

It began on a particularly rainy day. Lara Croft sat silently inside Croft Manor, watching the fire crackle in the fireplace sending the aroma of burnt Yule wood and pine through her nose. She savored the smell, it reminding her of her most recent adventure. She was in stranded in a dense wood. She was lost. She was alone.

The helicopter had crashed in the dark forest. Gunfire had brought it down, killing the pilot upon impact. She was used to death. It was as if she and Death were longtime friends. Her arm had been hurt badly, and blood trickled down the side of her leg where a piece of debris had scraped against it in the crash.

She cursed, under her breath, and then looked towards the stronghold, not too far ahead. She had thought her plan to be full-proof. She had stolen one of the enemy's helicopters, and flew without a hint of betrayal towards the stronghold. It was set deep in the forests of Africa, the stronghold. If they got a hold of the artifact before Lara did...

It was a situation she didn't want to think about.

Picking up her fallen backpack, she flung it around her shoulders, faced the woods, and began the trek towards the stronghold, some miles ahead.

"Lovely," she sighed.

She stumbled forward through the thick woods as the calls of various animals surround her. Her hands pressed hard against her gun holsters. "*Why am I so paranoid? I've been in this situation a million times*" she was thinking as a monkey jumps right in front of her. Shots rang out and blood ran from the poor limp body of the monkey. "*Damn it! What the hell is wrong with me today?*" she thought but as she walked over the body mindlessly the ground shook and a huge creature rolled out from the stronghold's outer barrier little to Lara's knowledge.

She stopped at the poor animal's dead body and sighed quietly, her weapons lay, forgotten in her holsters; she swallowed a lump in her throat and closed the little ape's eyes gently, then standing up again, determined to continue on, she stumbled along aimlessly, blood now beginning to pulse from her leg.

"If I don't get out soon... I'm going to die..." She muttered, in a matter of fact voice, while she said this she noticed grey spots beginning to appear on her vision.

'I'm going to black out...' She thought, however after a moment of clinging onto a thick tree she felt the dizziness leave, and she had only a moment's warning.

Then it pounced through the bushes...

It was the Guardian of the stronghold. She thought it to have simply been myth, but as it happened, it was real. Very real. With a mighty roar, the beast cried out into the night sky, the space around its mouth distorting momentarily from the high frequency bellow.

Sore, she pulled out her pistols, and aimed them directly at the beast's chest. It was titanic in size, as tall as about ten feet. It was hairy, brown fur puffing out all around its body. Sharp claws were fashioned onto its two beastly arms and legs, and his most notable quality? The two necks that separated from its body. Two heads. Twice the trouble.

*But bigger the fall,* Lara thought.

She ran towards the beast, unloading a whole magazine into its chest. Not much damage had been done. It roared in its unexpected reaction. Lara slid under the beast's legs and continued firing from behind. But one of the Guardian's necks, thrashing about in the air, scooped Lara up, wrapping its neck tight around her body.

*A grasp like an anaconda...* Lara recalled.

It picked her up from the ground, and she dropped her pistols, silently cursing herself for her clumsy mistake. The beast brought her up to eye level, and roared in her face, ghastly saliva spitting around.

"This is going to be harder than I thought," Lara muttered to herself.

Even though the beast had her arms pinned against her body, Lara had just enough room to reach the grappling hook that was hanging from her belt. She pointed the sharp tip at the Guardian's second head and fired.

The metal hook shot out from her belt like a rocket and buried itself directly into the right eye of the beast. As soon as the hook lodged itself inside the soft flesh of the eyeball, it sprang open, shooting blood and soft pieces of the beast's cornea all over Lara.

The beast bellowed in pain and released its' death grip on Lara.

She fell about fifteen feet towards the hard, rocky ground. Lara did a quick tuck-and-roll and landed right next to her pistols. She scooped them up as the Guardian, dripping blood from its eye, came back for round two.

Quick to avoid the beast which lashed at her with its mighty, and fearsome claws, Lara back flipped, nearly escaping the slash, and swipe of claws. She began to fire at the beast, the bullets bouncing off and rolling across the ground. She knew that she didn't have unlimited ammo, and that she'd have to act....fast.

Another shot to one of its eyes would make it half blind, which Lara could probably use to her advantage. The problem was that she couldn't aim perfectly with the beast lashing about. Taking cover behind a nearby pine, she pointed her pistols and fired at the first head. The first few bullets were a miss.

Then, it saw her. Crashing across the ground for her, she jumped out of the way as it crashed into the tree she had been hiding behind, and then she shot at its furry face. Direct hit.

More blood gushed from the beast's eye, and his entire left head was soaked with the maroon fluid. The tree the Guardian had crashed into swayed momentarily, and then picked up speed as it crashed with a thunderous echo, to the ground. The beast looked for Lara, located her, and then spun around madly. Lara had an idea. The beast needed to be defeated within the next moment. If not, Lara wasn't sure she could hold out against its rage, again. She had one last chance to bring the beast down...

Lara sprinted towards the back of the beast, firing her pistols as she ran.

*Please, thought Lara. Don't turn around.*

She needed the Guardian to lash out at her with its' tail. If not, her plan was worthless.

She decided to get the beast's attention by emptying her clips on the base of its tail. Eventually, the Guardian got the memo. The tail swung around in a low arc headed straight for Lara. She waited patiently for the tail to come around and then did what the beast was least-expecting.

Lara jumped onto the tail and ran up the beast's back, reloading as she went. The Guardian tried to swat her off of its' back, but Lara easily dodged the sharp claws and shimmied up one the long necks on to the head.

The beast roared, which was exactly what Lara wanted. She leaped off the top of the head and dove forward, firing three rounds down the throat off each head. Blood erupted from the back of the two heads as her bullets pierced the soft flesh of the throat.

Lara had timed her jump perfectly and landed softly in a nearby Baobab tree, just as the Guardian of the Temple crashed down onto the rocky ground.

The tree was a colossal size. Its branches are spread dozens of meters in all directions. Its central trunk was full of compliments and twisted recesses of life and death. Scratches caused by earlier battles of the Guardian.

She started to climb from the narrow crevices, clinging to all that amalgam of wood twisted like a whirlwind to heaven.

After a few minutes reached a branch and began to string enchain hops between all that net which was forming the tree.

Her skill made her get to the northern end of one of the largest branches of the tree.

From there she could jump into a small hole in the wall of the temple.

The temple was like none she'd ever experienced. Legend surrounding the artifact she was after spoke of a thousand traps that lay scattered throughout. Even if one were able to bypass the Guardian outside, they'd not survive the temple's various pitfalls spike traps.

The hole in the wall that she'd climbed through emptied into a long, stone corridor. There were black scratches periodically on the stone floor, hinting that Lara may be about to face a...

As she took a step forward, the stone beneath her lowered. It was a pressure pad. "Trap!" Lara shouted, alarmed at the swinging pendulums that began to slice back and forth very fast down the hall. Hesitant to continue, she turned to see a wall of spikes moving towards her from behind.

*There's only one way forward*, Lara realized. Taking a small jump back, she ran forward and dove over the first bladed pendulum. It missed her by an inch. Three more pendulums lied down the hallway, continually scratching into the stone floor. Lara ran, and jumped over the second. This time, the blade caught the back of her braid, slicing through the hair band, and cutting an inch to the ground.

"Bloody-" She was interrupted by the sound of a high frequency clashing. The spike wall and collided with the first swinging pendulum which held the wall back for a brief moment before it broke the pendulum and picked up even more speed.

She jumped over the third pendulum, and then to finish it off, swan dived over the next, landing in the "safe zone".

*As if any place here is...safe?* She realized as she turned out of the first hall, that she had already been plunged into the second, deadly trap...

The hallway with the pendulums opened up into a slightly larger room with a deep pit in the center. A thin, wooden beam connected the ledge that Lara was standing on to another

ledge about 40 feet on the other side. The only problem was, the second ledge was also about 25 feet *below* Lara's current position. This made walking down the beam at such an angle a highly improbable feat to pull off, even for Lara Croft.

Lara tried to look for a place to attach her grappling hook, hoping that she could just swing across the deep chasm that was filled with spikes, but the ceiling was just smooth stone.

*No problem*, she thought as she unspooled some of the cable and wrapped it around her left arm. Lara walked up toward the ledge and threw the other end of the grappling hook over the beam. It was then that she felt the ground beneath her sink about an inch.

*Pressure pad*, she thought.

She was right. As soon as the pad depressed, multiple hatches opened above the beam and began spewing thousands of gallons of water across the chasm.

*Oh well*, she thought as she jumped off the ledge and began her descent down the beam, hanging from the grappling hook and rope.

The water beat against her face, and she couldn't help but take in a few mouthfuls, accidentally. She spat out the water as she slid down the thin beam. The water caused her to be temporarily blind. She couldn't see a single thing, even through squinted eyes.

And then, she crashed into the wall on the other side of the chamber. Thankful that the thin beam hadn't snapped from the thousands of gallons of water, she scrambled to pull herself up onto the lower ledge. The waterfall that had been created beat so hard against her that she didn't even consider where all of the water was going.

With a final burst of adrenaline, she vaulted onto the ledge, and collapsed to the ground taking in slow, deep breaths. She opened her eyes, grateful that water wasn't pounding against them, and then slowly stood to her feet.

All she saw was a long corridor, which probably housed more traps. So far, she'd fought a giant guardian beast, survived swinging pendulums, and bypassed an indoor waterfall. What could be worse?

She had thought too soon. The chamber behind her was now overflowing with water. She would have to run to escape its powerful grasp. Light on her toes, she sprinted down the hall, the water splashing thunderously behind her.

And then the hall came to a stop. It just ended, right like that. The water was up to her thighs. Frantic, Lara beat against the wall, hoping she'd activate a secret switch or

something.

*What am I going to do?! she thought.*

Lara hastily looked for a solution, looking at the ceiling for an exit. Nothing. She paced in the water, trying to think. Suddenly, she realized that one of the floor panels were very light. Extremely light. She braced herself, and plunged under the water.

The panel was thin as paper. Enough for her to give it a good punch through it. She looked inside to find darkness, but the water slowly poured into it. She noticed a grip of some sort. This was better than anything right now, so she reached in and pulled the grip-lever.

It, though heavy, came up somewhat, and she heard a noise from above. One of the panels on the ceiling had disappeared. She saw mostly darkness up there, but an eerie shadow peered upon her until running quickly away. As relieved as she was, she had to figure out a way to get up there.

Lara realized that the easiest way to reach the hole in the ceiling was to just tread water underneath the hole and let the rising water carry her up into the black opening.

The shadowy figure that she saw earlier worried her. She could not see where she was going. She could be rising straight up into the open jaws of a crocodile or some other vicious beast. As she glanced up, Lara could see more shadows fall across the opening. Something was definitely moving around up there.

As she got closer to the opening, Lara pulled out her pistols and cautiously climbed out of the water. Fortunately, the water level had stopped rising as soon as it reached the top of the ceiling in the hallway below.

*Good, Lara thought. That's one less thing that I have to worry about.*

Unfortunately though, she had something new to worry about.

Even though the room was dark, Lara could tell what was moving around.

Rats. Hundreds of them. They were crawling all over each other and swarming towards Lara. As the first few rats starting climbing up her leg, she knew that she had to do something before she was buried.

She quickly thought of something to do. She pulled out a flare and lit it. Suddenly, all the rats ran away from the light. She attached it to her shirt strap, and they stayed clear of her. The flare was slowly dying, though, and she only had two more. She had to act quickly.

She walked cautiously through the room, looking for a place to go, or something intriguing. Suddenly, she bumped into a wall with a lever. There were so many levers; this must've been some sort of plan for her. She hesitantly pulled the lever. A light at the far end of the room turned on. Then another one, and soon the entire room was filled with light.

The rats scattered away into the cracks and holes of the room. The room was styled extremely differently than the other rooms. It was green tiles on the walls with old marble flooring. To the left of her were many T.V. screens next to each other, about 20 or 30. They were strategically placed through the entire temple. It was a sort of observation room! On the far end was a door, and a light was shining under the crack of it. *Should I go in?* she thought.

The idea was impossible. Nobody could enter the temple unless they first bypassed the Guardian, and she had been the only one? So how was it possible that there was electricity, and televisions, and lights in the temple? Had someone already beaten her to the prize?

She studied the door with the light coming from underneath. Realizing that it was the only way to proceed, she opened the door, which opened into a hallway with cords suspended from hooks in the ceiling, and others which lay buzzing on the ground. Suspicious towards the find, she followed the hall down to another door, opened it, and gazed inside.

She was in a vast, circular chamber, lights flickering at intervals around the room. And in the center was a great chasm. Mist filtered up from the bowels of the ancient pit, and the temple stones turned into natural rocks and jutting stalagmites.

Picking up a cord, she tested it to see if it could support her weight. Making the final assumption that the key to this mystery lay in the depths of the dark, misty chasm, she nodded, swept her hair behind her head, and began to repel down on one of the cords, twisting her legs around the wire, and taking it hand over hand.

She had completely missed the dead corpse up top which had once been foolish as well, and traveled into the mysterious pit...

As she descended lower into the misty chasm, Lara began to find it harder and harder to see. She also noticed that the temperature had dropped substantially as the mist thickened. It didn't feel natural though. It was almost as if the pit was being kept cold for some reason...

Lara pushed her thoughts aside as she reached the bottom of the pit. She could barely see her hand in front of her face. She thought about lighting another flare, but realized that it would just be a waste of her time and resources.

She took one step forward and stumbled over something on the ground. She turned around and knelt down. Even with the mist in her eyes, she could tell that it was a dead body she had just tripped over. She could also clearly see the bright red slash marks on the man's chest. The blood had not yet begun to cauterize. Lara knew that the body was fresh.

She was about to turn away when she noticed the black combat fatigues the man was wearing. An assault rifle also lay on the ground next to the body.

"So the other team did beat me here," she said.

"Yes, we did," came a man's raspy reply. "And you are going to help us get what we came for."

The sound of a gun being cocked behind her head told Lara that the man meant business.

She whipped around, lashing up with her foot and knocking his assault rifle out of his hands, already pointing her own pistols at the unknown mercenary's head. The sound of three or four more rifles being cocked around the room signaled to Lara that he wasn't alone.

"I wouldn't advise that, Lara Croft," said the mercenary.

"Who are you, and how did you get here?" she interrogated, trying to put some intimidation in her voice.

"My name isn't important. What is, though, is how fast you are going to turn away and leave this place. This fortress belongs to us."

"Were you the ones who shot down my helicopter?"

"It was a necessary precaution. You were supposed to die in that fall, but unfortunately for us, you didn't. We've been excavating this place for weeks, and as soon as you defeated the Guardian, strange things have begun to happen. First the power went out from up top, and our men are being killed one by one-

"My pilot died in that crash!" Lara yelled.

"We couldn't afford any competition. But it seems now that we don't have much time. Further through this dark chasm is a door leading to the chamber with the artifact. We made it in, and almost out all alive. Something is in there, Miss Croft. We need your help to get it."



"You must be mistaken if you think I intend on helping the enemy."

"No, but as you've probably taken notice, there isn't another way out up top," he said.

She thought about this for a moment. The mercenaries wanted to help her retrieve their precious artifact. And the mercenary had a point: there wasn't another way out...

Lara sighed and holstered her pistols. She wasn't too thrilled about helping these guys, but it didn't hurt to at least listen to their offer. Besides, as far as she could tell, there were only five of the men in the pit with her. For Lara Croft, 5 to 1 is considered good odds.

"Well then, tell me what you know, Mister..."

The man grinned and said, "It's sergeant to you. And my name doesn't matter. What does matter is that we've been down in this pit for about 20 minutes now. We came down with ten men and now we are down to five. Every time we try to continue along that long tunnel, something attacks us. I'm not exactly sure what it is. It almost looks like some kind of... ice monster, if you can believe that."

"Sergeant," Lara replied. "When you've been in my profession for as long as I have been, you start to believe the unbelievable."

The sergeant snorted and said, "Yeah, whatever. All I know for sure is that as long as we stay out here in the pit, the thing leaves us alone. But when we enter the tunnel, he tears us apart. So now, you are going to go in there. And you are going to bring us back the artifact."

"And what if I refuse?" Lara said, smugly.

"Then I'll put a bullet into your pretty, little face."

"On your head, be it," Lara chimed. It was a line she'd used twice before, only with men who were making a mistake. A very grave mistake. Picking the pistols out of their holsters, Lara held them loosely at her side, prepared to fire upon instinct.

The men led a very serious threat, and Lara had no doubt that "Sergeant" wouldn't have had a problem gunning her down. Even though she could handle the lot of them, she decided to go on from there. The sooner she got the artifact, the sooner she could determine how to deal with Sergeant and his men.

The darkness soon engulfed her, so Lara trailed over to the wall, brushing a hand against it to ensure she was going the right way. All was silent and dark. After a few minutes of walking, a small light became visible. It was red, and beginning to blink.

*Electricity?* Lara thought aloud.

And then the light grew bigger, and began to blink even faster. Staring in puzzlement, Lara stopped, and then jumped back just in time to avoid the icy fist that billowed from the air. It shattered upon impact blasting a chill wind around the dark hall. The red, blinking light turned into a red ray of light that spread its eerie illumination around the hall.

Lara gasped at the enormity of the icy monster. Its body was composed of a dense, cold ice, and had frozen spikes sprouted across its body. Its head was just the same, made of ice, except for the giant, single red beam coming from its face.

"Well, the bigger they are, the harder they fall," Lara jested, and then began firing at the beast's giant red eye.

Lara kept firing as she rolled and weaved her way through the open area around the ice monster. She back flipped away from another icy punch that shook the whole room. Needing to reload, Lara found a large block of ice to take cover behind.

She also took this time to assess her surroundings.

The whole room was covered in ice. The floor was solid ice that was at least two feet thick. The walls were also cut out of pure, white ice. Aside from a few chunks of ice like the one Lara was hiding behind now, the cavern was bare except for the ice monster and a bloody pile of three dead mercenaries.

Stepping out from behind ice block, Lara resumed shooting at the beast's red eye. She watched helplessly as her bullets pinged off the red dome that was emitting the laser. They also seemed to have no effect against the solid ice that coated that monster's body.

"Oh how I would love to have a flamethrower right now," Lara said, sarcastically as she rolled her eyes toward the ceiling.

It was then that she noticed the artifact she came for, sitting on an icy ledge about 30 feet above her, near the top of the room. She knew that if she could just reach the artifact, then she'd have no problem defeating the ice monster.

The problem was going to be reaching the artifact with an ice monster breathing down her neck.

Sprinting around the icy beast's powerful punch, she dodged his swift attacks just in time. Observing every detail she could, as fast as she could, she decided the only way up, was the hard way.

*Was there ever any other?* she thought silently. But the thought was interrupted, sliced into a million fragments of memory by the icy monster. It smashed its icy fist against the ground, making Lara clear path to his head. Vaulting on top of his fist, Lara began to run cautiously up his arm, unloading her pistols into its single, red eye.

Its fist was stuck, just as she had planned. Finally, with a single bound off the top of its head, which was shrieking in pain from the strike to its eye, Lara flew through the air, a free bird, onto the icy ledge.

The fabled Minotaur Statuette, encased in a crystalline glaze, the prized treasure of many great kings, and one of the most valuable, was now in Lara's hands.

**SMASH!**

The beast, blinded, swung towards the platform with his icy fist, attempting to smash Lara to bits, but instead making contact five feet above her on the wall behind her. Shards of rock pelted her, and the impact of the strike sent her tumbling to the ground. The Minotaur Statuette fell from her grasp, and struck the ground below.

But there was no thud, tink, or shatter. It was as if it hadn't hit at all. Cautiously gazing over the edge of the icy platform, she saw exactly what she was afraid of.

The mercenaries had gotten the artifact...

It was then that Sergeant unleashed the incredible power of the Minotaur Statuette.

Peering into the eyes of the golden centaur was rumored to give the wielder the strength of a centaur, and the uncanny ability to control fire. Lara confirmed this rumor as Sergeant melted the ice beneath the ice monster's feet with a fiery blast emitted from his hands.

Water started to drip down the large beast's body as the temperature rose to over one thousand degrees. The ground began to shatter, and with a loud *crack*, the floor gave way and the beast splashed down into a large pool, melting all the way as it passed through Sergeant's flames.

Sergeant and his team looked ready to leave, so she knew she had to make her move.

Lara jumped back from the ledge and sprinted towards the edge. At the last second she threw herself off of the icy ledge, drawing her pistols and firing at the mercenaries all the way down. She splashed down into the newly made pool that Sergeant had just opened up.

Lara knew that she had hit two of the men on the way down, but she also knew that Sergeant, with his new powers, would be waiting for her when she surfaced...

The plume of fire shot over her head as she surfaced, just as she had expected. But she was Lara Croft, and learning to adapt for the possibilities was something she had been practicing for years. She had only surfaced so her head was just barely above, allowing her to see Sergeant. The ice monster was gone, but she now had to deal with *him*.

As soon as the fire blazed overhead, she went underneath the surface again, preparing her lungs for a longer period of time submerged. She pulled out her pistols, aiming for the shadowed area of ice under Sergeant. Firing, the ice cracked, but barely. She'd have to risk surfacing again.

Jumping out of the pool, she went into a quick sprint, the flames licking the path behind her.

"No way out, Lara! You're stuck here, with me! And let me tell you, you won't be disappointed because today, I'm on fire!" He stopped shooting fire at her for a moment to show off his new abilities in a cloud of blue fire that cackled all around his body, doing no damage.

She took advantage of the moment, firing at the ice beneath his feet. He had stayed in the same position he was at when Lara had gone underwater. SO when the bullets met the weakened patch of ice, it shattered, and Sergeant plummeted into the depths, unaware that he had been tricked.

But she didn't have enough time to react. A blast of heat soared upwards, colliding with the icy, chamber roof. Hundreds of tons of ice shards began to fall to the chamber floor. Sergeant had used the Horn to blast the icy floor from underwater, an unthinkable feat. Now the chamber of ice collapsed around her. The icy monster had been taken care of, so getting to the surface shouldn't have been a problem. But...

...another burst of fire surged upwards as Sergeant, crisped and scorched, but still alive, summoned the power of the Minotaur Horn.

"You die, now, Lara Croft!" said his voice in an evil, dramatic tone. He raised the artifact which glowed in preparation for the attack.

"My, my. You're just another one of those men who focus too much on me, and not on the environment around them. That poor chap in London..." Catching him off guard, she fired a single bullet up at the ceiling, and the weakened ice shattered, solid stalactites falling straight for him. He cried out with a final scream of terror, dropping the Minotaur Horn to the ground with a clatter.

She picked it up, snatching it and retreating towards the exit just before a large stalactite did the same to her as to Sergeant. Sprinting towards the room, through the dark hallway, the icy, cold tunnels collapsed seconds behind her. She felt along the wall for the cord she'd come down on, and then after finding it, began to climb. Large stone blocks shot out of the wall from the internal pressure going around the room, threatening Lara's ascension.

Finally, at the top, she was safe. Putting the Minotaur Horn in her backpack, she gazed down at the large abyss as the walls collapsed around it, covering the tomb of Sergeant and his mercenaries.

Lara sighed, turning to leave the chamber. "Well, on the bright side of things, I now have a fire-starter for the library," she added.

The Tomb Raider was able to safely exit the forest temple, closing another adventure, many more awaiting her.

END

**This was the second Community Event to be hosted by Hunter's Tomb Raider Tales, from January to February of 2011. Thanks to all the participants who contributed their share to the story. The participants are as follows:**

Hunter Wolfe (Marluxia15) – Webmaster of Hunter's Tomb Raider Tales

Lord Gaga

FloTheMachine

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