did not reply. He obviously didn’t feel comfortable with the whole situation. So Lara left him to the hedges, but he now had no heart in doing them. What had happened between he and Illiandra and Richard all those years ago had to remain his very own dark secret...

LONDON: HEATHROW AIRPORT

Lara hung up with the British Museum having arrangements made for the artifacts from the Zephyr Estates to be shipped to a rightful place. She wore windbreakers and a brown jacket, fur coating the inside. It was winter right now for Japan and she didn't want to be too cold.

Two men were waiting across the airstrip by her private jet. After the fire at Croft Manor, the London airport had offered to board her jet until her estates were fully completed again. They were both young, helmets on and waiting obediently by her jet. One had the cockpit opened for her, the other standing by a set of stairs with his arms folded behind his back.

"Your cockpit's warmers have already been turned on and everything is ready for your flight. Hiroshima airport expects you in about two hours. Landing information will be distributed upon entry into the airway."

"Thank you, gentlemen. Here's for your hard work," she said throwing each a small wad of cash. They looked shocked as they shoved the wads into their pockets. After the cockpit shut, they began to walk side by side back towards the building.

After flipping several switches and adjusting the seat back to her comfort zone, Lara pressed down on the gas pedal and went into taxi. The airport had made quick passage for her, so within the next five minutes, Lara was in the air above London and heading east for Hiroshima, Japan. For it was there that she would find the man she needed for this particular job.

And his name was Isamu Kenta.

HIROSHIMA AIRPORT, JAPAN

Lara hated those darn time zones. As she had calculated while in automatic mode on the way to Japan, Japan was nine hours ahead of Great Britain. So when she left it had been 3:00 AM in Japan. Upon arrival, she added another two hours which was her estimated flight time so she reset her jet's clock to 5:06 AM of the next day.

They welcomed her with a little too much for the dark hours. She expected most of the boarders to be quiet as it was very early, but she had two journalists, a news reporter and flight attendant all greeted her as she exited the gateway. With the news reporter she gave the man the usual confidential spiel and Lara directed the flight attendant to a Chinese couple down the way that looked confused. The journalists just left for fear of "hurting their reputation by interviewing such a rude woman".

'Oh well,' Lara thought to herself.

On the way out, a thick crowd of unexpected people walked past. Someone bumped Lara and muttered a very low and quiet..."Excuse me..." When Lara turned to see who had done it, the crowd had passed about the main door and into the areas beyond.

Lara disregarded this quickly.

She picked up a cab outside the airport and fit snugly in the back with her pack sitting in the seat behind her. "Where to?" the taxi man asked in Japanese.

She responded in the same tongue, "Prince Hotel, east side."

He gave a short nod, and then began to drive. Lara reviewed the contents of her pack. She had her pistols and a tranquilizer with several packs of ammo for each, her wallet of money, exchanged back at the airport, a GPS unit and a cell phone with headset. She was ready for whatever lied in front of her. *'Madeline's brother may or may not be alive...but I have to find her regardless.'*

PRINCE HOTEL, HIROSHIMA.

Lara waited silently at her table above the lobby in Prince Hotel. Isamu Kenta was a friend who she had run into years ago while on a community dig at the Great Wall. Isamu was like Zip, computer specialist and was able to hack any computer system he chose. But he had something better as well.

Kenta Corporations was a weapons manufacturer. Isamu's father owed the entire corporation and managed it very well as a clean business; something Lara discovered was hard to find in Japan.

So Isamu, heir of Kenta Co. had resources and connections that Lara would need to bust down a guy like Bingwen Chang. So Lara was recruiting him. Together with her, they would be able to break in and out of the Chang offices without tripping a single alarm *and* with inside help.

So Lara sat quietly above the lobby in the cozy sitting area. The couch she had chosen was very comfortable, a model she considered getting shipped to Croft Manor since her inherited furniture was now an admirable-sized ash tray.

She took a deep breath and closed her eyes, gathering her thoughts for getting into Chang's offices, if she could even make it that far. She wasn't even sure of the son of Kenta Co. would even be up to working underground!

"Lara Croft!" came a familiar voice. Isamu had a fluent English accent as was necessary for a business man. Isamu had black hair, spiky and slick and his signature brown eyes. He wore a white collared shirt with the top button undone and black pants that covered the tops of his expensive Ferragamo shoes.

Lara stood up straight and embraced Isamu in a friendly hug. “Oh I’ve missed you so much old friend. How goes the business with your father?”

“Oh, quite well, actually! I just landed my first deal with a rival company several weeks ago that brought in millions of yen! Father was so proud.”

“That is great! Now, how about we sit. We have a bit of business to attend to.”

“You always were the negotiator, Lara. Ha! How many I be of service?” Isamu asked, a smile broad on his face.

Lara began, “My friend Madeline Hovan vanished several years ago and went under the radar. Just yesterday, my friend, Zip discovered a file back at the manor sent from Madeline herself. Apparently her brother got into a bad scrape with a man named Bingwen Chang. We believe he has been holding her and her brother hostage for some time now and I need into those offices to find anything at all on their database.”

“Wow...sounds exciting. Have you tried accessing the mainframe computers from the outside yet?” he asked, anxious to help out.

“Yes. Zip has done everything possible from the outside...he’s worried about getting in though. That’s why I’ve come to you.”

“Okay! I can help you out. Father’s actually been groaning about Bingwen for some time now! He says Bingwen has been doing something bad....maybe illegal, even! I would like nothing more than to bust that creep!”

“Thank you so much, Isamu. I must say, I didn’t expect you to be so compliant. I mean, son of the renowned Lu Kenta...”

“Oh no, no, no...ha-ha, just because I am the son of a big business man, doesn’t mean I follow all the rules myself...” Isamu got up and began to walk down the stairs of the Prince Hotel. Lara followed as he said, “Wait to father finds out I’ve got a girlfriend!”

Lara walked down the steps of the Prince Hotel, around the large circular pool that resided in the centre, and exited towards a limo come to pick him up. Lara and Isamu got into the limousine.

“Kenta Corporations, please!”

The personal driver nodded with a very satisfied smile and pulled out of the parking lot and into the streets of Hiroshima. He almost reminded her of Winston back home, always a friend. “Oh! That reminds me...” Lara pulled the headset from her pack and positioned it around her head.

“Zip. Are you there?”

A moment’s pause and then, “Yeah. What’s up?”

“Isamu is in. We’re heading to Kenta Co. right now. Have you gotten anything new for me?”

“Nope, sorry Lara. I keep trying to get into Chang’s mainframe but his security is too tight!”

“That just means he has something to hide. I’ll ring you later when we’re ready to get in.”

“Right. Zip out.”

And with that, Zip hung up and Lara and Isamu were on their way to Kenta Co. to make plans for getting into CHANG Offices...

KENTA CORPORATIONS HEADQUARTERS

“Thank you again so much, Isamu for getting up so early to meet me. I’m figuring jet-lag will start in a couple of hours for me.”

“No problem, Lara! We had jet-lag together during that excavation in China!”

They laughed as they walked into the main lobby of Kenta’s headquarters. Lara was in awe at the architecture in this place. Murals of different time periods of China surrounded the walls and a main desk sat at the end of the square room. Behind the desk was a synthetic waterfall that added to the room’s effect. Green plants flourished around the room’s windows. It was a beautiful sight.

The secretary wore a native pink robe with her black hair put up in a bun held by two authentic chopsticks. She sat expertly at the lobby desk typing away and making arrangements for a company luncheon over the weekend.

“Aiko!” Isamu exclaimed halfway to the desk.

“Isamu, put your hands down! There are security cameras in this place, you know,” Aiko whispered.

“Oh Aiko, father will have to find out about us some time or another. In fact, he probably already knows! Those guys at security are snitches you know.”

Aiko and Isamu were speaking in Japanese, but Lara understood perfectly. So *this* was Isamu’s girlfriend. They smiled at each other, and she was obviously blushing. It was not customs for them to be showing public displays of affection yet since their relationship was unknown of.

Aiko asked. “Who is this?”

“This is Lara, an old friend of mine! I’ve got to help her with some business.”

“So good to meet you, Lara. My name is Aiko and welcome to Kenta Corporations!”

They briefly shook hands, and then Lara smiled and said, “Well we really should get back to work. We’ll see you later, Aiko.” Lara was trying to rush as much as possible. If Bingwen knew where Madeline and her brother were, they didn’t have much time. They needed into that database.

Isamu led Lara up an elevator to a penthouse at the top of the Kenta Co. skyscraper. It was Isamu’s suite, with multiple plants and a full sized kitchen off the side. The living area resided nearest the windows with a beautiful view of the sea from where he was. The furniture was all top-notch and a television set hooked up with gaming stations of all kinds and paintings, centuries old hung around the walls.

Lara examined one. A Van Gogh original inside of a laminated casing! “You have beautiful pieces of art here. Some of these are thirteenth century too! How did you manage...?”

“Lara, Lara...” he put an arm around her shoulder and examined the painting. “My father owns one of the biggest weapons dealers in Japan! I think a thirteenth century is in our price range...Ha-ha!” He patted her shoulders as he left towards the bar table in the kitchen. A computer sat on top of it, the power light arm.

“So. You want me to get you into CHANG Offices, eh? Well, I can only do so much for you. Let me look a little around the neighborhood. Zip can do the outside work, I’ll do the inside...”

Lara pulled out her headset again and, once on properly, asked, “Zip...you there still?”

He came on immediately. “Yeah, yeah. What’s up Lara? You met with Isaac yet?”

“Isamu, and yes. I have. He says he can do the inside work when I get in, but we’ll need you for outside operations. You can access other databases out here in Japan, right?”

“Yeah. But why are you in Japan? I thought Chang’s place was in China.”

“The main offices are, but his secondary offices are in Japan, right in Hiroshima, actually. I figure if we can gain access to the secondary mainframe, we can get into the primary. Is it sound?”

“Yeah, but you’ll need to copy his hard drive. Ask Isamu for a portable drive and then plug it into the mainframe computers when you get there. That should give me all the stuff I need.”

“Okay. Does tomorrow sound good?”

“Whoa! So soon? I mean, if you want to but I...”

“Hey guys listen to this. The CHANG Japan Branch is right down the road from a neighborhood power station!”

“Hey, I can do power stations. Isaac, you focus on the interior...I got Lara’s exterior work.”

“Isamu!” they two corrected.

Zip replied, “Okay, whatever. I’ll ring you tomorrow.”

“Good night, Zip.” Lara said as she hung up and pulled the head gear off. Isamu was typing away in what looked like a command prompt.

“What exactly are you doing?”

“I...am...there. I have just messaged a friend of mine who works at CHANG Offices for us. He’s meeting us for dinner tonight back at the Prince Hotel. He can help you out on the inside as well. The mainframe computer is off limits and under high

security, but he is willing to divert the guards' attention. Ha-ha! This is sooooo cool! We'll be just like super-spies!" he shouted throwing a fist up into the air.

"Well, first allow me to take a warm bath. We need to get into the mainframe to find out where Madeline is and what Bingwen is up to himself. But right now I'm tired. I'll lock up if you'd like to head back to whatever you were doing."

"Thanks, Lara! See ya'! Father wanted to speak with me anyways...The perfect chance to drop Aiko on him. Ha-ha!"

Isamu left the penthouse and Lara found the bathroom and turned the water on HOT. Then she took her clothes off and sunk down into the warm depths of the tub leaving all of her thoughts of deception in the back of her head.

Right now she just wanted to relax.

PRINCE HOTEL: RESTURANT

Lara had taken the afternoon off shopping. It was one of those luxuries most people coveted so, but she hardly ever busted out the credit cards at all! In this case, she paid for a nice change of clothes and some food from a tiny Chinese fast-food place near Kenta Co.

The small Japanese woman from the counter questioned why a British lady in tight green shorts, a light blue top and large, cumbersome boots would walk into her petite restaurant. Then she noticed the two custom pistols hooked to her waist and decided this was not a woman to be tinkering with.

Lara pondered her afternoon indeed wondering if there was anything she could've done better...anything more productive, with her time. She threw the thoughts

out of her mind and, instead headed for the Prince Hotel. She walked inside at 7:00 sharp and found Isamu straight away.

He sat with a group of stranger playing cards with dollar bills. Isamu had all the bills on his side, so Lara assumed that he was winning. It also helped to see that the other men had the faces covered or hands over their ears as Isamu jabbered relentlessly.

In Japanese one said, "You know what, man...take it! Take it ALL! Anything's better than listening to you talk about the day you barfed up Ming's chicken."

"Yeah, dude. I'm out!"

The three men Isamu had been playing with left the cards, money and all and walked off towards the exit.

Typical Isamu.

"Lara! Ready to eat?" he said standing up from his chair and walking towards her.

"Of course. But I'd better not hear anything during the meal about Ming's chicken."

They chuckled and then found an area away from everyone else. They sat at a table which had small plants strung from the ceiling and paper lanterns lit with candles. And then they waited until Aiko and Isamu's inside man finally appeared at the front register.

A waitress directed them back to Lara and Isamu and they all sat down together. "Lara. Meet my friend from CHANG Offices." Isamu held out a hand towards and American who looked quite handsome in Lara's eyes. He was of medium build and had spiked brown hair. His attire was formal, jacket and all and his eyes were hazel, Lara's favorite.

"Nice to meet you, Mr....?"

“Brenner. Steven Brenner.” They shook hands and then he continued as they all sat down in their seats. “So I hear I may be of assistance?”

“Indeed you may. You’ve been doing investigative work on CHANG for Kenta Co. We might need your help. A friend of mine was kidnapped by CHANG a few years back and we have a lead Bingwen was part of that. And something illegal as well.”

“Ahhh...I may help you here. I do know a few things about recent goings-on at CHANG Offices. Not much since I have only Level 2 clearance. They’ve found something in Rome. An archaeological site of some great proportions. I know it has taken awhile to accomplish, but the deed is done. I have also noticed that several shipments of weapons have not arrived but have been marked as so; so I believe that whatever Bingwen has been up to in Rome is not very good.”

“Food?”

They all turned and looked at the waitress who had returned to take orders. She was smiling, and obviously had not heard anything important as they had been speaking in English.

“A bit more time please,” Lara corrected in fluent Japanese. The waitress nodded, and then walked away with her tiny notepad.

“Okay. This helps. Tomorrow night we are going to break into the tower and access. Can you apply for late-night shift tomorrow?” Isamu asked.

“I can indeed. I would be glad to help. If Bingwen is trading illegal weapons to an unregistered client, we can use that to bust him down,” said Steven.

“An American do detective work in Hiroshima...how is that supposed to work?” Lara questioned.

“Well, a few years back...”

Steven proceeded to inform them all of his time in the service back in America. He was a marine who made leave and became an international business man cracking

deals with big companies. One day he was approached with a proposition by Kenta Co, six years back he had said. Pay was double his salary and he would receive free boarding in the house of his choice.

A very fair deal!

Lara was the last in the group to exit the hotel restaurant as she'd held the door for everyone else. Then someone else came in, so Lara held it a moment longer. The person, in a hooded jacket with his face shrouded in darkness bumped into Lara again.

Lara examined the person from behind. But as she blinked, he seemed to vanish into thin air.

"I could've sworn that was the same person from the airport who had bumped into me! No...never mind...I am just imagining it...too much Chinese food today!"

Lara let the door close and exited the restaurant.

CHANG Offices

Lara wore a tight fitting cat suit. The one she had worn all those years ago to VCI Headquarters. It still fit her, and was as tight as usual. She stretched her neck as she got out of the black van that had transported her to Bingwen's building.

It was dark in the streets of Hiroshima. It was quiet, true to its name as the 'City of Peace'. After the United States dropped an atomic bomb on it nearing the end of World War II, Parliament dubbed this city the City of Peace. Its buildings had all been modernized in the past year, she noted. Instead of the older styled Japanese buildings, high tech offices had booted them down and were erected in their places.

A trolley passed by Lara as she walked towards the back of the van. None of the people saw her though, which was good considering this was a stealth mission. A light snow, the first of the year began to fall from the sky, sprinkling the lamp poles and closed newsstands with a light dust of ice crystals.

Lara pulled open the back of the van where Isamu and Aiko sat at large computers built into the back. The computers were feeding videos of security cameras and such on the inside of the office complex. "Are you in?" Lara asked.

"Of course! Do you doubt my speedy abilities, Lara?" Isamu asked throwing a finger in front of Lara's head.

"Of course...not. Now let us get to work. Ring Zip. Is Zip on camera yet?" Lara asked Aiko who was still working at the cameras. Aiko had just signed on hours before when Isamu told her of the dangers he'd be getting into. It was great, Lara thought. Working with a team was nice for a change after working for so many years solo. She still preferred solo work, but the job she was taking on needed much more...control.

"Yes. Zip is on...now." She hit a button and Zip came to life in a thousand colorful pixels on the computer screen.

"Give me the word, Lara. I'm excited to shut this place down!" he said cracking his knuckles confidently.

"How about...now."

"You said it! One plague of darkness coming up." In an instant, the lights down the road flickered violently, and then died out with a dying buzz. Apartment buildings and shops of all types exploded in a flurry of electricity as the power died out everywhere. Zip had done it.

"Phase one complete. I'm going in. Is Bingwen's backup generator down, Isamu?" Lara asked closing one of the van's doors.

“Yes. You have twenty minutes to get in and out. You want the mainframe computer on the twenty-third floor. I’ll activate an elevator when you are ready to come down. You have the portable harddrive to back everything up?”

“I’m ready. It’s time to find Madeline.”

CHANG OFFICES

The lights were out; guards in flashlights roamed the halls of the first floor looking for a way to reactivate the power. They wouldn’t find any, Lara knew. She sprinted through the halls with lightning speed, but her toes touched lightly and quietly so that nobody could hear her.

She was searching for a staircase, it would take her straight up to the floor she needed in only a few minutes’ time. Then she saw it, nestled away between two trees that stood on either side of the door. She walked to it, and opened it slowly to avoid making noise. Two guards were walking towards her down the hall, only one with a flashlight trained on a bug that crawled across the floor.

Bingwen Chang would learn to hire a better night crew.

The stairwell up seemed endless. Every time Lara made it up a story, it seemed the path to the top was longer. It was also dark which didn’t help that she couldn’t see where she was going. So Lara counted each flat space in her head until finally she reached floor number twenty-three.

She felt around the wall for a door, then grabbed the smooth handle and gave it a quick pull. The door should have been locked, but Isamu had helped her there. She slipped inside, and was not surprised to see the lights on in the new hallway.

“Isamu,” she whispered into her headset. “Was that you?”

“Yeah. Power is only being distributed to floor twenty-three. Keep up the good work.” Static said that Isamu had checked out.

Lara walked down the hall reading each sign as she passed it. JANITOR, CLOSET 108, SCREENING ROOM, and then ARCHIVES. Lara went into the archives room with a quickening pace. Soon the police would be investigating the entire block and soon the guards would wonder why the power was only on on the twenty-third floor.

The archives room was where all data and records of CHANG operations were stored. It consisted of a huge cabinets lined in a row with black boxes and green lights, cords sprawled everywhere and draped down the back into power outlets in the floor. But what Lara needed was the desk that sat in the corner by a window that looked out over all of Hiroshima. She only gazed out at the night sky, a clear view of the stars for a few seconds, and then sat down at the desk.

She examined the large computer system sitting on the metal desk shaped like an ‘L’. There were three computer screens, one right next to the other which displayed a polygon-screensaver, the figure transforming on the screen and changing colors.

Lara pulled out the portable harddrive she’d been carrying in her pack and plugged the USB cable into the mainframe computer’s side. Suddenly the screensaver vanished and a command box popped up. Lara typed in ‘CLONE/DEV/ENTIRE_ARCHIVES.SNP’, a computer code that Zip claimed would copy all files onto the portable harddrive.

As the progress bar rolled across the screen, Lara wondered how a small black harddrive could store all the information that took a row of technological cabinets to store here. Isamu said something about the files being converted into binary codes, codes that consisted of 1’s and 0’s.

But then Lara was knocked out of her chair as a metal object impacted her sending her flying to the ground and the chair across the room. Lara picked herself up quick and then pulled out her pistols. But she wasn’t fast enough. The person kicked

one pistol out of her hand and then grabbed the second. Lara fired as the two fought for control over the gun...but each shot missed and hit the ceiling above.

Lara slammed her head into the other's head, but it didn't have the expected outcome. The figure didn't seem like he had been hit at all. Instead he caught Lara around the neck and pinned her to the wall.

Lara caught a glimpse of the man. He was oddly shaped, his body hidden behind layers of dark clothing. His face was completely covered...like the man from the airport! Lara had recalled the event. And from the restaurant!

"You've been tracking me..." Lara gasped. "Why!"

"You should know why you incompetent fool!"

A woman's voice!

But this wasn't just any woman...this was the one who caused so much trouble just days ago...the one who opened fire and ordered her mercenaries to attack her closest friends...the one who was presumed dead underneath the rubble of the Catacombs of Pharos...

"Illiandra!"

Lara struck again, this time hurting her wrist. Illiandra fell stumbled backwards and landed into one of the large cabinets, her face unmasked from under the dark shroud she had been wearing. It was Illiandra.

Lara picked up her pistols and pointed them at Illiandra who weakly rose to her feet, an arm supporting her from the cabinet. Her old hair, the lush black that used to hang beaded down her head was thinning and missing in some places. Her nails were jagged like claws and her eyes glowed with a dark red color.

"Back from the dead. No thanks to you. That idiot archaeologist you sent to clean up the excavation site dug me up, but I soon discovered the Orb had bad effects on me. The curse didn't kill me, Lara. It changed me and I survived with nothing but my life."

“However much that is worth...” Lara sneered.

“Agh! Your impudence is beyond annoying, Croft!” Illiandra’s jaw dropped and a high-pitched sound was emitted from her very core. It was a high-frequency pitch that sent the electricity haywire in the room. Several lights went out and Lara found herself on the ground as the windows shattered from the pressure.

Finally it stopped. Lara unclasped her ears and breathed in deeply, small trickles of blood caking her lobes. She gasped, “Why...follow me to Hiroshima? Why didn’t you...just kill me at the airport?”

“Haha...This is rich. I guess you haven’t figured out what files you’re stealing from Bingwen Chang. The Sacred Pools of Evora, Lara. Bingwen has been digging them up. Why did *you* come to Hiro...agh!”

Lara had taken advantage of the moment and fired at a perfectly unsuspecting Illiandra. She hit directly in the chest, a dark liquid that seemed to be blood spat out. Illiandra collapsed to the ground as Lara snatched the harddrive from the desk; the COMPLETE box disappearing as the USB was unplugged.

She sprinted down the hall, Isamu ringing in on her headset, “Lara...what happened to you? The power grid is on the fritz and glass just showered down on the sidewalk!”

“It’s a long story. Zip, you there also?”

“Yeah...what’s going on?”

She replied, “Illiandra’s not dead. Tell Winston and then get back as soon as you can. I have the files for you to decipher.”

“Gotcha. Zip out.”

Lara ran back to the EXIT door that opened to the stairwell. She opened the door by the push bar and gazed at a sentry of guards, armed who’d taken position right in front of the door. Steven said that in the case something bad would happen, he’d

distract the guards and lead them to another location. Thankfully he had done his job in a timely fashion. She didn't waste time taking them out. She jabbed upwardly into one's jaw, dislocating it and roundhouse kicked the second in his chest.

They both collapsed to the ground.

"WHERE ARE YOU!?!?"

Illiandra's scream came loudly down the hall. Lara didn't have much time. There were two more men who'd retreated a few feet back to the steps. One fired a shot at her, but she had detected it and ducked, the bullet whizzing over her head. She fired a shot at him and two bullets at the second.

They fell down with their friends.

CHANG OFFICES: FRONT DOOR

Lara was thrown out one of the glass windows that lined the lobby. Policemen aimed at her, unaware of the monster on the inside, then focused back on the dark interior. Lara limped as she picked herself up to the van.

"Drive!" she shouted at Aiko who had taken position in the front seat. Isamu pulled her into the back through the open doors, an officer shouting, "Hey!" as they drove off.

Lara had a cut on her cheek from the glass. Illiandra had caught up to her in the lobby and gave her a good run. Lara lost in the end and was thrown with incredible strength into the window. The Sacred Pools of Evora, Lara thought to herself. Now it was clear how Illiandra and Bingwen were connected.

But now they had everything they needed to find Madeline. Now that had a new first priority.

KENTA CO.

Lara, Aiko, Steven and Isamu sat on the couches of Isamu's penthouse, the morning sun shining on the clean carpet. For awhile, they hadn't said anything. Isamu was waiting for a message over the webcam from Zip who'd been working all hours of the night to retrieve the files from the harddrive.

And then, his voice chimed in from the speakers.

"Lara. Madeline is alive and looking for someone in the States. A man named Julian Hikes. Bingwen's been keepin' tabs on her. Apparently, Chang has dug up some place in Rome called Aventine Hill. Know anything about it?"

Everyone looked at Lara; she sat up straight and then began to speak. "Illiandra said last night that she was trying to find wherever it was Chang has been operating. She said it was the Sacred Pools of Evora, an ancient healing spring buried beneath the Temple of Diana that was supposedly buried beneath Aventine Hill, one of the seven hills that make up Rome.

"Diana was the Roman goddess of the hunt and in other myths the moon. Her worshippers believed her powers lied in an ancient spring that they found and built the temple around. But legend says that the temple was wiped from existence when Diana saw what the humans had done. She said they had unveiled the secret to immortality and eternal health to the world and that no man should ever set foot again inside the temple.

“So Illiandra wants to heal herself from the curse, another story I’ll tell you about sometime, Isamu. She probably thinks the Sacred Pools of Evora can heal her. She’s probably right as well. On the other hand, Madeline’s brother was taken because he must’ve found out too much. Chang is just another man seeking fame, fortune and power.”

“So what now?” Steven asked.

“We head to the states, whoever wants to come. I need to find Madeline. She’ll be wanting to get information about the temple from Professor Hikes. My father knew him and I know he knows Roman myth better than anyone. We find Madeline, and then we head to Aventine Hill.”

“I must stay. Mr. Kenta need not know what trouble we’ve gotten ourselves into,” Aiko stated. She was shocked herself by everything she’d gone and done. But it was too much drama for her. She wanted to go back to her everyday life of ‘secretary’ for Mr. Kenta before she got herself hurt.

“Okay. I’ll go...Steven?” Isamu asked.

“I’m in. Looks like Lara Croft is forming a team!” he exclaimed.

“Not exactly my normal field of occupation...but I’m ready, Lara! Let’s find Madeline Hovan!”

[PRESENT DAY]

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."

"Madeline!"

She twisted in the chair to see a new figure at the door standing behind a now confused Professor Hikes. "Lara...is that really you?"

Madeline slipped past Professor Hikes and switched the lights on in the office. Her van had pulled up just as Professor Hikes had slowly started back inside the wing. The others were in the van waiting for her to come out. It had been a long flight back to the states, but Lara was awake the whole time, never letting her guard down.

Bingwen Chang and Illiandra were *both* out to get her. She had to be on the lookout or it could be bad news...

"Madeline...you could have stayed. I could have helped you!"

“I know you’ve been through a lot, Lara. But in those men’s hands...I was helpless. There was nothing I could do to save Jonathan. But they’ve got him in a place called...”

“Aventine Hill. I know. We’ve been looking for you for days now.”

Madeline had dark bags under her eyes. She hadn’t slept much. Her glasses covered the sad eyes that lay on her face. She had been through so much and thought that she had nobody to help her. That was wrong. Lara would be there with her now. Together they would rescue Jonathan and stop Bingwen for good.

“Would someone PLEASE tell me what’s going on!”

They had forgotten about Hikes whose jaw was dropped in fear. He wasn’t sure what was going on...but couldn’t connect it to him at all.

“Professor...I am so sorry. My name is Lara Croft. I presume you knew my father, Richard Croft?”

“Yes...yes I did. Why do you ask though? What is all this.”

“It’s rather a long story, why don’t you sit.”

Lara, Hikes and Madeline sat around Hikes’ desk as Lara explained everything from the Pharos Island to the incident at Chang’s offices the night before. Slowly, Hikes was able to piece together where he fit into all of this. And then it was decided. He chose to believe Lara’s story and began to tell them all about the Temple of Diana under Aventine Hill.

“Long ago, the goddess Diana, master of the hunt and ruler of the moon was loved by thousands. But as I’m sure you’ve discovered, that love turned into servitude. Those same people bowed down to Diana and worshipped her above even Zeus. Then one day, the humans discovered the source of her earthly powers.”

“The Sacred Pools of Evora?” Madeline asked.

“Correct. The Sacred Pools of Evora...residing near Aventine Hill could heal any disease or illness. It restored the young to their appearance of youth! A miracle-worker. And so the humans built the Temple of Diana around them, a grand structure that overlooked all of Rome.

“Diana did not like this, though. For although they practiced their faith in the gods, they were corrupted by their passion for her, as the legend goes. Some wanted to be with her forever, so they drank from the Sacred Pools and, just like the Garden of Eden, Diana exiled them all from that place and swept it from Aventine Hill, burying it beneath its green pastures.

“And that was the end of the Temple of Diana.”

“Do you think it’s still there?” Lara asked. She had her doubts about the legends. Aventine was Grecian for ‘godly power’, and Capitoline Hill followed with the same translation. It was another hill that formed Rome and was raised in honor of Vejovis, one of the first gods born and the god of healing. An easy misconception, just like Helheim, Lara thought. Capitoline was home to multiple temples in honor of Vejovis. She wouldn’t be surprised if this was her destination after all.

“Well I believed so. You don’t actually think you can *find* the temple, do you?”

Lara was about to interject when Madeline chimed in, “Thank you for your information, Professor Hikes. But if Lara Croft says it’s real, then not only is it real, but she’ll be the first one to prove it.”

They looked at each other, memories of their friendship reflected in the other’s eyes, and then together they left Professor Hikes in his office at Yale University to meet with Steven and Isamu out in the parking lot.

Within the hour, they were on a plane to Rome.

ROME: AVENTINE HILL

Lara thought back to the last time she had been in Rome. It was many years ago, one of her earlier adventures. She had been exploring the illustrious Trajan's Market, a series of ruin shops from Rome's payday. Rome was the city that never slept from that era. Now the world had New York and Moscow, Tokyo and many other places, but Rome was the first.

The city itself was beautiful. The sun beat down on the many fountains casting a sunny glow throughout the city. People smiled, natives sold hand-crafted items in the stalls of Rome's bustling streets. It was another day in one of the world's most gorgeous environments.

Lara had set no time apart, though to visit several of Rome's attractions. Jonathan was being kept prisoner by a madman and Illiandra was probably biding her time in the shadows until she thought she had an advantage to strike.

Aventine Hill was only an hour from Rome Fiumicino International Airport. They took a tour bus directly from the airport with their luggage in their laps for the entire trip. The tour program was called 'Exploring Rome- the Seven Rolling Plains!' It took them straight to Aventine Hill by chance, and Lara paid the driver with a wad of Roman cash to compensate for their leave.

Madeline said she had tracked Bingwen to a cliff on the Tiber River, a winding river that went north from the western side of Rome. The clouds rolled through the air creating a relieving breeze that brushed against Lara's braid and the loose lock of hair that hung down her face. Lara would quite enjoy it as they hiked along the Cliffside to a location hidden far from any tourists.

They walked all afternoon, Lara and Madeline, Steven and Isamu, the breeze lasting the entire period. Lara thought about Illiandra some of the time. Illiandra was brought up into the world of piracy and hunted for the Orb of Pharos for many years.

Lara partially blamed herself for what Illiandra had turned into, for Lara had made her look unworthy in front of the Orb before throwing it against her young frame.

She deserved it, Lara reassured herself. Winston had known her from his past, and wouldn't be pleased to discover she was still alive. But it had happened... Illiandra was indeed back from her grave. Any moment she could strike them and have her revenge...but not until Lara got her inside the temple to the sacred pools.

Little did she know Lara wouldn't be going in at all. She had plans to sneak inside the base of operations and locate Jonathan, rescue him and escape the facilities before they were noticed. Illiandra was beat.

"Lara! There it is!"

Lara gazed ahead to see a tower in the distance. An old tower half-buried in dirt. A thousand years of erosion had caused the cliffs to break off, parts of the temple unearthed.

Wire fencing also surrounded the site. It took her awhile to begin to make out the different structures in the distance, but she could definitely make out a large brick warehouse that stretched along the eastern side of the property. Tents were constructed around the camp for the diggers and archaeologists employed for Bingwen Chang. Did they even *know* who they were working for? Lara thought.

She stopped in her tracks and then crouched down to tighten her boots, a bit of a habit she'd gotten into before she went into a dangerous situation. "What's the order?" Steven asked her.

"We wait until sundown. Based on the sun's position, that should be in about twenty minutes. I saw a bunch of trees inland more which should provide us cover until then."

"And then?" Isamu asked.

Lara looked at Madeline and said, "Well, we'll just have to rescue Jonathan."

The wait was painful to Madeline. She had waited for four years to find her brother. She had been taken herself to a facility somewhere, but this wasn't it. Bingwen must've been searching in the wrong place at the time for if he had been digging up the temple for four years, it would be renovated and sparkling by now with *his* resources.

Finally, the sun went down and Lara, Madeline, Isamu and Steven cocked their weapons into a firing position. They would follow the cliffs towards the site and then wait for the guards to move about, or change shifts or something. Lara was reminded of the thieves from the Zephyr Estates. It all seemed so long ago at this point.

They ran low to the ground as the lights came on around camp. From the sounds of it, Bingwen was having them dig even in the dark, the sounds of metal against rock ringing in everyone's ears.

They reached the front of the wire fence and observed the site more closely. A dirt road, not very distinguished from the field of Aventine Hill stretched out from the east side of camp.

Inside the camp, however were armed mercenaries. Each one was equipped with an AK 32 Assault Rifle, loaded by the looks of it. Bingwen was expecting guests. The tents were all in line. Sixteen by sixteen. Each one was tall and wide which would provide cover for them.

The guards were on the job, keeping aware at all times and aiming the flashlights out around the perimeter. None walked through the rows of tents, however. That would be their route. But first they had to get in.

There was the front gate in the fence, but that was locked and two guards stood on each side of the paved road on the right fence. There wasn't a gate on the left side, where the camp dropped off into the Tiber River which lay quiet beneath them. But the fencing they faced stopped at a metal pole that rose ten feet or so, on the cliff's edge.

"Can you guys shimmy around that pole over there?" Lara whispered as they all ducked by a nearby grouping of trees. She was surprised Bingwen hadn't taken security measures by cutting them down.

“Sure. On your count.”

Lara waited for a guard to pass by and then hissed, “Now!”

They all sprinted for the Cliffside, the moon looming above them like a disco ball at a club, except a million and one times larger. Lara was the first to twist around the pole. She then dove for the first row between the tents and ducked down low as a flashlight passed overhead.

They all did the same, each taking precautions and finally all four of them were together next to one of the tents. “Jonathan would be in the brick warehouse, right?” Lara asked Madeline.

Madeline replied, “I don’t know. I was taken somewhere else. I don’t even know if he’s there or not...or if he’s...”

“Don’t talk like that, Madeline,” Lara intruded. “I doubt Bingwen has him working the temple. Jonathan was a business man. Bingwen would be using his skill for his own purposes. Not putting him to work.

Madeline tearfully nodded and then they all awaited further instructions. “Lara. The pavilion is across camp. Should we sprint for it?” Steven asked.

“I like the sound of it. The four heroes sprinted for their lives through the hands of the enemy, only to be met with more trouble!” Isamu mocked. It was a stupid idea, but Lara didn’t tell Steven that. About every decision she made in the field was based off of tactic and reasoning. Not instinct or chance. Although she had her moments...

“We’ll slip through the tents and then find some way into the warehouse. “Let’s move.”

They all nodded in compliance, and then ran from row to row, stopping and looking for guards. They made it through all sixteen rows to the other side of the facility, the eastern road just before them...and the guards. The warehouse was in front of the sixteenth row. Lara noted a backdoor and a guarded front door.

There was no way they could get through! Unless...

Lara looked at Steven and Isamu. They both wore the same colors as the guards. If they knocked the guards out, Lara and Madeline could get into the suits and slip in while Isamu and Steven would take the guards' places. From a distance, they would look like the two normal guards on duty. But only from a distance...

"What are you doing?" Steven asked as Lara pulled out a tranquilizer from her pack complete with a silencer. She aimed at the first guard's neck, fired, and then shot the second before he heard a thing. They both fell to the ground.

As the group ran for the station, Lara explained her plan. They shoved the bodies out of site behind some bushes and took the clothes, weapons and walkie-talkies in case someone wanted to check in.

In the end, Lara and Madeline were dressed uniformly and nodded at Isamu and Steven before they headed back into the camp. They turned back to see the two "night guards" looking like normal on duty.

It had worked.

It got even better when Lara and Madeline slipped right through the two guards. Each mercenary had a helmet on, as ordered that shielded their faces from everyone else. This made their job easier, Lara thought.

The interior of the warehouse was high-tech and expensive. Platforms were suspended by cables above them and a crew of twenty or so men worked on a large drill that took up the center of the place. It's loud and busy in here, Lara thought. Perfect for a stealth mission.

Then Bingwen Chang walked by. Lara immediately thought that if he had ever auditioned for a big Chinese corporation villain, he'd fit the part. Everything from his expensive Italian shoes to his twenty-dollar tie was neat and fit. No spots or remains of dirt were on his suit and he wore glasses that covered the most distinguishing feature about this man.

A scar ran from his forehead down to his chin, right across an eye that looked like it had seen hell many times. This was Bingwen Chang. And now Lara knew what *he* would do with the Sacred Pools of Evora.

“You two! Why are you not on patrol duty!” he barked at them stopping right in front of them. “We have very special visitors coming soon and if you do not get back into place immediately, I will make sure you are given the honor of digging-duty. Night shift! Now go!” he shouted.

They both nodded nervously, trickles of sweat forming on their brows. They walked towards the door, each pondering how they’d get back inside when Bingwen shouted, “Jonathan! What is wrong with this picture! While my team of highly trained technicians works on the broken drill *you* designed, you stand back with a clipboard! Get to work or you will face my punishment!”

Lara and Madeline twisted speedily. It was him. Jonathan Hovan standing in a white lab coat with a clipboard in hand. His brown hair was messy and his left eye was swollen badly. He had cuts and bruises on his face and hands. He looked scared.

“Lara. We have to help him.”

“No Madeline. Not yet. Let’s meet back with the others and...no!” Madeline brought up her stolen AK 32 and fired towards Bingwen Chang. She hit him directly in the back and then started shooting at anybody in a guard suit.

“Madeline!”

Jonathan turned from across the site of the drill. He was curious now. He was scared and hearing the name gave him hope.

Chaos erupted throughout the warehouse. All of the technicians and programmers fled for the front doors as Lara joined in with Madeline’s thought out “attack plan”. Then, the two stopped as guards up on the suspended platforms pointed their barrels at them. They had no chance now.

“Drop your weapons!” Bingwen shouted as he rose from the ground. Holes were torn in his expensive shirt revealing a bullet-proof vest underneath. Lara and Madeline reluctantly obeyed their 32’s clanking onto the concrete floor.

“Lara Croft, I presume?”

Lara ripped her helmet off, alarming the guards and threw it down at her feet.

“Lovely day for tea, isn’t it?”

“Charming. And who is your friend here?”

Madeline took off her helmet and shook the hair out of her freckled face.

“Madeline!” shouted Jonathan from behind the crowd. He had hidden behind the drill as the panic spread moments ago.

“Wait a second. You!?” Bingwen shouted.

Madeline cockily responded, “Yeah. Not as dead as you thought I was. All I want is my brother and we’ll go and never say a word about this. The Sacred Pools are as much as yours.”

“My girl. You are not in a place for negotiating right now. In fact, you may die.”

Bingwen whipped grabbed an AK 32 from a nearby guard’s hands and fired a single shot at Madeline’s chest. She fell forward, dead.

Lara struggled with herself. She wanted to kill Bingwen for what he had done. But that would only get her killed. She was outnumbered. She needed to keep her head.

“As for you, Lara. You’ll be helping me open the doorway to Evora.”

“And if I refuse?” Lara spat back.

“He dies too.” Bingwen snapped his fingers and all of his men aimed their weapons at Jonathan.

“Sir, these men are imposters!” came a shout from the warehouse entrance. A beat-up and bruised Isamu and Steven were thrown to the ground next to Lara letting out a loud moan as they fell.

“And them...”

“Then take me to the Temple of Diana,” Lara muttered.

This would only get worse...

TEMPLE OF DIANA

Lara, Isamu and Steven walked through the stone courtyard of the temple of Diana. It was a magnificent place, Lara thought. She wished she could study it more, but the circumstances told otherwise. Lara had her own pistol held against her back by Bingwen. He pushed her forwards towards a stone archway, two hollowed areas on each side of the arch with a stone slab preventing further passage.

“I’ve tried everything, Lara. TNT, grenades and C4. Nothing will break that slab. How do we get inside the temple?”

“There’s...a transcription above. On the stone archway. It says, ‘To find one must leave behind,’ in Roman.

“What does that mean?” Bingwen asked.

“Maybe it means you should stay back and let us go into the temple, murderer,” Steven retorted.

“Watch your tongue or I’ll cut it out myself!”

Steven, a gun pressed against his back let his head hang down. Lara looked at the transcription again, and then two hollowed areas. She fit her hand inside, a small wooden rod stuck on the inside for one to grasp.

“Have two of your men grab the handles inside these hollows,” Lara ordered.

“How about your two men?” Bingwen said with his deep, commanding voice.

“If you’d like to get inside, you need me. I refuse to do it if either of my friends are harmed or left behind. Right now, I’m calling the shots, Bingwen Chang.” Lara gave him only a small portion of the verbal beating she wanted to give him. Of course, verbal beating wasn’t the only thing she wanted...

“Fine. Any funny business and those men back there fire,” Bingwen threatened. He nodded at the row of five men who stood behind the three securing Steven, Jonathan and Isamu. Two of the five stepped forward as instructed and grabbed the bars inside of the archway’s hollows.

Nothing happened.

“Turn them,” Lara ordered.

As they did, a large clanking of internal gears throughout the courtyard sprang to life. The two guards howled as a stone weight fell down from inside the arch and pressed their hands into place. They pulled, but couldn’t get out of the trap.

“They stay.” Lara motioned to the mercenary guards. The slab slowly descended into a space beneath it allowing access into a tunnel that flickered to life with multiple flashlights...right on cue.

And so Lara, Steven, Isamu, Bingwen Chang and his mercenaries began their trek into the depths of the Temple of Diana.

AVENTINE HILL: WAREHOUSE

“What a shame.”

“Yeah. Bingwen drops people like anybody does flies.”

“Well, let’s stop talking. Somebody could hear us and we’ll be next.”

“But she was so damn good lookin’!” he said sadly.

The other replied, “True. But help me clean this mess up.”

“What mess. There’s hardly any blood, Jacob. You’d imagine that someone who gets shot in the chest bleeds out everywhere.”

“Funny. I was thinking the same thing myself,” said Madeline Hovan as she grabbed the heads of the two men bending over to pick up her “dead body” and cracked them together with as much power as she could muster. There was a little blood on the ground, but luckily the bullet had missed her heart and went straight through her shoulder. After all those years of employment with Lara, she knew how to fake her death. She’d done it with Bingwen twice now. She’d worry about patching the bullet up later though.

Right now...she had a tomb to raid.

TEMPLE OF DIANA

Lara and the others had come out atop a balcony. It opened into an ancient library with a square of light open to the night. The moonlight beamed down and filled the library with a peculiar air of mystery. The shelves lined the walls on the bottom floor.

Two grand staircases reached from the balcony and went down, but one staircase was broken at the top and difficult to reach the other side.

“Well Tomb Raider, you may go first,” said Bingwen as he pushed Lara towards the stable staircase. She looked at the square pool on the first floor, directly under the skylight. The pool was empty, due to lack of rain from the past few days. A mosaic of the sun and moon was depicted in the small one inch by one inch tiles.

As they reached the bottom, she looked to another door, parallel to the wall they'd come in. “This is incredible! All of the books and texts! Scrolls and manuals and history books from ancient Rome! Oh this is so cool!” Isamu exclaimed.

“So, what?” Bingwen said glaring at Isamu.

“So boring. Duh. Who likes reading anyways?” he averted Chang's gaze and instead whistled the tune to, “We All Live in a Yellow Submarine”. Bingwen ignored this.

The main door they all approached had on it a crevice about two inches deep into the unrecognizable wood. The crevice was in the shape of a semicircle with a crevice jutting down from the top middle of the arch to a center hole. At the two vertices were two shapes, movable that created the next puzzle. The one on the left was a sun, and on the right a moon.

“The inscription said, ‘To find one must leave behind’. Does this mean I'll lose more men?”

“I suppose so. Have one of them grab the sun and the other the moon and slide them to the top of the arch, right in the middle if you will.”

Bingwen snapped his fingers and two more men went forth. They did as instructed and connected the two objects right in the middle. The pieces fit together like a puzzle and formed a full circle, half a moon and half a sun.

“Mr. Chang! My hand won't come off!” one yelled.

“Please get us off!”

“Oh stop being such babies. Serve your master willingly and ask no questions!” Bingwen ordered. They stopped whining, but their faces told Lara the opposite.

“Now slide the pieces down into the center.”

“It went down and fitted itself in place in the hole sinking deep into the door’s surface. The sound of internal gears began again and two stone weights fell down on *their* hands as well, isolating them to where they were. This time, the door folded inwardly revealing another tunnel, this one filled with spider webs and such into complete darkness.

There were three guards left from the original seven and Bingwen, Isamu, Steven, Jonathan and Lara. They all continued into the bowels of the Temple of Diana.

It emptied into a chasm, a fountain of water rising up from an age-old piping network that drew up water from the Tiber River. Lara was amazed as they entered the chamber. The floor was stone and a large mural surrounded the perfectly round room. The whole place resembled a can with the ceiling hundreds of feet above them forming the tallest tower in the temple.

Pipes drained water from the fountain to small pools around the room. The Sacred Pools of Evora. But something wasn’t right. Some pools were emptied, water not running draining down them. And the water was a crystal clear. It was dirty, muddied.

“Haha! Finally! Redemption.” Bingwen raced forward to the fountain and scooped up a handful of the dirty water. He drank it without a second thought, his face showing disgust. “What is this? Why isn’t this working?”

“Because we have all been deceived,” came Illiandra’s freaky voice from the exit of the cobwebbed tunnel.

They all lashed around.

“And you know that...don’t you, Lara?”

Illiandra stood dormant in the shadows of the tunnel, only parts of her visible.

“Well...look at the mural. The picture shows the real sacred pools...what they should really look like. I had my doubts, but now we know for certain. These are *not* the Sacred Pools of Evora.”

“And what else have you figured out, Lara?”

“That the goddess Diana dedicated this place to the study of the moon...the stars. All of the skylights are observation decks. Aventine Hill is one of the best places to view the stars in all of Europe. I’m sure Diana wiped this place away when she saw her worshippers were obsessed with the Sacred Pools and *not* the beautiful temple she’d given them.”

“You mean to tell me...this place is an observatory! You knew you despicable brat! You knew this whole time we weren’t heading to the pools! Oh...Lara. What a bad choice you’ve made,” he said shaking his head and pulling out Lara’s pistol. He aimed it at her. “And everyone will wonder what happened to Lara Croft...Tomb Raider...”

Lara was on the balls of her feet to dodge when Illiandra in her bulky form pushed her to the ground and pounced on Bingwen. “What! NOOO! Get off of men you demon!” he shouted trying to fire at Illiandra. Chang’s three guards stepped back and fired at Illiandra. Some shots hit but it didn’t do much damage. She kept on Chang.

Pipes that hung around the walls burst from stray bullets. Lara gathered Steven, Jonathan and Isamu and began to make for the exit. He was thrusting his hips.

“Croft is mine!” Illiandra screamed. She took her claws and thrust them into Bingwen Chang’s chest. He died instantly.

The group made way for the exit, Illiandra heading for Chang’s scattering guards who still shot as they moved. She picked one up and tossed him into the fountain

bloodied with amazing speed. The other two she punched with her fist. The first fell dead and the second collided into the wall and died upon impact.

Now Illiandra approached Lara.

“Run!” Lara shouted at them.

“No. Friends don’t leave friends,” Isamu chimed in. He took his place next to Lara, Steven and Jonathan following.

“No fight, Lara. Fair enough.” She raised a hand, her claws looking lethal in the air. Lara was planning it out in her head. Duck, upper house punch in the jaw, run! And then...

“Die you hideous witch!”

Madeline Hovan brought out two AK 32’s and fired consecutive shots from each one at Illiandra, once a girl with great potential. Illiandra’s black blood spat out with each shot which weakened her to the point where she collapsed to the ground.

They knew that with the curse, she was immortal. She couldn’t die. But Lara also knew that they were dead meat if they didn’t get out fast. Madeline lowered her guns and dropped them to the ground.

“Surprised to see me, Lara?” Madeline chuckled.

“Now Madeline, do you think that if I knew you were dead I would have left your body sprawled across the floor?”

They hugged quickly and then turned to the others.

“It’s time to go,” Lara said.

Everybody nodded. They all ran out of the Temple of Diana towards a small lot in the camp, wranglers parked in no particular order. One had the keys in providing them a ride. They all drove off into the distance, the moonlight shining down on them the whole way back to the city.

ROME: THE NEXT DAY

Lara Croft waited in jeans and a black tank top at the airstrip, leaning against the corner of a small communications tower. She'd been waiting for about ten minutes when Isamu and Steven showed up. Madeline and Jonathan didn't arrive for another ten, but eventually they were all together, the clouds covering the sun from view. It was a stormy day in Rome; the rain hadn't started yet though.

The helicopter landed not too much longer after they all met. They laughed, talked about the latest news. Normal stuff. Everything that had happened in the past few days brought them close and they wanted to remember the good times before they all went their separate ways once more.

"Well Lara, Aiko will be missing me back home. Father's slightly concerned as well. I suppose the son of the big business man Mr. Kenta, CEO. of Kenta CO. shouldn't be playing around with a Chinese weapons dealer...Haha!"

"Thank you so much, Isamu. You were a great help. You too Steven. What will you do now?" she said to Steven.

"Mr. Kenta has been very happy with me aiding the takedown of one of his business rivals. He's offered me a position on the top floor of his American branch. I start next week."

"I suppose you'll not be returning to Croft Manor then, Madeline?"

"No, Lara. Four years I've been off the grid. I cannot thank you enough for helping me...and saving Jonathan. I just want a normal job somewhere. You know my resume. Even with today's business world, I'll be able to find a good job."

"Yes, Lara. Thank you so much. My bruises are finally starting to heal from all this Bingwen stuff. I am in your debt. If ever you need anything, just let me know."

"What will you do now?" Isamu asked.

“I have a cursed pirate to hunt down. I’ll head to Capitoline Hill and wait for Illiandra there. She’ll drink from the real Sacred Pools and then I’ll take it from there...when she’s *not* immortal.”

“The best of luck, Lara. Rome is one of the most ruin-packed cities in the world. Even if you have narrowed it down to Capitoline Hill, there are a many ruins and tombs there. I’m sure you’ll pull through though,” Steven assured.

“Well. We should get going Jonathan. Our plane leaves in twenty minutes so we’re in a bit of a hurry,” Madeline laughed.

“Goodbye, Madeline. Keep in touch.”

She smiled. Then, “I will.”

Madeline and Jonathan started for the airport a quarter mile away as Isamu and Steven got aboard the helicopter. Isamu waved goodbye to her with his typically large smile until he she was out of site. Lara jumped in the small scooter she’d taken out and headed for the main terminal.

Illiandra was out there...and other people were in danger with her around. When the time comes, she wasn’t sure what she would do to her.

And then Lara Croft thought of the mission she had just completed. She had found Madeline Hovan and watched her drive off as happy as she was before she’d disappeared all of those years ago. Together they took out Bingwen Chang and saved the day. One man should never obtain claim such power as his own. *Then I suppose it’s done. Another mission accomplished for Lara Croft: Tomb Raider.*

Lara shut the door of the terminal behind her, unaware of the woman crouching behind a nearby forklift, anger seething through her veins.

“Lara Croft will die...”

PART 2. END