

EMERALD EYE

A Lara Croft Adventure

by Bob Patterson

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AUTHOR'S NOTE: This story was inspired by the character of Lara Croft in the game Tomb Raider. My vision of Lara is of an assertive young woman, sometimes a loner, sometimes lonely. She is undoubtedly wealthy from her books and journals, and possibly from the sale of some of her finds. Despite having turned her back on her aristocratic past, Lara remains educated and cultured. She most likely has learned several languages in her travels, and has gained some standing in the archaeological community as well. Her knowledge of firearms and their use, something totally alien to most British citizens, must have come not just from her experiences but some type of instruction or training.

Having captured Bigfoot and published her book, Lara must certainly have become a public figure. This story assumes that she is considered a celebrity in the UK and America. One wonders how she deals with intrusive reporters...

BEGIN...

Chapter One

Lara Croft had just stepped down from the podium of the lecture hall in New York's Museum of Natural History. She was there to give a lecture to the National Archaeological Society about her discoveries on her last expedition - the one that took her to Atlantis. She wisely left out the part about the aliens. She was still being debriefed by MI-6 and the CIA about their presence and possible intentions and they asked her to refrain from discussing it; to which she agreed. But what a book it will make one day, she thought to herself.

As she left the lecture hall she was accompanied by Dr. Lilith Starks, the Museum's curator, and Sgt. Jonas Wilder, NYPD, assigned as her temporary security escort. Not that she needed any. Not with a Walther PPK tucked in the small of her back, neatly covered by her tailored Burberry suit jacket. She once dated a captain in the SAS who taught her the fine art of smuggling firearms through airport metal detectors. It had proven to be a most valuable skill.

"Your lecture was most fascinating, Miss Croft," Dr. Starks said, smiling. "It's quite exciting to have such a well known archaeological figure as yourself here at the Museum."

"You're too kind," Lara replied. "I appreciate the chance to share stories of my travels. And I'll use any excuse to come to New York." Lara loved Manhattan. In fact, all her Western Hemisphere expeditions were based here. She maintained a small office and apartment in the Upper West Side, along with a respectable collection of classic Harleys.

The trio walked out through the Museum's main lobby, past a crowd of onlookers, students and assorted fans, all hoping for Lara to autograph their copies of her latest book. Lara smiled and waved, while Dr. Starks apologized to the crowd, explaining that Miss Croft's visit was to be as low-key as possible this time. Sorry, everyone. Maybe next time. Sgt. Wilder noticed several TV news crews out in the street, likely waiting to catch a glimpse of the famous adventuress, and remembering his orders to keep Lara from the eyes of the press, recommended another exit.

"Ma'am, we had better take the side door. I got an unmarked car waitin' and we can go out through the back gate." He motioned to a nondescript door next to an Italian sculpture of some long forgotten pope.

"Thank you no, Sergeant," Lara said. "I appreciate your concern, but

I don't think there will be a problem with the front entrance."

"But ma'am, there're some TV crews out there and I have orders that you not be harassed by the media."

"Nothing of it. We'll just pop past them and that will be that. Dr. Starks," she said, turning to the curator, "Thank you ever so much for your hospitality. It was great fun speaking to your society. Promise me that you'll invite me back."

Lilith Starks, Ph.D., was charmed by the delightful and interesting young woman. "Of course, Miss Croft. You are most welcome whenever you wish."

Lara smiled at her host, and turned for the main doors with Wilder in the lead. He held the glass door open for her as she breezed through into the beautiful early autumn afternoon. Immediately, cameras and microphones pointed in her direction as she descended the marble steps to 5th Avenue. Several overly dressed reporters started yelling questions in her direction.

"Miss Croft! What about reports you discovered extraterrestrials on an island in the..."

"Do you really carry twin pistols on your expeditions..."

"Could you respond to reports that you were recently seen with Prince Charles..."

Hah, she thought. As if she would answer that last one. It was just a benefit appearance at the British Museum. The tabloids had her in a passionate affair with the Prince of Wales within days of the event. She continued with Sgt. Wilder down to the street smiling and shaking her head no, as if she had nothing to say.

The NYPD detective, for his part, didn't like having all those reporters and cameras bothering his protectee and the look on his face showed it. Lara noticed.

"Oh Sergeant. You mustn't be bothered by all the fuss. I'm followed in London loads of times by the paparazzi these days. I simply ignore them and go my way."

"Yes ma'am," the 20-year veteran growled in reply. "I just don't like the security risk. There's no barrier over there. One of those guys could be a maniac with a gun or something..."

“Well, it won’t be the first time for me.” Lara chuckled to herself.

“Maybe not, but this is New York, not some cave in Peru. You can’t carry a machine gun on the street here.”

Just as they reached the sidewalk, a black BMW 720 rolled up to the curb. The front passenger door opened and out stepped an athletic looking man in his mid 20s sporting a short GI haircut and an expensive gray pinstripe suit. Wilder noticed the man’s coat was open. He was probably carrying. The man opened the rear door for Lara, and she began to step in.

“No you can’t. Too bad, that. Take care of yourself, Sergeant.” Lara smiled to the detective as her door was closed. The bodyguard got back in the car and it quickly moved into traffic down Central Park West.

Wilder, a veteran of countless drug busts and street shootouts, watched the black car as it sped away. That gal, he thought, is definitely one in a million...

Chapter Two

Lara's car was equipped with a satcom link hidden in the trunk. In front of her was a small work area, with a phone and Power Book laptop. She popped the laptop open and pressed the Startup key. While the computer booted up, she picked up the phone and began dialing.

"Janis, could you drive me to my flat, please?" Lara said to the driver, a wiry brunette with Julia Ormond good looks. She was dressed similarly to her colleague in the other front seat, except she wore black Ray-Bans. Her suit jacket was unbuttoned as well. In addition to the handguns both ex-Secret Service bodyguards carried, there was a 9mm Heckler & Koch MP-5 submachinegun under the front passenger seat and a Benelli semiauto 12 ga. tactical shotgun behind a drop panel in the driver's door. They were better armed than any police car in New York.

"Sure thing, Miss Croft," Janis replied, turning right and merging into the traffic of 72nd Street. Lara's flat was only a few blocks from the museum. The traffic slowed to a crawl. Typical for this time of day.

Lara finished dialing the number and heard it ring on the other end. Just as the second ring began the phone was picked up. "Hello?" The cautious voice was that of an elderly gentleman.

"Dr. Rademacher. Hello. It's me, Lara Croft."

The voice of Dr. Charles Rademacher, Dean of Fordham University's Department of History, changed suddenly. "Lara! What a pleasant surprise to hear from you. How are you, dear girl?"

Lara smiled in return. She genuinely liked the old man. He was a regular source of valuable research for her. "I am well, Doctor. In fact, I'm here in New York at the moment."

She eyed the computer. It had finished booting up. Lara was running System 8.0.1, a special release she had gotten as a favor from a friend at Apple. She clicked on the Netscape icon and it started up. "I have a request of you, Doctor." Lara continued. "I need to obtain some information regarding the Nitlacatzal tribe of Ecuador. Familiar with them?"

"Yes, the name strikes a bell. Didn't they die out around 200 BC? Plague, I believe."

"I think so. I need to know something of their written alphabet. I have come across an artifact that bears some writings I can't quite identify

and I think it may be of Nitlacatzal origin.”

As Lara spoke the Netscape mail screen came up and her latest incoming messages began to download. Only a dozen or so, she noted.

“Really,” Dr. Rademacher replied, intrigued. “Well, I would love to look at it. I’m sure we can dig up something on it. I can make a few calls. Meanwhile, Lara dear, you must join Elizabeth and me for dinner tonight.”

“I would absolutely adore it!” Lara replied. “I’ll bring the artifact with me.”

“Seven o’clock, then?”

“Smashing. Goodbye, Doctor.”

She placed the phone back in its cradle and turned her attention to her E-mail. She saw some messages from her publisher, one from a university in England, and others from some of her friends. One message caught her attention. The subject line read: “IMMEDIATE RESPONSE” and the sender’s address read “krj0722A@bragg.army.mil”. Odd, she thought. Who from the American army would have discovered her private E-mail address and sent her a message? Lara clicked on it and the text opened in the message window. The message read:

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FROM: krj0722A@bragg.army.mil  
TO: lc@croft.org  
SUBJECT: IMMEDIATE RESPONSE
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Miss Croft, please call (910) 553-2621 and ask for Major Ashton. This is very urgent.

There was no name at the bottom.

Their car finally cleared the traffic jam. Janis accelerated, turned left at Columbus Avenue and turned left again at 71st. She slowed at the parking entrance of Lara’s building. The sleek black BMW slid into the dark entryway. Lara was puzzled by the message. “Jeff, what is bragg dot army dot mil anyway?”

Jeffrey O’Rourke, former agent of the U.S. Secret Service, turned around to face his employer. “Sounds like Fort Bragg, down in North Carolina. Big place. Been there a couple times.”

“What could they possibly want with me?”

“Beats me, Miss Croft.”

They stopped in front of the elevator. Jeff stepped out and opened Lara’s door. Janis’ head swiveled left to right, scanning for possible threats. Lara stepped out and followed Jeff to the lobby door. As Janis moved the car to Lara’s reserved spot, the pair walked into a waiting elevator.

“Already hearing great reviews of your lecture, Lara. There’s talk of publishing a transcript of it in the Smithsonian Journal!” Jenny Harriman was excited. She greeted Lara with the news as they walked through the door of her penthouse apartment. Jenny was Lara’s personal assistant. Her right hand, actually. Jenny kept Lara’s schedule organized, kept the press away, generally did everything Lara didn’t have time or inclination to do herself. Lara was pleased with the news.

“That’s wonderful, Jenny. Make sure they don’t use an unflattering photo of me, will you? Any other news?”

“There was a call for you from a Major Ashton of the U.S. Army. Said he’d call back. You thinking of joining up or something?” she joked.

Lara chuckled lightly. “And cut off all my hair? Not bloody likely. Did he say what he wanted?”

“Nope. Very curt to say the least.”

Lara walked through the entryway into the living room. Her apartment was decorated with artwork and sculpture from nearly every civilization in history. There was a handsome collection of Pre-Columbian art in a King Edward oak display case on one wall, some Masai war masks and spears by the leather sofa, a jade tea set from the Ming dynasty and a solid gold statue of Kali on the glass coffee table. On the walls hung some amazing paintings, including a Van Gogh, a Manet and even a beautifully restored Rembrandt. There were also some rare Japanese prints and an ancient Tibetan scroll. The artifacts in this room alone were worth millions.

The large windows gave a spectacular view of Central Park, casting the late afternoon light across the room. Lara removed her jacket and threw it on the sofa, slipped her pistol and holster from her belt and laid it on the coffee table then turned to the small kitchen to make some tea. O’Rourke took up a position by the door, as he always did while waiting for his partner to come up from the garage. Jenny followed her boss into the kitchen.

“I wonder why the Army would be calling you? Is it about your last trip? I know you spent time in D.C. answering questions about it,” Jenny asked, retrieving a pair of teacups and saucers from the cupboard. Being an American, she normally drank her tea from a mug. But Lara would die of thirst before doing such a thing, so Jenny had to adopt the habit of using teacups and saucers.

Lara opened a box of imported Darjeeling from the counter and put the water on to boil. She measured an amount of the black leaves into a silver tea ball and laid it next to the cups. The water would be ready in a few minutes. Lara sat at the small kitchen table and kicked off her shoes. She was a little tired after a long day surrounded by bookish intellectuals. Perhaps a late night workout, she thought.

“I don’t think so, Jen,” she replied. “Both the American and British security services asked all their questions. None of them had any military nature, really. By the by, did you confirm those reservations to Los Angeles on the fourth?”

“Sure did. You’ll be flying first class on British Airways to LAX and will be staying at the Los Angeles Plaza Suites. The staff from the Institute will meet you at your hotel. Jeff and Janis will travel separately and will meet you at the airport.” Lara was scheduled to speak at the Institute of Archaeology at UCLA next week. It was speaking engagements like this along with her book sales that funded her expeditions. Lara Croft was a white-hot item on the lecture circuit these days, what with her books and the articles in Newsweek, The Economist and the BBC interview. Everyone wanted to meet the beautiful auburn-haired adventuress. One of the national morning TV news shows had called her Indiana Jane. There was even a computer company who approached her about designing a game based on her adventures.

Just then the phone rang. Jenny picked it up. “Croft residence. Yes, Major, she’s here. One moment please.” She handed the phone to Lara mouthing the words ‘that’s him’. Lara took the cordless handset to her ear.

“Yes? Lara Croft here.”

The voice on the other end had a clipped Texas drawl that rang like gunmetal. “Miss Croft, I’m Major Wayne Ashton, U.S. Army. I apologize for the directness of this call, but a situation has come up that requires your expertise. We’d like to ask you for assistance.”

“Really,” Lara replied, curious. “What could the Army want with me?” Janis had just entered the kitchen and was pouring herself a cup of

coffee.

“Ma’am, have ever you heard of somethin’ called the Emerald Eye?”

Lara felt goosebumps on her arms. The teakettle began whistling, but she didn’t hear it. Jenny eyed her with concern.

“Ma’am?”

“Y-yes. Major. Yes, I’ve heard of it. Why?”

“Well, ma’am, to put it directly, we need to get our hands on that thing in a big hurry, or some people are gonna die. Have you seen the news today?”

Lara frantically gestured to the TV in the corner. Jenny picked up the remote and turned it on.

“No, major, I’ve been occupied. What’s going on?”

“Some tangos have taken down the U.S. Embassy in Nairobi. If they don’t get this Emerald Eye, whatever it is, they’re going to waste the hostages. I’ve been told it’s some kind of ancient artifact. We looked for someone who was qualified to go get it. Short list of names. Yours was first. We’ve cleared you with the State Department and the Brits. When can you come down to Fort Bragg?”

Lara was even more confused. ““Tangos’?”

“Terrorists, ma’am. Some sort of religious cult. Fanatics. Very dangerous. We need you here ASAP, Miss Croft.”

Lara glanced over to the television. CNN was on. The graphic at the bottom of the screen read “Breaking Story: U.S. Embassy, Nairobi, Kenya.” The picture was taken from some distance, waves of heat distorting the image. There was a walled compound in the African night. In front of the gate under the glare of floodlights lay two bodies. They had been shot. Blood ran down to the street. Jenny and the two bodyguards watched, frozen to the floor.

Lara played for sport, never for stakes this high. This was something else altogether. And the Emerald Eye. Did it even exist? She thought on it for a split second. Her decision made itself. How could she turn this down?

“Major, I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

His voiced changed, taking on the unmistakable tone of command. “We have a plane waiting at Newark. You can be here in two hours. Bring your gear.”

The phone clicked. Lara laid it on the table and jumped up to go into her bedroom to change into her “work clothes”.

“Janis, bring the car round please. We’re going to Newark Airport. Jeff, pack my kit. Include everything. Jenny, cancel the flight to L.A. And cancel with Dr. Rademacher, please. I’m going to North Carolina.”

Chapter Three

The USAF C-9 executive transport touched down at Pope Air Force Base exactly one hour and fifty-six minutes later. It had one passenger. The plane slowed to taxiing speed within less than half the length of the runway. A minute later, it stopped at the apron. A car was waiting. The plane's door opened and stairs extended to the tarmac. Out stepped Lara, dressed in khaki cotton trousers, white T-shirt, climbing boots and a wool-lined RAF leather flying jacket. Her long ponytail swayed like a lioness' tail as she descended the steps. She carried a large black duffel bag filled with an assortment of equipment. Climbing gear, ropes, clothes, satellite comphone, and two Browning Hi-Power 9mm pistols with extra ammo. She figured if she needed more firepower, the U.S. Army probably had a rifle or two lying around.

A tall black man in fatigues came up to her. The nametape on his right breast pocket read "Sommers". He wore a dark green beret. American Special Forces, Lara guessed.

"Miss Croft, Sergeant Sommers. Let me get that." He took her bag and tossed it into the open trunk. "We better get a move on, Ma'am."

The pair got into the car and Sommers drove off toward Fort Bragg, which was situated next to the air base.

Jeff was right. This place was huge. Sgt. Sommers explained that the post was home to America's quick response forces. XVIII Airborne Corps, the 82nd Airborne Division, the Special Operations Command, and a host of other units were based here. Including the one they were about to visit.

"Which one was that?" Lara asked. Sommers smiled.

"SFOD-Delta", he said. "But the TV and the papers call us Delta Force".

The headquarters building of the 1st Special Forces Operational Detachment-Delta was hidden behind a high concrete wall. A blue and gold sign at the gate read simply "Security Operations Training Facility." There was an electronic keypass console by the gate. Sommers pressed his thumb against a sensor, a green light lit up and the gate opened. The car slowly drove in.

In the sunset, Lara saw a five-story concrete structure directly to their front connected to a low building that stretched off to the left. Sounds of muffled gunfire emanated from that building. On the right stood a smaller building and a parking lot. Sommers led her into the smaller

building. They crossed through a small lobby to an elevator. On the walls were pictures of commandos on training exercises and missions. One showed a group of dusty, bearded men wearing desert-toned uniforms and Arab headdresses. One looked like Sommers.

They stepped into the elevator. It began to descend. “We’re going down to the Intel area,” Sommers explained. “The command staff is waiting for you. They’re going to give you a sitrep and will expect a briefing on this Emerald Eye.”

Lara’s eyes opened wide. “Briefing? I’m not prepared for that! And what’s a ‘sitrep’?”

“Situation report, Ma’am. And don’t worry about your briefing. They’re an informal bunch. I’m sure you know more about that thing than they do.”

The elevator opened into a room that looked to Lara like the city room of a major newspaper. There were rows of desks, computer terminals and background chatter everywhere. Except that everyone here was in uniform. There were some doors along the back wall. Sommers led her to one of them. They entered.

Inside was a conference room. A large table dominated the center. Several officers sat around it. There were TV screens on one wall and a large map of the Embassy on the other. Its purpose was clear to Lara. Everyone turned to look at her. The nearest officer rose and extended his hand.

“Major Ashton. Miss Lara Croft, I presume.” Lara shook his hand and smiled politely. He continued. “I’m the Operations Officer here. Let me introduce the others. Here is our commander, Colonel Joseph Williams, the executive officer, Lieutenant Colonel Ralph Peters, our intelligence officer Major Nick Karansky, and the leader of one of our squadrons, Captain Jack Kraemer. I see you’ve met Sergeant Sommers, our chief NCO.”

“Yes. How do you do, gentlemen,” Lara said. As she sat, she took stock of the men in the room. Col. Williams was a bulldog of a man, with craggy features and snow white hair. He wore a dress green jacket with rows of ribbons nearly up to his shoulder. Peters was thin and scholarly looking, but with an intensely focused gaze. Karansky had dark Mediterranean features and jet black hair. Kraemer, however, made more of an impression. Not quite slender, but muscled, he had a young face and deep brown eyes. A scar ran from just above his right cheek around his eye to the end of his eyebrow. Unlike the others, he wore a black jumpsuit and assault vest. A silenced MP-5 lay on the table in front of him. He looked dangerous. Lara liked dangerous. She

was attracted to him instantly. And she noticed that he was looking at her the same way.

“Let’s get her up to date”, Williams ordered, snapping Lara back to the present. Major Karansky hit a key and the TV screens lit up with images of the embassy. “Miss Croft”, he began, “We have a group of Kenyan terrorists that we believe are backed by the IRA and several Islamic fundamentalist outfits. They came in posing as a catering crew, just like the takedown in Peru last year. There are 47 hostages: Kenyan, British and American. We can’t find out much about the bad guys, but we have this videotape.”

The TV screens showed two African men standing behind the embassy’s main gate. They were armed with automatic weapons and waving spears at the crowds in the street.

“They’re Maasai. I can tell by the spears. From the Kisumu area, I should think. Near Lake Victoria.” Lara blurted out without thinking. All heads turned to her. She suddenly felt the weight of five pairs of eyes focusing on her intently.

“Keep going, Miss,” Karansky asked. She had just unlocked a 12 hour-old mystery. Apparently they had no Swahili speakers here.

“Is there sound? Can I hear what they’re saying?” Lara asked. Karansky turned up the sound. The angry jabbering of a terrorist filled the room.

“Oh, yes, they’re Kisumu Maasai. I recognize the accent. He says that the Kenyan government is killing off their cattle, starving their babies...the Americans are at fault...we have to rise up and take revenge...oh, my that was obscene.” Lara observed. “Oh... He says that they will begin killing the hostages in twelve hours if they don’t receive the Emerald Eye.”

“Which brings us to our next point,” Lt. Col. Peters observed. “Just what is this ‘Emerald Eye’ and why are they so willing to kill for it?”

“Well,” Lara began, “I must tell you that the Emerald Eye is more myth than fact. No one knows if it actually exists.”

Bad news. Groans and whispered obscenities filled the room.

Lara continued. “The story is an old one. The legend says that in the days when the Maasai ruled the earth, there was a chief called Bantuswana. He was a great warrior. So great that the people revered him as a god. God heard this from his home on Kilimanjaro and became furious. He came down to Bantuswana and they fought. The

fight was so great that the forests were destroyed and the sun grew dark. Finally God overpowered Bantuswana and put his spirit into a stone. An emerald in the shape of an eye, to be precise. Then God separated the Maasai from the Bantu and for all time took the emerald with him back to Kilimanjaro. If the Emerald Eye can be found and a Maasai warrior holds it in his right hand, he will be able to release the spirit of Bantuswana and rule the Earth. Well, that's what the legend says at least."

"Do you know the location of this thing in the mountain?" Kraemer spoke for the first time. His strong, quiet voice sent a small shiver up Lara's back. What was his first name? Jack?

"I have some copies of ancient maps and drawings," Lara replied. "We can find a place to start. But I can't guarantee anything."

Major Ashton spoke with finality in his voice. "Well please get started, Miss Croft. We got a squadron in Mombassa ready to board choppers and go take down the embassy. That'll be bloody. We don't wanna do that. We wanna tell 'em that we're going to look for this damn stone and to hold off killin' anybody. They killed two people already. We don't want any more dead."

Williams turned to Kraemer. "Jack, pick two of your best men and accompany Miss Croft on the search team. Take a satcom unit so we can keep in touch. You may have to parachute in. Miss Croft, have you ever jumped in a parachute?"

"Why yes. I am a certified skydiver."

"Good, 'cause you're jumping with the Army now. It's almost sunrise in Kenya. We go in after dusk. You have 12 hours to get ready, people. Let's do it."

Chapter Four

Lara and the search team had only three hours to prepare before their plane left for Africa. There was much to do, including preparing team weapons and equipment and gathering last-minute information. Jenny accessed Lara's computer database in the UK and faxed dozens of pages to Lara, including historical records, drawings and tribal research. Along with the satellite images provided by the CIA, the team had assembled a thorough "target folder".

Lara met the other two members of their team. Terrell Givens was a 6'3" former Michigan linebacker. He grew up on Detroit's west side and developed his survival instincts on the street. He was with Delta in Iraq, where he was awarded a Silver Star. Givens was a knife fighting expert as well as the team paramedic. Dave Collins was a skinny big-eared kid from Oklahoma who started out with the Rangers in Panama. He was one of Delta's top rifle marksmen - one of the very best in the world. Known as D.C., he was also responsible for the satcom radio.

Each member on the team carried a variety of equipment. The men chose standard green camo fatigues and jungle boots for this mission. Under their fatigue jacket went an armor vest, and over that went a nylon assault vest in which they carried ammo, knife and related gear. The vest attached to a web belt that included a leg holster for each man's sidearm, a Colt .45 pistol. Lara stuck to her sky blue leotard, khaki shorts and British Army hiking boots. No one seemed to complain about her choice of clothing, although she would have to wear black overalls for the jump.

Everyone on the team, including Lara, had a Motorola radio that was wired to an earpiece and throat mike. This allowed them to communicate by whispering. The team was well armed. Jack and D.C. carried CAR-15s, the shortened version of the M-16. Terrell carried a full size M-16 with an M-203 grenade launcher under the barrel. Lara persuaded Jack to loan her his MP-5SD submachinegun. That was the best choice for her, as she would need only one caliber of ammo for the MP-5 and her pistols.

In addition to all the standard gear, everyone carried specialized items according to their job. Jack carried a "combat laptop" developed for Delta. In it was stored data they would need for the mission. Terrell had a medical trauma kit that included everything except an ambulance. D.C. carried the satcom terminal and foldable dish. Lara carried only her backpack and climbing kit.

Around midnight they boarded a MH-60K NightHawk helicopter for the three mile hop to the plane. The four of them sat in a circle on the

deck.

“So you’re the one who found Bigfoot, eh?” Givens shouted over the roar of the rotor blades.

“That’s right. Smelly bloke. Ugly too.” Lara shouted back, smiling.

“Ha! Kinda like you, buddy!” D.C. shouted, jabbing his friend in the ribs. Givens responded with the one finger salute, eliciting laughter from everyone.

Lara felt a tap on her shoulder and turned to see Jack leaning toward her ear so as not to shout. It was the first time he touched her. “So what got a nice girl like you into this game anyway?” She could see his smile through the black camo cream on his face.

“Life was too boring before. Thought I could use some adventure in my life.”

“Well,” Jack said, “you seem to have done that in spades. It must be a challenge going into all those tombs and caverns all by yourself.”

Now it was Lara who smiled. “I like a challenge. You must too, given your line of work. What got you into doing this?”

Jack shrugged. “I like being a soldier. And I don’t like sitting around peeling potatoes.”

“It must be hard having a personal life as busy as you are.”

“Ha,” Jack snorted. “I forgot what a personal life was.”

“Too bad,” Lara said, half to herself.

They landed on the Pope AFB tarmac near a C-141 jet transport. The team hopped from the chopper and jogged to the open tailhatch and up the ramp of the jet. Their parachutes, jumpsuits and oxygen masks were waiting for them.

“Okay, everyone,” Jack called out. “Let’s rig our chutes and get the O systems checked. Then we can get a few hours sleep before we jump². I’m going to go up front and get an update from Nairobi.” He went forward to the flight deck while Terrell and D.C. started rigging their jump gear. Lara sat down and took out her stove to brew some tea. First things first.

Chapter Five

There were two reasons the team was parachuting in. One was that it was the quickest way to get them into the area. The other was that Mt. Kilimanjaro was actually in Tanzania, just across from the Kenyan border. Tanzania absolutely forbade U.S. military units from entering their airspace. So, the team had to slip in undetected. The best way to do that was by doing a night HALO jump.

HALO, or High Altitude Low Opening, was a skydiving technique developed by the Green Berets. It involved exiting an aircraft at more than 30,000 feet using oxygen and freefalling all the way down to about 1,200 feet where the chute is deployed. The skydivers could travel almost 20 miles laterally which allowed the aircraft to remain in friendly airspace. It was hazardous enough, even more so at night. To Lara, the idea was absolutely insane. Even though she was a moderately experienced sport jumper, this kind of jump was beyond her expertise. Jack promised she would be safe as long as she remembered the procedures he taught her. She resolved to jump no matter what. She couldn't back down in front of these men.

The tailramp opened and the four black-clad parachutists stepped gingerly to the edge. The lights of Nairobi could be seen to the right and the thin pink ribbon of sunset stretched out before them. It was a breathtaking sight. The warning light turned from red to green and the four of them jumped into the cloudless African night.

“Boss!”

“Come in.”

Jamba strode into the Ambassador's office. Its current occupant was seated behind the desk, enjoying one of the fine Cuban cigars the Ambassador kept in a cedar box on the desk. Despite what the police and reporters thought outside, he was far from a terrorist. His hands had rarely seen manual labor, the nails neatly manicured. The chic safari clothes he wore were the work of Savile Row tailors. His tan came not from days toiling on the savanna but from relaxing in St. Tropez. Despite all that, he instilled fear in the hearts of the twenty heavily armed men that were currently occupying the building and surrounding grounds. His name was Jean-Pierre Rimoux.

“Oui, Jamba”, Rimoux replied smoothly, “What is it?”

“We've heard from our friends in New York. She departed in a mili-

tary jet. She must be on her way here.”

Rimoux allowed a cold smile to cross his face. Croft was involved. She was coming. To the mountain.

“Excellent news, Jamba. Soon our prize will be in our hands, thanks to Miss Croft.”

“By the way, Boss,” Jamba added, “The hostages are complaining again. They want to go to the bathroom.”

That drew a sardonic smile from the man behind the desk. “Well, let us not stand in the way of their bowels.”

Jamba nodded and left the office. Rimoux leaned back in the leather chair and inhaled deeply. These were indeed wonderful cigars. How unfortunate their previous owner was too dead to enjoy them any longer. Rimoux knew the Eye was hidden in the mountain. The tribal records he recently found proved it. He also knew that Lara would find those same records and figure out how to retrieve the Eye.

‘Ahh,’ he thought, ‘Lara, we will meet again. It has been so long since you stole what was rightfully mine. Now, I shall steal it from you.’ Rimoux chuckled softly. ‘Perhaps I will have the pleasure of taking the Eye from your dead hands.’

“How’s the ankle?” Givens offered a hand to help Lara to her feet. She twisted her ankle on the landing. Other than that, the jump went pretty well.

“As well as can be expected, I suppose,” Lara grimaced. “I’ll have to lace that boot a bit tighter.”

Givens smiled. “You did great for a first night jump, Ma’am. I broke my arm my first time.”

Lara smiled back. “Thanks. And please, call me Lara. I’m not a Royal, you know.”

Givens’ smile broadened. “You got it, Lara.”

After hiding their parachutes, jumpsuits and harnesses, the team assembled their packs and huddled in a circle to plan their next move. Jack flipped on his laptop and called up the tactical map file.

“Okay. GPS says we’re right here, the summit is here. Lara, what’s next?”

Lara leaned over to see the LCD screen, holding her faxes close. “Right,” she began, “According to these Maasai tribal drawings, there is an entrance to a cavern on the northeast face of the mountain. Just here, I should think. It’s outside the park reserve, so there shouldn’t be any footpaths there. Look at this drawing. It shows a spear of stone marking the entrance to the cavern. Most likely a rock formation.”

D.C. peered at the screen dubiously. “How the heck’re we gonna get there without running into park rangers? They have patrols all through there.”

“We’ll have to go through here,” Jack declared, running his finger along a spit of land close to the summit. “This rocky area will give us cover until we reach the tall grass. Then it’s another mile or so to the spear. It’ll be rough humping across five miles of crappy terrain.” He paused, looking everyone in the eye.

“Remember, people. This is not a hot war mission. The rules of engagement are strict. Weapons tight. Only fire on my order. The Tanzanians are not the enemy, but if they fire on us, drop ‘em.”

“I’d like to add,” Lara interjected, “that we’ll be crossing free range. We’ll likely encounter a cattle herd or two. Where there’re cattle, there’re cattle herders. And they have excellent hearing.”

“No problem”, D.C. said flatly. We sneak in, grab the green rock and get out. Should be a snap.”

“If it were that easy, you wouldn’t have called me. These expeditions have their own unique dangers. Something this important will be protected by an elaborate series of boobytraps. There may even be creatures in there dedicated to keeping us out.”

Everyone looked at Lara incredulously. Givens didn’t buy it.

“Girl, whatcha talkin’ about? I know you didn’t say that.”

“I did. Wait until my next book comes out.”

The four of them sat motionless for a few seconds. Then Jack finally spoke.

“Alright. D.C., take point. Then me, then Lara, and Terrell takes the rear. That’s it, people. Move out.”

Chapter Six

Kenyan authorities were in charge of all negotiations with the terrorists, although there were U.S. and British advisors on hand. The Kenyans were proving impossible to work with. They disallowed anyone but themselves to listen in on conversations with the terrorists, refused their advisors Swahili translators, and most of all, would not let Delta fly its assault team into the city. They were all still stuck at the airport in Mombassa. Major Sam Wallis, Delta's senior officer on site, was worried. If things went bad, he wasn't even sure the Kenyans would give him permission to assault the building.

Wallis knew that they would anyway. His orders from the President were clear. Should there be an imminent threat to the lives of the hostages, do what is necessary and let the State Department clean up the mess later. That was fine by him.

What neither the Kenyans nor the Brits knew was that the U.S. had an ace up its sleeve. Posing as American and Canadian journalists in the crowd of reporters surrounding the embassy were several Delta recon teams with some very special surveillance gear. Their bulky videocameras contained thermal imagers that could "see" through the walls of a building and read the heat signatures of the people inside. The shotgun microphones were actually laser mics that when fired at a window could read vibrations in the glass and translate them into sound. Right under everyone's nose, Delta was quietly assembling detailed information on the location of every hostage and terrorist in the embassy. Wallis stayed in touch with the teams via a radio earpiece tucked in his left ear.

So far, they had ascertained that all the hostages were being kept in the main ballroom on the first floor. There were twenty-two bad guys in the building. Four were down in the ballroom and another four patrolled the first floor hallways. There were eight on the second floor: four at the front and four in the back. On the top floor stood one man at each corner. One more man wandered throughout the building and one stayed in the secure room in the Ambassador's office, coming out only occasionally. It was assumed this was the guy in charge and the rover was his lieutenant.

The laser mics told them a little more. The shooters spoke in guttural Swahili. The rover barked orders at them but never in English. His voice matched the voice they were told was on the other end of the phone. What concerned Wallis was the boss man. No one could find out anything about him. He could be the key to the whole thing.

"Halo, Major."

Wallis' thoughts were interrupted by the junior British diplomat on scene. What was his name? Smythe? What did he want?

"How did you know I was a major?" Wallis asked.

The Brit smiled. "Captain Howard Smythe, Her Majesty's 22nd Special Air Service Regiment."

Now Wallis smiled. SAS was here too. He felt a little better. "Smyth, good to see you. At least we're not alone here."

"Not completely. We only have one recce team about. I assume your lads are out there somewhere?"

"Yeah," Wallis replied. "All around the embassy. We've got a pretty good target layout now."

"Ah," Smyth smiled back. "You Yanks and your gadgets. Where did you say the hostages were?"

Smart aleck. "First floor ballroom, as you've probably heard from your recce team. I assume they have a thermal imager of their own."

"Touché, Major. Just confirming our data. So what is the assault plan?"

"We're taking a page from your book. Just like Princess Gate. We'll hit the roof and rappel down the sides. We'll hit all three floors simultaneously." Wallis referred to the dramatic 1980 rescue of the Iranian Embassy in London. The SAS made history that day.

"Right," Smyth replied, pleased. "Sounds like you know who to learn from. How is the search team getting on then?"

"We haven't heard from them since they landed. They should be checking in soon. I wonder how your girl is doing. Think she can hang?"

Smyth grinned. Lara Croft was near legend in the U.K. "I'm sure that Ms. Croft is keeping the British end up."

After a four-hour cross-country march the search team neared the objective. D.C. saw it first. He signaled the team to halt then crawled forward about 30 meters to get a better look. Jack's voice crackled in his earpiece. "Talk to me, Dave."

“I think I see it. Rock formation, about six feet high. Looks just like the drawing.”

Lara and Jack looked at each other. The drawings were right. Jack keyed his mike.

“We’re coming in.”

Jack, Lara and Terrell joined D.C. at the obelisk-shaped rock. It was barely visible in the starless night, but it looked nearly identical to the drawing Lara carried. The foursome stood in a rough circle around it, staring. “Well, what now?” Jack asked.

Lara touched the rock, moving her fingers deliberately over its smooth surface. She studied it closely, looking for anything that might indicate what to do next. “Check for hidden switches, carvings, anything,” she ordered. “The answer must be here.”

The men stepped forward to inspect the rock. As Terrell stepped up to touch it, the ground suddenly gave way under his feet. He disappeared into a hole, landing in a heap.

“OW!” he shouted. The other three jumped, startled. D.C. peered into the hole and saw Terrell trying to stand in the darkness.

“You okay pardner?”

“Yeah. My butt’s killing me though. What happened?”

Lara leaned over the edge of the hole. “Must be the cave entrance. Probably overgrown after all these centuries. Well, at least we found the way in. What can you see down there, Terrell?”

“Nuthin’. Wait a sec.” Givens pulled out his night goggles. “Oh yeah, baby. This is it. It goes as far as I can see...”

“Well let’s get going, people,” Jack ordered.

The other three stepped carefully into the hole. D.C. stopped to set up the satcom at the opening. He took a moment to align the dish and set the unit to REMOTE mode, slaving the satcom to a tactical radio like the team members carried. That would allow the team members to operate the satcom from their personal radios.

“Satcom’s set up, Boss.”

“Okay. I better check in. Open the channel.”

D.C. hit a few keys and the connection was open. At the other end

would be the Delta duty officer in the Pentagon. Everyone else could hear the conversation in their earpieces

“Reebok, this is Adidas. Come in.”

The voice at the other end was clear as a bell despite being 7,000 miles away. “Adidas, this is Reebok. Say your status.”

“Reebok, Adidas. We’re in the cave. Moving forward. Over.”

“Understand, Adidas. Be advised, Nike says that our Blue friends are on scene, over.”

“Roger that, Reebok. Adidas out.” Jack switched off the satcom.

“Who are the ‘blue friends’?” Lara asked. Everyone else grinned.

“Blue is our code for Brits. He was saying that the SAS is there in Nairobi.”

“Excellent,” Lara said, grinning. “They’ll keep your blokes out of trouble.”

D.C. leaned over to Terrell. “Why did I know she would say something like that?” he whispered. Givens smirked.

“Well,” Jack announced. “We’re on your turf now, Lara. What next?”

Lara fished her flashlight out of her pack and switched it on. They were in a narrow gray stone cavern. It was just large enough to fit in, but it extended far into the inky darkness. Finally, she thought. I’m back in my element.

“Right. Follow me, lads,” she said.

Chapter Seven

The narrow tunnel the team walked through extended on a slight downward grade for several hundred yards. It finally opened into a balcony of sorts high up in an enormous cavern. Faint pools of colored light here and there gave the cavern an otherworldly glow. Lara stepped up to the ledge to take in the view. Jack, Terrell and D.C. fanned out beside her.

“Wow,” Jack breathed. He’d never seen anything like it.

Lara glanced over to him and smiled. “Beautiful, isn’t it? I never tire of this part.”

“What do we do now?” D.C. asked.

Lara slid her pack to the ground, unflapped it and started pulling out her climbing gear. “We’ll abseil down there and have a look around. It’s been my experience that you find what you’re looking for if you look long enough.”

The Delta operators started checking their rappelling gear. Jack touched Lara’s shoulder, causing her to look up at him. “Let’s not take too long,” he warned. “We’re on the clock, remember?”

“Of course, Captain. Believe me, that is weighing heavily on my mind.” She had never felt the responsibility of so many other lives riding on what she did. It was decidedly uncomfortable. Lara wondered how these men could function with that kind of pressure. Jack seemed to bear it with an easy grace.

Within moments, the foursome had their rappelling seats fastened and their ropes anchored, their D-rings and snaplinks hooked in and locked and were ready to go. Lara unflinchingly swung herself out over 100 feet of air and settled into her rope. The men did likewise. Without a word, they kicked off and bounded to the cavern floor in seconds, the ropes whizzing through their gloved hands. They stepped gingerly on the smooth limestone floor, unhooking from their ropes. Lara took a long moment to look around.

The cavern was at least 150 feet high and almost as many yards wide. Glassy stalactites and stalagmites punctuated the chamber’s geometry, and odd outcroppings of colored rock could be seen here and there. More importantly, there were no discernible signs there had ever been visitors. Lara walked out to the center of the chamber, the men fanning out in all directions, looking around and above them. Despite the apparent lack of any threat, their weapons were kept off safe and muzzles covering wherever their eyes wandered.

“So what are we looking for, Miss?” Lara turned to D.C. in response to his question. “Well, David,” she replied, “look for anything that seems out of place or doesn’t belong. Especially anything at all that is man made.”

“I suggest we split up. We’ll cover more area in less time,” Jack interjected. “Terrell, go left and check that area over there. D.C., go right along those rock outcroppings. I’ll go over into that corner there.”

The foursome split up, each searching their respective area. The cavern was enormous and would take a long time to search.

The ringing of his cell phone awakened Rimoux. It was most likely Harris. At least it had better be, interrupting his nap like that.

“Yes?”

“We’re in position.”

“Has she emerged from ze mountain?”

“Not yet, sir. We found her entrance point. You might be interested to know there is a satellite radio hidden there.”

Interesting, Rimoux thought. Lara never uses a satcom in the field. Could she be with someone? That could complicate things. “Do you think someone is with her?”

“Don’t know, sir. Orders?”

“Same as before. Wait for her to emerge, kill her and take the stone. Kill whoever is with her. And don’t tamper with that radio! I don’t want them alerted to your presence.” Rimoux shut the phone off before Harris could reply. What if there were American commandos with Lara? It could get bloody. No matter. Harris had twelve good men with him. They should be able to handle anything.

Jamba entered the office. He carried a metal box with him.

“Is everything ready, my friend?” Rimoux asked.

Jamba placed the box on the desk and turned it toward his boss. “Yes sir. The charges are all placed and ready to go. Just enter the time here and press the arming switch. The rest is in Allah’s hands.”

Rimoux smiled. “Wonderful, Jamba. And our contact has his instructions?”

“Yes sir. We will have a truck waiting at the appointed location. It will be easily accessible through the sewer system. We will all be out of here before anyone knows we’re gone.”

Rimoux was pleased. Harris would take the stone and kill Croft, he and the men would escape the Embassy and get away clean before the Americans outside could do a thing. Before their very eyes their precious embassy would go up in a fireball with all the hostages inside. And the Emerald Eye would fetch millions on the black market. It was a beautiful plan.

Jack called everyone on the radio to his location. He found something. When Lara arrived, he pointed it out to her. She saw it and nodded. “Well done, Jack. You have a flair for this.” She smiled at him.

What Jack found was a hairline crack in the cave floor next to a strangely shaped rock. It seemed that there was an opening there. The rock must be a seal over a door of some kind.

“We’ll have to move it,” Lara announced. She immediately crouched down and threw her weight into the rock, grunting as she tried to dislodge it. It wouldn’t budge. She tried pulling it, but there was no handle or grip to use for leverage. She finally turned and looked at the three men for assistance. They seemed to be amused that she took on such a heavy rock without hesitating. For her part, Lara was just trying to get on with things.

“You’ve got a lot of determination, Lara, but there are times when you should let technology work for you.” Terrell held up a block of C-4. “When in doubt, blow it out,” he joked.

Lara was dubious. “You don’t think that’ll be a bit of overkill, do you? We’re inside a volcanic mountain chamber, after all. That plastique might bring the mountain down on our heads.”

“Rest easy. Sergeant Givens is a master of demolitions. He was a demo instructor in Special Forces before he joined Delta. You might even call him an artist”, D.C. said as he helped Terrell unwrap some blasting caps.

Lara watched, intrigued, as Terrell tore off a little chunk of C-4 and

rolled it into a cigarette shape. He repeated the process several more times, studying the size and shape of the rock they had to get through. D.C. produced a small roll of wire and ran out several lengths, cutting and attaching a blasting cap to each. After studying the rock a bit more, Terrell began pressing the C-4 in four thin horizontal strips up the middle of the rock every foot or so. D.C. handed him the blasting caps which he pressed into the explosive strips. They ran the wire to its full length and D.C. attached them to the terminals on a small pocket detonator.

“The little red lights and blinking LEDs you see in the movies are pure B.S.,” Terrell said to Lara. “You gotta use wired detonators. A radio controlled detonator could go off at the wrong time. Like when you’re standing next to the charge.” Terrell and D.C. stepped back behind a low rock.

“Fire in the hole,” Terrell warned. Lara and Jack jumped behind another rock as Terrell and D.C. crouched low. Terrell flipped the ARM switch on the detonator box, then cranked the firing handle sharply to the right.

FOOM!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

Smoke, dust and bits of rock mushroomed up and away from the explosion. Everyone peeked out from behind cover to see what happened. It took a few seconds for the smoke to clear, but finally all could see the explosion’s effects. What had been a single large piece of stone was now a large pile of pocks and pebbles.

“Bravo, Terrell,” Lara said. “But it appears that your work is not finished.”

He grinned at her. “Oh, I think it was about right. Any more and we’d be wearing that rock. Now, all we have to do is dig that stuff out of the way. Boss?”

“Right, T. Let’s get at it.” Jack said as he started digging with his hands. The other three joined him and after a few moments they had a hole big enough to see to the other side. Lara climbed up to the hole and peered through.

“What do you see, Lara?” Jack asked.

“Not a bloody thing.” Lara reached into her pack for a flare, lit it off and tossed it through the hole. She peered intently in the hole for a long moment. Finally, she climbed back down the rockpile. The men looked at her expectantly.

“Looks like a large chamber in there,” Lara began. “I can’t see the ceiling or the far wall, but I can see some carvings on the near wall. It might be an anteroom of some kind. Let’s get the rest of this rock out of the way and get in there.”

The foursome quickly dug through the rest of the pile of rocks and rubble and were able to file through the opening into the large room. The flare was just burning out as they entered. Narrow cones of white light cut through the darkness in the room as team members switched on their flashlights. The whole room smelled of must and sulfur and a fine haze hung in the air. Slowly, they were able to discern exactly what kind of room they had entered.

The room was roughly square, about 30 feet wide and 50 feet deep and almost 40 feet high. Along the walls were strange carvings that seemed to Lara to be a cross between hieroglyph and cuneiform in nature. She couldn’t identify these markings but something about them stuck in her mind. Had she seen anything like this before? The carvings started at a point about 10 feet off the floor and extended all the way to the ceiling. Every few yards Lara could see ornate frescoes cut out of rectangles of volcanic glass. She walked up to the nearest one and studied it closely. The men followed, fascinated by what they were seeing. The black glass panel was about 18 inches wide and almost 7 feet high. It appeared to be carved rendering of some kind of warrior. He bore a shield oblong in shape, like the Maasai shield, and a war mask that looked like the face of a lion or some such. His bearing was aggressive and he was brandishing a long spear.

“Fearsome chap,” Lara observed. “Good thing he’s just a carving.” She wandered farther down the room, looking at the strange letters and other black glass carvings. They were all warriors, similarly garbed and threatening in nature. What was it about those markings?

As Lara inspected the carvings, the men checked out the rest of the room. It was completely bare except for one thing. A small stone podium about three feet high stood in the far end of the room. There was some glowing, glittering object setting atop it. D.C. walked over to the podium for a closer look. What he found was amazing.

“Hey, everybody, look at this!” he called out. Heads turned. “It’s some kind of gemstone. Maybe it’s what we’re looking for.” He reached out to take the fist-sized stone.

As he did, Lara’s eyes went wide as alarm bells rang in her head. “D.C.! Wait! Stop!” she called out. It was too late. He picked up the stone and held it out, its glow illuminating his face.

He turned to Lara, startled. "What's wrong, Ma'am? It's just a li'l ol' rock. Ain't gonna hurt nobody."

The men were a little unnerved at Lara's reaction. She snapped her weapon up to her shoulder and looked around wildly.

"Bloody hell, D.C., put that stone back right now! I haven't safed it!" she ordered.

"Huh? What do you..." D.C.'s reply halted in his mouth.

Something happened. All around them, the black glass panels with the warrior carvings began to glow with a volcanic red hue. Seconds later, thunderous noise, sparks and smoke filled the room as grotesque beings with spears and shields blasted out of the panels and jumped to the floor. They were almost seven feet tall and beneath their masks glowed angry red eyes. The team was surrounded.

Jack, Terrell and D.C. were among the ranks of the world's finest soldiers. They had seen and done things that few have imagined. They claimed a proud heritage forged in blood in hellholes the world over. But they were totally unprepared for this. Lara Croft, however, was the Tomb Raider. She'd been here before.

Lara's silenced MP-5 chattered like an air hammer. The sound of gunfire switched the men on. Immediately the deafening roar of automatic weapons filled the room. The warrior-monsters attacked. They swung and jabbed with their spears and darted in and out between the four humans now fighting for their lives. One swung his spear in a slash aiming for Jack's head. Jack ducked and fired a long burst into it. The 5.56mm bullets seemed to knock it back a bit, but didn't kill it. He kept firing and just as his rifle ran dry, the being exploded in front of him and disappeared.

D.C. found himself trapped in the corner with two of the beasts jabbing their spears at him. They were inching closer and closer as D.C. fired back, his bullets seemingly bouncing off their shields. Just as they were about to strike D.C. frantically swung his rifle at them, knocking one of the shields away. The beast looked away momentarily distracted. D.C. shoved the muzzle of his rifle in its face and squeezed the trigger. The three-round burst split its head open and it exploded in a ball of orange flame. The other beast took the opportunity to attack. Its spear came in low and swept into D.C.'s right leg. He screamed in pain. The wound was severe, cutting through tendons and muscle tissue in his outer thigh. D.C. reached around and grabbed the spear in a death grip. The beast tried to pull the spear back for

another attack, but D.C. held it firm for a moment. That was all it took for him to swing his rifle around empty his magazine into its chest. The explosion knocked D.C. off his feet and slammed him against the wall.

Terrell had already disposed of one of the creatures and was battling another while Lara was busy dodging jabs from the last one. Her MP-5 with its 9mm bullets didn't have the shock effect of the men's 5.56mm rifles, and she was having a hard time of it. She would fire a long burst, and as the creature moved to counterattack, deftly vaulted over its head and landed with a judo roll. That would give her enough time to fire another burst or quickly change magazines. This went on several times and Lara went through three magazines in fifteen seconds. The creature showed no sign of losing strength and Lara was running out of ammo. Just as the creature prepared to jab Lara in the guts with its spear, it exploded in her face. Jack had seen what was happening and drilled it with his rifle. Seconds later, another explosion sounded as Terrell killed the last creature.

As suddenly as it began, it stopped. The team was once again alone in the room, their faces singed and ears ringing, the floor littered with hundreds of brass shell casings, the thick stench of cordite in the air. And the black glass panels on the walls were gone without a trace.

Chapter Eight

Everyone froze for a second, almost not believing what just happened. Barely conscious, D.C. let out a low groan. That snapped everyone out of it. Terrell rushed to D.C.'s side to examine his injuries. Jack sat down next to Lara, who had slid to the floor. He gently brushed her hair aside to get a look at her face. She was scraped up a little, but not injured seriously.

"I must look a fright," Lara joked weakly. That explosion had really shaken her. Jack pulled a gauze pad from his first aid pouch and tenderly dabbed the blood from her forehead.

"You look just fine to me," Jack said quietly. "Y'know, I have to hand it to you. You can really take care of yourself. I've never seen anything like that in my life."

Lara leaned her head against the wall and closed her eyes, indulging in the moment. She wasn't really that badly hurt, but didn't want Jack to stop what he was doing. She took a moment to think. What were those beings? Obviously sentries of some kind, but what were they guarding? That stone that D.C. held didn't look like her drawings of the Eye...

D.C.? Did she see him go down?

Lara's eyes snapped open. "Jack, what about D.C.?"

Jack turned to see what happened. Terrell was hunched over D.C., bandaging his leg and starting an IV. Jack jumped up and ran over to them, followed by Lara.

"How is he?" Jack asked.

"He'll need surgery pretty quick. That thing cut deep into his leg and he's losing blood pretty fast. I can keep his volume up with an IV but I have only so much Ringers and D5 in my pack. He'll go through it before long and then has a risk of hypovolemic shock. His vitals are good now, but won't stay that way for long."

D.C.'s eyes opened just enough to see Jack's face. His skin looked pale and his right trouser leg was soaked in blood.

"They outnumbered me, Boss," D.C. whispered. "But I got 'em anyway."

"You sure did, partner," Jack said back as he gripped D.C.'s shoulder, trying to manage a smile. "You're gonna be just fine. We'll get you on

that chopper and get you outta here before you know it.”

“Sorry, Miss Lara,” D.C. said to her. “I didn’t mean to start all this. It was just a big shiny rock.”

Lara had to fight back a sudden rush of tears.

“That’s all right, David,” she reassured him. “Could have happened to anyone.” D.C. gave Lara a weak smile and closed his eyes. Terrell finished setting up his Ringer’s IV and opened the valve all the way. He had three more bags to go.

“What about that stone, Lara?” Jack asked. “Is it the Eye?”

Lara walked over to the stone and picked it up. It was a diamond, all right, bigger than any she had ever seen. Probably a thousand carats at least. Decent quality, and although it would have to be cut and polished before its worth could be assessed, Lara guessed that it could be worth a half billion pounds. Maybe more. Certainly, it was the most important gemological find ever. But definitely not the Emerald Eye. She looked at Jack and shook her head.

Jack paused a moment. Then he pulled out his laptop and flipped it on. He hit a series of keys and activated the satcom radio. He hit the TRANSMIT key and began to speak.

“Reebok, this is Adidas.”

“Adidas, Reebok. What’s your sitrep, over?”

“Reebok, Adidas. We have one down. We need medevac ASAP. Need to continue mission, over.”

“Roger that, Adidas. Will contact Air One and determine ETA.”

“Roger. Out.” Jack flipped the laptop closed. “Well, we’re gonna try and get D.C. out of here and keep going. Lara, what should we do next?”

Lara let out a deep breath and looked around the room. It was unchanged except for the bullet holes in the walls. No clues whatever. Blast. If she could only translate those markings...

“Of course!” she shouted. “That’s it! I knew it!” She strode over to Jack. “Can you use your satellite to patch me through to a New York phone number?”

“Sure,” Jack replied. “It’ll take a sec. Why?”

“I know what these markings are,” Lara announced. “I need to contact someone who can translate them.” She walked up to the wall and studied it again. Who would have believed it, she thought. Incredible.

They had just sat down to dinner when the phone rang. Elizabeth Rademacher, grumbling about people and poor timing, answered.

“Hello?”

“Hallo, Mrs. Rademacher. It’s Lara.”

Mrs. Rademacher’s eyes widened. “Lara dear! I’m so sorry you couldn’t stop by last night. Are you coming over?”

“I’m afraid I can’t,” Lara replied. “I’m in Kenya at the moment. Is the doctor about?”

“Just a moment, I’ll get him.” Twenty seconds later she handed the phone to her equally surprised husband.

“Lara! How are you! On another adventure, I suppose?”

“Hallo, Doctor,” said the familiar voice on the phone. “Would you believe I’m in a room in a mountain in East Africa covered in Nitlacatzal carvings?”

“Nitlacatzal? That’s incredible!”

“It’s true. I’m standing here looking at them as we speak. Doctor, is your fax turned on?”

Jack’s laptop had a small Connectix QuickCam attached. They used it to scan the walls, converting the images to fax format. The pictures rolled out Dr. Rademacher’s fax machine seconds later. The old man examined the images excitedly.

“My God, Lara. You’re right,” said the voice in Lara’s earpiece. “There are some minor differences, but these are essentially Nitlacatzal hieroglyphics. Astounding. You’ve done it again, young lady.”

“No time for laurels, Doctor. How quickly can you translate those

writings?”

“Give me a moment to get my notes.”

It took about five minutes until Lara had a rough translation of the entire body of hieroglyphs in the room.

“Thank you Doctor. I’ll call you when I get back to New York.”

“You’d better, girl. That’s two dinners you’ve missed.”

The three men looked at Lara expectantly. She allowed a satisfied smile to cross her face. This was why she went adventuring all over the world. Everyone thought it was the money or the action. Not so. Lara Croft loved mysteries. Moments like this made it all worthwhile.

“Well?” Terrell demanded. “What do they say?”

Lara looked at her hastily scribbled notes and began to read.

“Let it be known for all time, in this world and the next, that I, Kanjamantu, King of the Plains People, have killed my first born son Prince Bantuswana in the High Duel of the Ascension. He challenged me and I defended myself. I would have given my son the whole Kingdom at the appointed day but he felt greed in his heart for my Throne. I pleaded to him to not challenge me but he would not listen. When he attacked I fought back and his stomach opened up to my spear and his blood covered the warm ground.

“He was my only son and I can have no more children. Now my line will no more have the throne of the Kingdom and the Kingdom will be no more. Once we ruled this land and across the great water ruled the land under the sun. Now we are only a few farms and flocks and villages. Without a King to rule it our kingdom has no future. Now I am an old man and will soon die. The kingdom will die with me.

“I will ask the gods to place his spirit in this stone so he will not be lonely in the underworld and I will seal the stone in this holy place. May the Gods forgive me for all time and perhaps one day someone will find this place and rescue the stone and my son’s spirit will once again see the light of day. I ask the people of the future ages to be kind to my memory and do not judge my son to be wicked. He was young and foolish and I loved him and now he is dead.”

“Wow,” Jack muttered. “What about the legend of this stone you told us about? Is it not true or what?”

“Apparently, over the thousands of years, the story changed little by little until it became what it is now,” Lara replied. “So it seems that Bantuswana was killed by his own father in some kind of duel to become King. The duel sealed the fate of the whole kingdom and most likely the people dispersed afterward. This fight ended not only the life of a young man but a whole dynasty. Sad story, this. Sounds like the old man loved his son.”

“I don’t understand,” Terrell interjected. “Is there or is there not an emerald?”

“No emerald. This diamond that David found must be the stone we’re looking for. That fact was likely changed over time like the rest of the legend. It looks like our search is over. Its amazing when one thinks about it. This ‘kingdom’ had at one time stretched across central Africa and the Atlantic to the mountains of the Yucatan. The carvings in this cave match exactly what I found on a clay jar in Mexico six months ago.”

Everyone gazed at the huge diamond in Lara’s hands. An almost incandescent light sparkled and glowed from the stone, reflecting on the team’s faces. There was silence for a moment, then the radios chattered to life again.

“Adidas, this is Reebok, over.”

Jack keyed his throat mike.

“Reebok, Adidas.”

“Adidas, Reebok. Air One is thirty mikes out, inbound extraction point Red, over.”

Jack and Terrell shared a look. Thirty minutes?

“Reebok, Adidas, can’t you get that chopper in here any quicker, over?”

“Negative. They are inbound from carrier Eisenhower one hundred clicks off the coast. Air One says he’s moving flat out and will get there soonest. Out.”

“What about all our Blackhawks in Mombassa? They can get here in ten minutes!” Terrell exploded.

Jack was pissed. “They’re on call for the embassy takedown in the event of a green light. We can’t use ‘em.” At that, Givens swore like only a soldier can. Lara glanced at D.C., barely conscious and groan-

ing in pain despite the morphine. Jack swore under his breath.

“All right,” he finally ordered. “Let’s get out of here and get ready for the pickup. I’m taking point. T., you have D.C., and Lara, bring up the rear. Let’s hit it.”

Lara dropped the stone in her pack and the foursome exited the square room back into the large cavern. Walking to the base of the balcony where they entered, they attached metal ascenders to the waiting ropes. Terrell hefted D.C. over his shoulders in a fireman’s carry and they began the climb. Lara, the most experienced climber of the group as well as the lightest, made it to the top first. Jack followed and Terrell finally made it up to the top, huffing and puffing a little under the added weight. At the top they paused while Terrell adjusted D.C.’s bandage and checked his IV. Satisfied that everything was in place, he lifted his wounded comrade over his shoulders and they continued back into the narrow stone corridor, oblivious to several large red glowing spots high along the cavern walls...

“My leg is cramping.”

“Shut up! I told you to keep quiet!” Harris glared at the young man next to him. What an amateur. The kid looked back sheepishly. He would be just a boy except for the AK-47 cradled in his arms. No, Harris decided. He was a boy anyway. A stupid one at that.

Harris shook his head. It was bad enough these hired men had no combat experience, but some of them couldn’t even understand English. He cursed his decision to hire these idiots and pocket some of the money Rimoux had given him. Most likely they would want to break and run at the sound of the first shot. But they weren’t getting paid until it was over, and that would encourage most of them to stay put.

Besides, all his boss wanted was the stone. And proof that the English woman was dead. Whatever happened, Harris was sure he could deliver on that. He glanced at the rest of the men, arranged in a crescent-shaped ambush pattern about 30 yards from the cave entrance. At least no one was snoring.

Chapter Nine

In the darkness of the cavern Jack could just make out the satcom radio at the cave entrance and the pale gray light of false dawn coming in from the hole. He switched his flashlight off and paused for a moment. Lara drew up behind him with Terrell and D.C. a few paces back.

“What are you...” Jack held up a hand to cut Lara off. He was listening. After a few seconds, he low-crawled over to the satcom and stared up out of the hole. Lara looked at him questioningly. He looked back at her, pointing to his nose. Her eyebrows raised questioningly.

“He’s sniffing for cigarette smoke,” Terrell whispered in Lara’s ear. “Sometimes guys on ambush patrol get careless. The smell can carry for miles.”

Finally, Jack stood up to peer out over the rim of the hole.

POW!!!

Harris glared at the boy. He hadn’t given the order to fire, but this kid saw movement and succumbed to buck fever. The boy looked at Harris sheepishly. Croft wouldn’t come out now. He’d have to go in and get her.

Jack dropped to the cavern floor and lay motionless. For a moment, Lara thought he was hit. Suddenly he gestured frantically to her and Terrell to take cover. They moved back into the cave while Jack crawled over to meet them, fumbling with his radio.

“Now what?” Lara asked.

Ignoring her, Jack got on the satcom.

“Reebok, Adidas. Patch me through to Air One ASAP.”

“Wait one,” said the voice on the other end. As Jack waited to hear the voice of the chopper pilot, Terrell laid D.C. down and took his weapon and bandolier of 40mm grenades. The grenade launcher D.C. carried was going to be needed very quickly. Terrell handed his own CAR-15 to Lara along with a pouchful of extra magazines. “It’s gonna get thick,” he told her.

“Adidas, this is Eagle Four. We’re one eight mikes out and closing fast. What’s your sitrep, over?”

“Our situation sucks. We have hostiles, Eagle Four. Are you armed, over?”

“Affirmative, Adidas. We are a Seahawk antisubmarine helo with two ‘sixties and a full ammo load, over.”

“That’s good news, Eagle Four. We have unknown hostiles around our position. We can’t get a look without exposing ourselves. This a hot LZ, over.”

“We’re going flat out, Adidas. Sit tight and wait for the cavalry, over.”

“Understood, Eagle Four. We’ll try to be alive when you get here. Out.” Jack shut the radio off, rubbing his eyes in frustration.

“Just like the Euphrates highway all over again, huh Cap’m?” D.C. cracked, grinning through a morphine-laden fog. “We’re back in the hide site and the bad guys have us surrounded. Remember?”

Jack smiled at the irony. “Sure looks that way. Except we don’t have a fleet of Jolly Greens coming in to pick us up this time. Just a Navy helo with a couple of machine guns manned by sailors who probably can’t find the triggers.”

“Y’think those blokes out there’re just going to sit and wait for us then?” Lara asked. “Not bloody likely. They’ll try to rush us now that the cat’s out of the bag. And then where would we be?”

Jack looked at Lara, then Terrell. She was right. They needed to get away from here and fast. “You think there’s another way out of here?” Jack asked.

“Always another way out, luv,” The Tomb Raider answered confidently. “Simply a matter of spotting it, that’s all.”

Jack didn’t need any more convincing. He quickly folded up the satellite dish and slung the satcom unit over his shoulder. Lara readied her MP-5 in one hand and the CAR in the other. Taking point, Lara led the men back into the tunnel. With luck, she would find another exit from the main cavern before the Navy helo arrived.

“Wait,” Jack called out. The other two stopped, turning to look at him. Jack smiled wickedly at Terrell.

“Need to leave a present for our friends up there,” he explained. Terrell smiled back knowingly. Jack pulled a slightly curved flat object from his pack setting it on the ground. Pulling out a small box, Jack connected the box to the flat object via two wires then ran a length of fishing line from a knob on the box across the tunnel, keeping it several inches off the floor. He anchored the fishing line with a climbing piton in his pack, hammering it into the tunnel wall so it would remain fast. He placed the flat object about five feet back from the fishing line so someone would break the line before even seeing it. Finally, he covered it with dust and pebbles to partially hide it. Lara watched in fascination. Seeing her curious expression, Jack explained.

“Claymore. Very bad news, especially in this enclosed space. It should buy us some time. Okay, let’s get moving.” They headed out, only to be stopped by Terrell a few seconds later.

“Wait!” He slid D.C. to the ground gingerly. “He’s out. I think his wound is opening up again.” Terrell checked the dressing, dismayed to see it rapidly soaking with fresh blood. He yanked several 6x9 SurgiPads from his pack, placing them over the existing dressing and binding them tightly with gauze. He also replaced the now empty bag of Ringer’s with another one and added a bag of Albumin blood expander to the IV. His patient’s pulse and blood pressure were bad, Terrell noticed, and weren’t likely to improve. These measures would only buy more time. D.C.’s right femoral artery was severed and only immediate surgery would save his life.

“How bad is it?” Jack asked, bending down to Terrell’s ear. Terrell just shook his head.

“I don’t even want to move him, Boss. It would just kill him quicker.”

“We can’t leave a man behind, T, we just can’t. Remember Mogadishu? I don’t want what happened to Durant happening to D.C.” Terrell was about to protest when he was cut off by another voice. It was weak, yet determined.

“I’m stayin’. Y’all need someone to cover your withdrawal and I ain’t gonna make it outta here anyway.” D.C. was resolute. Despite the fog of pain and morphine clouding his senses, he knew what was at stake. With nearly all the strength he could muster, he reached for the MP-5 in Lara’s hand. At first she balked, but after seeing the look in his eye, she surrendered the weapon. D.C. grimaced as he pulled himself to a sitting position and placed the weapon in his lap.

“Git goin’, Cap’m,” D.C. growled. “You gotta git that stone back to

Nairobi. You know it. I know it.," D.C. pointed back toward the hole. "They know it too. And before long they'll come down here after us. That claymore will only take out so many of 'em. I gotta do the rest."

Jack took a deep breath, hating the fact that D.C. was right. He jabbed a thumb back toward the main cavern. Lara and Terrell obediently backed away.

"Wish you were going with us, bro," Jack said quietly, extending his hand. D.C. took it and gripped it tightly.

"Jack, please tell Annie.. tell her..." D.C. couldn't finish the sentence. He released his grip, letting his hand fall to his side. Unable to look at Jack any longer, he turned away .

Jack nodded. He hesitated a moment, then abruptly turned to follow Lara and Terrell, leaving D.C. alone in the tunnel with his weapon and one full magazine, bleeding slowly to death.

There was no movement or sound from the hole for several minutes. Finally, Harris pointed to two men and gestured toward the hole. The men, one an expert Xhosa tracker, walked in a crouch with their weapons at the ready until coming to the hole itself. Seeing that it was empty, the tracker turned toward Harris, shaking his head. Harris rose to his feet and strode up to the hole. It was about 6 feet deep, with a pile of collapsed dirt on the side opposite the stone pillar. There was a tunnel entrance on the other side that extended into the darkness.

The Xhosa studied the footprints closely. Harris eyed him questioningly.

"Looks like two men, Mistah 'Arris, sah," the tracker answered. "And a woman. One of de men he carryin' a 'eavy weight. Dey came out de hole and gone back in. And look dere," he said, pointing at brown stains in the dirt. "Somebody been 'it. Dat's blood. Looks fresh too."

So Croft wasn't alone. And now she knew someone was out here. Harris would need expendable people to go in first. He pointed out three men, including the boy.

"You, you and you. Go in there after them. We'll wait here for your report." Noting the dubious expression on their faces, he added, "There will be much gold for whoever finds the woman first. Now go!"

Lara was the first to get to the stone balcony when she froze. The men looked at her questioningly. Gesturing to them to stay back, Lara slowly and carefully backed into the tunnel opening. Safely in the shadows, she whispered, keeping her eyes fixed on something in the cavern.

“There’s three of them in there. They’re moving about like they’re guarding the place.”

“Three of what?” Terrell asked. He knew now not to doubt Lara about stuff like this.

“Can’t quite tell,” Lara replied. “Something like what we encountered in the stone room. Except these are big nasties and they’ve got wings.”

“Are you kidding?” Jack breathed. “Please tell me you’re kidding.”

“Wish I were, Jack. We’ll have to kill them or somehow get past them. Of course, I don’t even know where our new exit might be. I’ll need a minute to search the cavern after we go in and it won’t be easy with those great beasts flying about.”

Lara dropped to her stomach and crawled back out to the balcony with Jack and Terrell close behind. The trio made it to the edge where their ropes still hung. Peering over the precipice, they saw them. Three enormous ugly creatures, covered in veins and sinew. Their oblong heads, in which shone yellow eyes and long white fangs, bobbed up and down like overgrown chickens. Their fore and hind legs (for lack of a better term) hung in the air flashing razor-sharp claws. And they flew lazily back and forth in the huge chamber, held aloft by blood-red batlike wings.

“Good God in Heaven,” Terrell said under his breath.

“God has nothing to do with these things,” Lara replied. “I’ve seen them before. It’s kill or be killed with the likes of these. We’ll have to be careful and quiet as church mice. If they hear us, they’ll cook us for sure.”

“You mean they shoot fire too?” Jack asked. Lara nodded. Well, wasn’t this just great. Jack checked his watch. The helo was ten minutes away.

Lara checked out the area below them, seeing a place to hide among the rock formations. “If we can get down there we have a chance,” she said. “It’ll be tough going though.”

“Well T, looks like a dynamic entry.” Jack announced. “You have a flashbang handy?”

Terrell nodded, pulling a distraction grenade from his pack. The trio hurriedly attached their rappelling harnesses and hooked up to their ropes as quietly as possible. Thankfully, the creatures seemed oblivious so far, absently gliding to and fro. They would have to time this exactly. The trio slowly got to their feet and Terrell prepared to throw the grenade. He intended to place it as far from their position as possible, hoping to distract the creatures if not actually disorient them. Looking at Jack for his cue, he waited.

“Concentrate hard on what you’re doing, Lara,” Jack whispered. “This is going to be extremely loud.” Lara nodded back. She’d been around flashbangs before.

“Go!” Jack commanded. The trio swung out on their ropes and began a fast descent. Just before kicking off, Terrell heaved the flashbang as hard as he could. It sailed through the air and arced downward. About 15 feet above the cavern floor the grenade detonated. A brilliant white flash and deafening BOOM filled the cavern.

The creatures were completely taken by surprise. They thrashed about in the air, squawking and squealing, confused by what happened. That bought enough time for Lara, Jack and Terrell to make it to the cavern floor and run for cover. The creatures recovered seconds later, now in a rage and looking for something to kill. One of them let loose a ball of flame that barely missed incinerating Terrell.

The trio leapt behind several low rock walls and hugged the ground. Lara frantically looked left and right for an exit. There was none to be found.

Chapter Ten

The boy jumped when he heard the muffled explosion. He was beginning to get scared. The man behind him nudged him.

“Get movin’, boy. You wanna get paid, don’t you?”

Hesitantly, the boy continued forward. He could barely see his hand in front of his face in this darkness. It was a great honor to be chosen to lead. Especially after his stupid mistake, shooting his gun like that. As eager as he was to come down here, though, he was beginning to have a change of heart.

The tripwire was invisible in the darkness. The boy didn’t even feel it against his ankle as he took another step...

The claymore exploded, sending out a solid curtain of steel ball bearings at supersonic speed. Before their brains could even register what happened the three gunmen were shredded to bits.

Twenty meters away, D.C. flinched at the thunderous noise in this confined space. God, that was loud. He adjusted his night vision goggles for a better look. Nothing but smoke, he noted with relief. A few less to deal with.

“What was that?”

“They found the claymore,” Terrell replied to Lara. “Now it’s all up to D.C.”

“How are we going to get out of here, Lara?” Jack interjected. “You said there’s always another way out.”

“I did, didn’t I?” Lara noted sardonically. “Well, I’ll just have to make good on that.”

“What about those things flying around up there?”

“Bob’s your uncle, mate. I’ll have them taken care of in a jif. Terrell, do you happen to have any shotshells for that blunderbuss of yours?”

“Yeah,” Terrell responded, patting the 203. “I got four of ‘em.”

“Right,” Lara declared, scanning the rock formations above them. “Terrell, make ready with those shotshells. Jack, if you will be so kind

as to take this extra magazine for your rifle,” Lara said as she extracted it from her CAR. “Cover me as I get into position.”

“Lara what the he—” She was gone before Jack could complete the sentence.

She ran for a nearby rock shelf, vaulting up to it in a single jump. She vaulted to a higher one just as easily. Carefully walking along a narrow ledge, Lara came to a ten foot wide gap. She jumped, sailing over the gap with ease. Working her way down the left side of the cavern wall, Lara climbed over several irregular rock outcroppings. Noticing that the two men were staring at her, she smiled back and pointed toward the flying beasts. Jack and Terrell turned back toward the beasts, understanding her message. It was just so hard for them to take their eyes off her as she moved. She was like an acrobat.

Terrell shoved a “Dispersal Round” into the barrel of the grenade launcher. The euphemistically-named shell was the functional equivalent of five 12-ga. shotguns loaded with 00-buckshot. It was deadly at ranges out to 75 meters. He clacked the barrel closed and aimed at the nearest beast, keeping it in his sights. Jack sighted another beast, wondering how much effect his rifle would have against it.

Lara was now almost 50 feet above the cavern floor. Thankfully, the flying nasties had not yet noticed her. She crept along a crevice, coming to a wide gap. On the other side was a ledge and a shallow cave. This would be ideal for what she had in mind. Hopping back from the edge, Lara ran forward and leapt. Arcing high, she pivoted her body forward and extended her hands. She caught the ledge with her fingers, her body thudding against the rock face. Quickly she pulled herself up and darted into the cave.

“Ready down below?” Jack and Terrell heard Lara’s voice crackling in their earpieces. “Right, I’ll get their attention from up here. Terrell, wait until they come within range and give them the good news. Jack, try and keep the others at bay so we only have to deal with one at a time. Whatever you blokes do, don’t let them get too close to me or it’s lights out. Let’s get on with it, then.” Lara leaned over, and seeing Jack give the thumbs-up, drew her pistols and prepared to fire.

“Now!” Lara stepped out on the ledge and fired a couple of rounds into the air. Immediately, the beasts turned toward the noise. One of them started flying at Lara, its ugly wings flapping furiously. Lara jumped up and down, waving her arms and yelling at the beast. It flapped harder and flew faster. It was no more than 30 yards away from her when it exploded in a fireball, burning shards of flesh flying in all directions.

“Yeah,” Terrell said to himself. “Consider yourself dispersed.” He quickly jacked the smoking shell out of the barrel and slapped in a fresh one.

“Good shooting, T. Lara, how’re you doing up there?”

“Got a bit warm for a moment” came the reply. “Nice work, that. Shall we try another?” Before waiting for a reply, Lara fired several more shots in the air and yelled all the louder. These beasts were pretty slow in figuring things out...

...Not too slow, Lara corrected herself. Now the other two came at her simultaneously. To her alarm, they split up and approached her from two directions.

“Oh, this isn’t good,” Jack observed. He sighted the far one, leaving the near one to Terrell. He paused a second then opened fire. The rounds hit the beast amidships, causing it to shudder, but not slow down. It began to get closer, still flying singlemindedly at Lara, and Jack aimed carefully for its head. He fired again and missed. Terrell fired at the other beast, his shot catching it on its right wing. The 47 00-buck pellets tore the wing off, sending the beast hurtling at the cave wall directly below where Lara stood. The other beast was coming in fast, oblivious to what was hurtling into its flight path.

Lara realized what was happening and quickly jumped back into the cave, dropping to the floor just as the two beasts collided. The resulting explosion sent sheets of flame and burned flesh all over the cavern wall. The shockwave knocked Jack and Terrell to the ground and showered them with gory embers. When the smoke cleared, they looked up. The ledge was half gone, an ugly black scorch mark in its place.

And Lara was nowhere to be seen.

Harris figured there would be a boobytrap down there. The explosion confirmed it. Seeing the alarmed expression on the mens’ faces, he tried to reassure them.

“They always leave one boobytrap,” Harris announced. “But just one. It’s safe to go in there now.” He smiled at the men, trying to allay their fears. “Trust me. I know how this goes. Now the rest of you, get in there. I’m right behind you.”

Reluctantly, the men complied. One by one, the nine remaining men

hopped into the hole and filed through the tunnel entrance. Harris went in last. He swore to himself that he'd get Croft if he had to go through the bodies of every one of these men. The pit of his stomach began to tell him that he might have to.

One of Delta's specialties was taking down hijacked airliners. That usually involved operating in a dark smoke-filled passenger cabin wearing night vision goggles. Terrorists had to be hit with shots to the head in order to be put down instantly. D.C. was a master of this arcane skill, and here in this dark tunnel, with NVGs and a weapon, he was totally in his element.

The lead man came up to the remains of his three dead comrades. It was too dark to make out any detail but there was no mistaking what he felt under his feet. The smell was overpowering. He had to keep from vomiting and keep his eyes focused ahead. He came up to a bend in the tunnel and rounded it slowly...

...only to drop dead from a 9mm bullet right between his eyes.

The second man was momentarily confused, thinking that his friend tripped on something. He bent over to help his friend to his feet when another bullet entered his left ear, turning him off like a lightswitch. The third man realized what happened and raked the tunnel ahead with AK fire. The muzzle flash lit the tunnel like a strobe and the sound of the weapon was deafening.

The rounds impacted harmlessly above D.C.'s head. He shut his eyes to avoid being blinded by the muzzle flash in his NVGs. The first two were "gimmes", he thought. I'm gonna have to work for the rest of 'em.

Harris worked his way forward to see what was happening. In the darkness he could barely make out the carnage before him. Two more men were dead but he only heard the firing of his own man. That meant there was someone back there with a silenced weapon, ready to pick his men off one by one. That was unacceptable.

"Wait here", Harris ordered the men. There was something in his Land Rover that would be perfect for this situation.

“Lara! Lara!” Jack yelled. He couldn’t see her up there anywhere, fearing the worst. He and Terrell were still brushing pieces of something off themselves while looking for her. Jack was starting to wonder if she survived. The idea gripped him in the pit of his stomach. Not just the idea of losing another member of the team but losing...her. Jack realized he didn’t want to lose her. He’d let the thought of her being injured or worse upset him more than it should. He wished now that he didn’t. Now that she was...

...Standing up on the ledge covered in dirt, her smile beaming down at him. She was alive! Jack almost smiled back before he caught himself, struggling to maintain his professional detachment.

“Sorry to scare you like that,” Lara called down, “but I think I’ve found a way out of here. That explosion dislodged some rocks back there and I see some daylight coming through.”

“That’s great! But how can we get up there? Givens and I aren’t exactly Olympic gymnasts, you know.”

“Hang on, then.” came the reply. “I’ve a knotted rope left. Give me a moment to anchor it and you can pull yourselves up.” It took a couple of minutes for Lara to hammer a piton into the rock wall, attach a carabiner to it and loop her rope through. Finally a hemp rope, knotted every two feet for rapid climbing, sailed over the precipice and down to the two men.

Jack and Terrell were up in seconds. Following Lara, they made their way into a narrow passage of freshly disturbed rock and earth, clawing their way toward a shaft of sunlight. Eventually they hit a layer of topsoil and broke through the surface. The dirt-covered trio came out, standing in a field of tall grass. Jack and Terrell squinted in the bright Equatorial morning light, while Lara, ever the fashion plate, donned her trademark sunglasses.

Below them stretched the gentle incline of Kilimanjaro’s north face. About 200 meters downslope stood their stone pillar and the ragged hole in the ground and — a white man carrying a rifle and some kind of canvas bag dropping into the hole.

“He’s moving in. Maybe he’s the only one. Let’s go!” Jack ordered, hoping to intercept the man before he did harm to D.C. He took off at full steam with Terrell and Lara on his heels. They ran until they were about 100 meters away when five or six armed Africans clambered frantically out of the hole followed by the white man.

Instinctively, the trio fell to the ground for cover. Lara parted the grass

in front of her to get a look. They seemed to be diving for cover as well. “What are those blokes doing?” she asked herself aloud. Her question was answered when suddenly a deep rumbling explosion shook the ground under her. A second later, a plume of flame and smoke shot out of the hole. It mushroomed high into the sky, knocking the stone pillar on its side.

“Satchel charge!” Jack hissed. “They got D.C.!” Enraged, he jumped to his feet, rifle welded to his shoulder. He opened fire, mercilessly killing two men before they could even react. Lara and Terrell joined him, laying down a curtain of fire that caused all the men to take cover in the grass. Strangely enough, none of them returned fire. Maybe they had no more fight left in them.

“All of you!” Lara yelled. “On your feet, hands up! Now!” She repeated the command in Swahili, and the Africans slowly rose out of the grass, their hands high in the air. There were three of them. The white man was nowhere to be seen.

Of all the blasted luck, Harris thought. Just as he was on the verge of winning they show up out of nowhere on high ground! And his men pick now as a time to surrender. Stupid kaffirs. Well he wasn’t about to give up. He had Rimoux to answer to and that was worse than anything. Whatever happened, he had to get away from here.

“Where’s the white guy?” Jack asked himself aloud. The trio moved toward the Africans cautiously, weapons at the ready. These men looked like farmers, not soldiers. They were only too eager to give up. Something didn’t make sense about that. Besides, there was at least one more man out there with a weapon.

“Where’s the white man?” Lara asked them, repeating the question in Swahili. In unison the three men pointed to Harris’ position. Two muzzles swerved in that direction as Jack and Lara moved toward him while Terrell covered the Africans. Lara and Jack edged forward, spreading apart from each other to cover the target from two directions.

“On your feet!” Jack ordered. Slowly, a man stood up from the grass. He held his hands out to show he was unarmed. He was blond, ruddy complected, and had a hint of a spare tire. He looked to Jack like a heavy drinker. He looked to Lara like...

“Willem Krueger Harris. Blimey,” Lara said. “I might have known you would be slithering about, you filthy sod.” Her voice was laced with contempt.

“You know this guy?”

“Yeah. Had a run-in with him last year in Tangiers. He’s from Pretoria. Used to be South African secret police, terrorizing blacks in Soweto. Now he fancies himself a diamond hunter and something of a mercenary...”

“Soldier of fortune,” Harris corrected her in his thick Afrikaans accent. “I’m but a traveler and adventurer, trying to make a living.” He affected a sleazy smile.

“Opportunist and cheap exploiter,” Lara spat. “And cold-blooded killer. What are you doing here, Harris? How did you find out I was here?”

“I was sent here by my client,” Harris replied. “Miss Croft, I’m surprised to see these men with you. Don’t you usually work alone?”

“This is an all-Yank show. I’m just along as a consultant.” Lara said as she edged closer to Harris. She frowned thoughtfully. “Your ‘client’ you say? Who is your client?”

“You know him well, Lara dear,” Harris replied, smiling like the Cheshire cat.

Lara’s eyes narrowed thoughtfully. Who could it be? It would have to be someone powerful and ruthless enough to be willing to kill dozens of innocent people to get what they wanted. And someone with enough money to persuade Harris to want a piece of the action. She knew him well? Who was it?

Just then the nearby weeds erupted in gunfire. Jack and Terrell spun instinctively in that direction and returned fire. The one African who didn’t surrender was riddled with bullets. Lara was caught by surprise by the sudden noise and distraction, and her weapon swerved away from Harris for a split second...

Harris struck in a flash, knocking Lara’s rifle away. His other hand came out from behind his back with a knife. Before Lara could respond, Harris had her in an armlock with his knife to her throat. Jack and Terrell were frantic, shouting at Harris to let her go. Terrell kept one eye on the remaining Africans, but they seemed not to want any part of this. He was furious at himself for not getting an accurate count of these men and was ready to kill if any of them so much as

twitched.

“Drop your weapons or I’ll kill her!” Harris shouted. “Drop them now!” Reluctantly the men complied, letting their rifles fall to the ground.

“Right, here’s how it works,” Harris began, smiling at his good fortune. “I move with her to my Land Rover just over that ridge. No one interferes. If they do, I’ll slit her throat. I swear I will.” He began shuffling away with Lara firmly in his grasp. Jack eyed Harris with a look that could kill. But there was nothing he or Terrell could do with their weapons lying on the ground.

“You never told me who your client was,” Lara said, trying to remain calm. She could feel the cold blade against her neck.

“Rimoux,” Harris replied. Jean-Pierre Rimoux. Remember him? He certainly remembers you. He’s behind the whole operation. He’s in the American embassy right now.”

“That bloody Frenchman? He set this up just to get me to find the stone?” Lara was incredulous. “Then why are you here?”

“He didn’t expect the authorities to just waltz up to the Embassy gate and hand the stone over, my dear. I’m here to take it from your cold, dead fingers. Call it insurance,” Harris joked.

“You ain’t gonna do nothin’,” Jack threatened, stepping toward Harris.

“Shut up, you bloody Yank!” Harris screamed at Jack. His grip on Lara loosened just a bit and the knife lifted from her neck. That was all she needed. She twisted, her left elbow flying backwards into Harris’ ribs as her left foot stepped behind his. He fell in a heap, but not before severely cutting into Lara’s right upper arm. Lara executed a judo roll and came to her feet facing him, wincing at the pain. He recovered and lunged at Lara, cursing her in Afrikaans, murder in his eyes.

BA-BAM!

Harris’ head lurched backward, a fountain of blood spewing from two holes in his face. His dead body flopped to the ground. Lara turned to see Jack, his Colt .45 pistol smoking in his hands.

It took Lara a moment to register what happened. As she broke free, Jack went for his sidearm and executed a perfect double-tap to Harris’ head in under a second and a half.

“You saved my life, Jack,” Lara breathed, still a little stunned. “Thanks.”

“Just taking out the trash,” Jack replied flatly, a thin smile on his lips.

As if on cue, the three remaining African mercenaries broke and ran, seeing no more reason to hang around. Terrell, watching them flee, let his rifle hang loosely. Noticing the blood on Lara’s arm, Terrell stepped up, took out his trauma kit and began dressing Lara’s wound. “What now, boss?” he asked.

“I’ll tell you what now,” Lara interjected, back to business. “Jean-Pierre Rimoux is a cold-hearted piece of filth. He will kill all the hostages without hesitation. There’s no negotiating with him, Jack. Your lads need to move quickly or there’ll be a disaster.”

Just then the sound of rotor blades filled the air. The trio turned to see a pale gray helicopter appear over the trees, slowing down as it flared to land.

“You’re right, Lara”, Jack replied. “Time to get the guys moving.”

Chapter Eleven

Immediately after boarding the helo Jack got on the radio and relayed the situation to the Pentagon staff. The President was contacted and a decision was reached. The green light was given. Two MH-6 Little Birds and six MH-60 Blackhawks carrying 45 Delta operators launched into the morning sky headed for Nairobi. The takedown would happen in broad daylight in full view of the world's news media. The last time Delta tried to free an embassy was Tehran in 1980. This time they swore the results would be different.

The Navy Seahawk carrying Lara, Jack, and Terrell streaked north to meet the Delta choppers at the embassy. They should arrive in time to see the takedown in progress. Lara was betting that Rimoux had an escape planned. She intended to hunt him down and make him pay for what happened. The trio sat crowded against the rear bulkhead in stone silence.

The helo sonarman, a 18 year old sailor on his first cruise, stared openmouthed at the sight. Two dirty and grimy SpecWar types in camo fatigues and an amazingly beautiful woman in a leotard and shorts, all carrying enough firepower for a small war. No one would believe this one.

Jack stared blankly out at the lush veldt, sliding under them at 180 knots. The spring rains had started and he could see wildebeest grazing in the fields. It was a beautiful sight that meant absolutely nothing to him at that moment.

Lara gently touched Jack's arm, bringing him out of his reverie. She spoke to him soothingly.

"Jack, I am sorry. I gathered you two were close mates."

"Yeah, we were," Jack replied, his expression unchanged, the words coming slowly. "We met at the Special Warfare School. I was a know-it-all second lieutenant fresh out of West Point. He was a combat decorated Ranger sergeant. Boy, did he set me right. We graduated in the same class and were assigned to the same A-team. When the Gulf War broke out, we were among the first to go."

“He spoke of a Euphrates Highway? What was that about?”

Jack continued to stare at the beautiful countryside. As he spoke, Lara could almost see his story unfold before his eyes like a movie.

“We were sent on a mission to locate and kidnap Saddam’s nephew. He was the commander of the Republican Guards in the Basra region. The insertion went off without a hitch. We set up a hide site just off the highway. E-8 runs all the way up to Baghdad and we knew that our target would be coming down that route. Well, the next morning, this little girl walks right up and opens the cover of our hole. Just opens it up big as life to see what was inside.” Jack chuckled to himself at the irony.

“We couldn’t very well shoot her. So we tried to convince her that we wouldn’t hurt her. She ran and got her father and he understandably freaked. He called the local gendarmes and before you know it, we were surrounded by 150 Iraqi soldiers and 4 T-72s. Me, D.C. and four other guys in a ditch against all that. We called for extraction but weather was keeping most of the air war on hold that day. No one was flying. It took six hours for a chopper to come get us. By the time we were pulled out, every one of us had been wounded at least once. The chopper crew reported seeing more than 100 Iraqi bodies around us and two of the tanks were out of commission.”

Jack rubbed the dirt from his eyes as he continued. “D.C. was responsible for half of that. You should’ve seen it. All that fire coming in and he’s calmly picking off targets one by one with his M-16. Took two tanks out by shooting their drivers. They all abandoned their tanks after that. When Schwartzkopf heard about it he put D.C. up for the Medal of Honor. Colin Powell stopped it because of the secret nature of our mission, downgrading D.C. to a Silver Star instead.”

For once, Lara had no words.

“D.C. never mentioned it after that. Never saw a need to. It wasn’t a big deal to him, y’know? Just doing his

job.” Jack took a long look outside, taking in the spectacular sunrise.

“Just doing his job,” he repeated to himself.

TWENTY-FIVE MINUTES LATER:

Jenny was rushing back from the ladies’ room to her table. Her boyfriend had just ordered their drinks and Sonny Rollins was about to start his third set. An ardent jazz fan, Jenny didn’t want to miss a note. It had been six months since Sonny had played the Blue Note and she was determined to be here. As much as she enjoyed the evening, however, she was constantly thinking about Lara and worrying. This mission was different from the others and to Jenny, far more dangerous. Her beeper hadn’t gone off all night, which she took as a good sign. If anything happened, she would be one of the first people contacted.

As she came around the bar to her table, Jenny caught the TV in the corner of her eye. CNN was on and it seemed like something was happening. She stopped to take a look when her beeper went off. Checking the number, she pulled her cell phone from her purse and dialed.

“Munroe”, said the clipped British voice on the other end. It was Niles Munroe, Lara’s chief of staff, in his London flat. Jenny guessed it was about 6:00 AM there.

“Niles, it’s Jenny. You paged?” Jenny’s eyes were fixed on the TV and growing wide at what they saw. The opening strains of “Oleo” coming from the stage drowned out the sound but the pictures told everything.

“Right, Jenny. You have a telly about? The morning news is on here and you won’t believe what’s happening.”

“I’m watching it here, Niles,” Jenny shouted over the music. “My God. Do you think she’s involved?”

“What do you think? It’s Lara we’re talking about. She’s

in this up to her eyeteeth. I'm heading to the estate straightaway. Where are you?"

"On my way to her apartment. Talk to you soon, Niles". Jenny shut off the phone and waved her boyfriend over. Hopefully they could still get a cab at this hour.

"This is Paul Aronoff reporting live from Nairobi at the scene of the U.S. Embassy hostage crisis. The scene being played out before me is absolutely stunning. I have never seen anything remotely like what I am witnessing now."

As the reporter spoke, the cameraman kept the Embassy building in his viewfinder, broadcasting what he was seeing live to the whole world. There were dozens of other camera crews around the building, all transfixed on the event unfolding before their eyes. Behind them ran a cordon of police, taken completely by surprise and barely able to contain the crowds that were screaming and pointing.

Barely a minute ago, the morning quiet was shattered by the sound of many rotor blades. Suddenly the sky was filled with sleek, dull black helicopters, swooping in low over the Embassy. Some hovered over the roof while ropes fell out and armed men slid down one after another. Thirty men were on the Embassy roof within seconds. Other helicopters hovered low over the street, disgorging more men who ran in a mad dash for the main doors. Two smaller helicopters began circling the Embassy like hornets, marksmen training their long rifles out the side hatches.

A loud BOOM from the roof and a burst of gunfire caused the crowd to begin screaming and pointing in astonishment. The next instant, the Embassy building was obscured by smoke and the sound of gunfire and explosions filled the streets.

Delta's Gold team was running this operation. The plan was fairly straightforward. There is an old military maxim that says it's easier to fight down than up, so it was decided the best way to hit this target was from the roof. The plan called for thirty shooters to hit the

roof and make entry. Fifteen men would take the third floor, entering through the fire escape. Fifteen more would enter the second floor via the outside. Fifteen other men were dropped to street level to seal all exits and clear the first floor, where the hostages were.

The location of every terrorist in the building was known and constantly updated by Delta's surveillance teams surrounding the building. They were in radio contact with the shooters and vectored them to their targets. It was far from a fair fight, which was the way Delta wanted it.

The top floor was cleared first. Fifteen Delta operators flooded through the fire stairs into the corridor, splitting into five three-man elements. One element covered the stairs while the other four each headed for a corner sentry. It was over very quickly.

At the same time fifteen more shooters rappelled to the second floor. Using grenades and steel pipes to breach the windows, they made entry and began clearing the rooms. There were eight terrorists on this floor, already alerted by the noise outside. A vicious firefight broke out among the offices and hallways on this floor. It lasted almost five minutes and when it was over seven of the terrorists were dead and one incapacitated. One Delta shooter was severely wounded.

The first floor was where the greatest potential for disaster existed. Not only was it the location of the hostages but the Delta shooters had to gain entry by running from their helicopters, which would leave them exposed for several critical seconds. For this reason, the job went to the fastest sprinters. They made it to their entry points in record time and gained entry to the first floor with only one injury, an arm cut by falling glass. Once inside, two of them came under withering fire from three terrorists in the main lobby. One shooter, a master sergeant whose parents were immigrants from nearby Uganda, was killed. The other dove behind a steel desk while returning fire. It was enough to force the terrorists to head for cover only to be cut down by two more Delta shooters who had entered through a side window. Two more terrorists were killed in the rear portion of the floor near the kitchen entrance. Almost a dozen shooters worked their way for-

ward, converging on the main dining hall and the hostages.

In the lead was Major Ronny Buckman, the operation commander. Behind him were his security element, Sergeants Vince Edwards and Howard Gatlin. They came up to the rear door to the dining hall and stopped, waiting for everyone to get into position.

“Now! Hit it!” Buckman ordered. There was no hesitation. Any pause in the assault could give the terrorists time to kill hostages in that room. This was the true nightmare scenario. Having been prevented by the Nairobi police from placing listening and viewing devices in the room, the shooters were going in blind. They didn’t know the location of the hostages or any terrorists in the room, whether any boobytraps existed, or if any furniture had been moved. Such details take on life-and-death significance in this situation.

Responding to Buckman’s order, Edwards kicked the door open. He dove left, Buckman going right and Gatlin left again. Captain Billy Hicks’ element did the same thing through the main door on the opposite side of the room.

The hostages were all crowded against the outside wall, screaming in terror at the sudden appearance of six black-clad armed men. Some dove for the floor, others just stood, frozen in panic. The shooters did as they were trained, shouting at everyone to drop to the floor. They had to get control of this crowd quickly and determine if any terrorists were hiding among the hostages. A dirty secret in the hostage rescue business is that many hostage casualties are due to being shot by rescuers. Delta and similar teams in other countries operate on the assumption that anyone still standing is a target. The last thing Buckman wanted was to shoot a hostage in a moment of confusion.

Fortunately, all the hostages dropped to the floor obediently. Buckman took a second to look them over. He spotted some members of the senior Embassy staff, as well as prominent British and Kenyan diplomats. They seemed uninjured but fatigued from their ordeal. He was relieved to see that no terrorists were in the room but there was no sign of the Ambassador. More Delta

shooters and paramedics rushed in and began the process of getting everyone ready to go to the waiting helicopters. Buckman reported all the hostages secured on his radio.

Other teams began to report in now that the shooting was over. All in all, eighteen terrorists were reported down, one of them still alive but not expected to make it. One Delta operator was dead and two were wounded. The grounds around the embassy were being searched and snipers in orbiting helicopters were checking the perimeter. Three Blackhawk helos came in and landed in front of the Embassy to receive the hostages. After being put in handcuffs and searched, the hostages were filed out to the helos and flown back to Mombassa. All the hostages were secured and in the air quickly. The entire operation lasted thirteen minutes.

Lara, Jack and Terrell enjoyed a ringside seat, watching the whole operation unfold from their hovering helo two hundred meters away. Jack was able to describe the action to Lara as it happened. They could hear the shooters' reports on their headsets, letting them monitor the progress inside the building.

Lara listened intently, hoping that no hostages would be injured. She was also listening for any sightings of Rimoux in the building, fearing he might escape. He was cunning and ruthless and would not hesitate to leave his own men in this situation.

Eventually, calls of "Clear" began to trickle into the radio chatter. Then they heard Buckman's report that the hostages were secure and saw the helos come in to collect them. They all breathed a sigh of relief. Jack and Terrell were euphoric at their comrades' stunning success. This was definitely Delta's finest hour.

Lara turned to Jack. "Can we contact the men on the ground? I need to know if they've found Rimoux."

"Sure," Jack replied. Keying his mike, he announced, "Gold One One, this is Adidas. Are you there, over?"

They could hear Buckman's sarcastic voice in reply.

“Adidas, Gold One One. What are you doing on this net, Kraemer? You in town this weekend, over?”

Jack smiled. “Yeah Ron. We saw the whole thing. You guys rocked. Listen, my consultant here says the leader may still be at large. Can you give me a description of the bad guys?”

“All black Africans, male, early to mid 20s. Sound right?”

“Gold One One, this is — er, the ‘consultant’”, Lara interjected. “You’re looking for a Caucasian male in his mid 40s. Tanned and fit looking. Probably well dressed. He’s French.”

“Nope,” came the quick reply. “That guy is not in this building.” There was a pause. “I think you folks need to get over here ASAP.”

Jack tapped the Navy pilot on the shoulder and pointed toward the Embassy complex, still smoking and surrounded by helicopters.

“Take us in,” he ordered.

Chapter Twelve

Pandemonium was setting in as the Navy helo touched down in front of the U.S. Embassy building. The Nairobi police could barely contain the pressure of the crowd and media personnel as Jack, Lara and Terrell hopped out and raced for the front door. The smell of cordite hung in the air, black smoke poured out of windows and broken glass crunched underfoot as they entered the lobby. Blood smears and shell casings covered the floor. Lara noticed a body lying by the door, black assault boots sticking out from under the sheet. Images of D.C. flooded her mind.

“Hey Jack,” a voice called out from across the lobby. “Ronny’s up in the Ambassador’s office waiting for you. Third floor.”

Jack nodded to the Delta trooper, clapping him on the shoulder as he passed. “Thanks, Dale,” he said as he headed straight up the stairs followed by Terrell and Lara.

“Good to see you,” Major Buckman said to the trio as they entered the ornately paneled office on the third floor. He gave Lara a suspicious look for a moment, not having been notified of her part in this operation. Lara returned his gaze unflinchingly. Her eyes told him, *don’t worry, I belong here*. He seemed to accept the message, looking back toward Jack.

“What’s going on, Ronny? Where is this guy?” Jack asked as he looked around the office. “How could he have gotten away? You guys hit this place pretty fast.”

“We sure did,” Buckman replied. “There was a team in this room within thirty seconds. No way could anyone make it out of this building in time. And look.” Buckman pointed toward the far corner of the office. Sprawled on the floor was a body of a well-dressed black man, a pool of blood soaking the carpet around his head.

“This guy had time to do the Ambassador before he left,” Buckman observed coldly. He nodded toward Lara. “You seem to know this guy. Who is he?”

Lara stepped into the center of the office, unable to take her eyes off the Ambassador's body. "Jean-Pierre Rimoux," she began, "is a former mercenary and officer in the French Foreign Legion. He turned to treasure hunting several years ago. He's been all over the world stealing priceless artifacts and selling them on the black market. I first ran across him in Burma two years ago. He was raiding a Bhuddist temple of some gold statuary that I was helping catalog for the Ministry of Culture. The local villagers found out and came to the temple to try to stop him. He and his men slaughtered them all. Then he went into the village and burned it to the ground. Two hundred men, women and children murdered for some gold statues."

Lara paused, frowning as the memories came back. "I managed to recover the statues and give them to the government. Killed several of his lads in the process. Rimoux's never forgotten that. He's tried to kill me several times since then. I reckon this is another attempt at revenge aside from pure greed for the Emerald Eye."

Buckman spat on the floor. "In his attempt for revenge, as you put it, one of my guys and a hostage was killed. That makes it personal."

"Two," Jack interrupted. "They got D.C."

Buckman locked eyes with Jack for a long moment. "He took a few with him, didn't he?"

Jack nodded grimly. The room fell silent. Delta was a small community and losses were felt by everyone.

Terrell called from the other room. "Yo, found something."

Buckman, Lara, Jack and several others came into the secure comms room. It contained teletypes, computer terminals and encryption gear that the Embassy depended on for all its important communications. Terrell was standing by a laser printer examining a metal box. Wires extended from it to the phone relay box in the wall. Seeing everyone's puzzled expressions, Terrell explained.

“It’s a detonator. Looks like they rigged it through the internal phone system. I’ll bet you’ll find explosives placed near phone jacks all over this building. Very slick setup.”

Lara put her hand to her chin pensively. “Strange, that. It’s not like Rimoux to leave everyone alive. He must have exited in a great hurry.”

“But how?” Jack asked, exasperated. “There was absolutely no warning. I don’t understand it.”

Just then Terrell noticed a sheet of paper lying in the printer tray. Picking it up, he read it quickly. The look on his face startled everyone. Terrell handed the sheet to Buckman.

Buckman swore at what he saw. “Standard State Department press release notifying all their embassies of the ‘imminent rescue attempt at AMEMB Nairobi’. This came off the printer five minutes before we hit this place.”

Everyone was incredulous. “How did that wind up here?” Jack asked.

“Some numbskull back in Washington forgot to remove this embassy from the distribution list. We lost all tactical surprise because of a clerical error.” Buckman wadded up the paper and threw it across the room in disgust. “Damned State Department,” he muttered.

Jack rubbed his eyes for a moment. How many lives of U.S. military personnel had been lost because of incompetent bureaucrats and diplomats in the government? This was only the latest example. He let out a long breath of resignation and looked squarely at Lara.

“All right, ma’am,” Buckman began.

“Please. It’s Lara.”

“Lara,” Buckman replied. “You know this guy. Where could he have gone? Who does he know in Nairobi? Do you have this information?”

“Not here with me,” Lara replied. “But I can get it

straightaway.”

“Hello?”

“Jenny, it’s Lara.”

“My God,” Jenny breathed. “Where are you? Are you hurt?”

“I’m okay, I’m — ah, where you probably think I am. There are some gentlemen with me who need some information. Got a pen?”

Lara quickly told Jenny what was going on and what she needed. Jenny called Niles at Lara’s residence and he started checking the database. Quickly finding the data, he faxed it directly to the number Lara gave Jenny.

Several sheets of paper rolled out of the fax machine. Lara snapped them up and looked them over.

“Right. Here’s a list of Rimoux’s contacts in Nairobi. My guess is that he would head to one of these places to hide until you lads have left the city. Let’s see...” She read down the list, stopping on the second page. “This is it. Harris’ flat. He has a flat here in the city!”

“That has to be it,” Jack said. “What are we waiting for? Let’s get moving.”

“Not so fast, Captain,” Buckman interjected. “In case you’ve forgotten, Delta is here to rescue the hostages. That’s it. Anything further would be a serious international incident. We can’t have U.S. combat troops kicking down doors in a foreign country.”

“All right then,” Jack replied. “But I’m still technically on a black mission. Total deniability. I’m going with her.”

Buckman shrugged. “Suit yourself. I’m not in your chain of command on this one. But you better get rid of those camo fatigues. That kind of attention you don’t

want to attract.”

“I’m going too,” Terrell declared.

Jack touched his friend’s arm and shook his head. “Not on this one, bro. You go back home with these guys. You did your part.”

Master Sergeant Terrell Givens tried to stare Jack down. It didn’t work. Jack was adamant. Terrell let out a breath, glanced at the floor and nodded. He extended his hand to Lara to say goodbye and was surprised when she stepped over to him and hugged him tightly.

“Take care of yourself, Terrell,” Lara said. “You’re a good man.”

Terrell hugged her back for a moment then released her. He smiled shyly and nodded. Looking back at Jack, he whispered.

“Get him. For D.C.”

Jack nodded gravely.

“That’s it,” Buckman announced. We have to get lost. The local cops will be in here any second. There’s a helo waiting. Good luck, you two,” he said to Lara and Jack. “We’re outta here.”

Buckman turned and left with everyone else on his heels, leaving Lara and Jack alone in the office.

“Well, sport,” Lara said to Jack. “What do we do now?”

Jack smiled back at her. Standing there, covered in dirt and sweat, she was more beautiful than any other woman he had ever seen. It was difficult keeping his mind on the mission, but he had to do it.

“Let me find something to wear. Then we can get going.”

Ten minutes later, the pair exited a rear door of the embassy. They crossed through a small tree-covered

park to a back alley, managing to elude the police cordon and reporters. The wail of police and fire sirens could be heard in the distance.

Jack managed to find a pair of khaki slacks and a tweed suit jacket. With his green Army T-shirt he managed to look fashionably casual. Lara found a travel vest that covered her gunbelt reasonably well. She carried a gym bag in which they placed their automatic weapons. Jack stuffed his .45 into his waistband and a Gerber folding knife into the inside pocket of the jacket. They looked like tourists or photographers to the casual observer, and blended in fairly well.

“First order of business is transportation,” Jack whispered. “We need to get a car.”

“Can’t we just hail a cab?”

“You forget, Lara, we’re in this country illegally. If the local police find us, they’ll lock us up in a deep dark hole. The less contact with the locals the better.”

“Fair enough,” Lara responded. Stealing a car didn’t seem that unjustified considering the obscenity their quarry had created this day. “How about that one?” she said, pointing out a dark burgundy Audi sedan.

“That’ll work,” Jack replied. They walked across the street quickly, checking all around for police or passersby. The area was deserted. Jack reached the car first, checking the lock on the door.

“It’s locked. I need some kind of tool to pop this thing. Lara, do you have a —” Before he could finish the sentence, Lara crossed to the opposite door and jimmied the lock open with her camp knife. She slid into the seat and reached to unlock Jack’s door.

Jack stood there in complete amazement. “Lara Croft, you are a woman of many talents,” he observed.

“And I’m also a great cook,” Lara smiled. “Now get in.”

Jack got in and immediately noticed something wrong. “Where’s the steering wheel?”

Lara chuckled. “Over here, luv. You’re in Kenya, where they drive on the proper side of the road.”

“But I was gonna drive,” Jack protested.

“Have you ever driven on the left, Jack?” Lara asked as she fiddled with the ignition wires. “Ever been on the streets of Nairobi before? I have. Now let’s get on with it.” The car’s engine suddenly thrummed to life. Without hesitating, Lara slammed the car in gear and punched the accelerator. The car sped off and made a hard right turn out of the alley, tires squealing.

Several minutes later, the burgundy Audi turned down a quiet tree-lined lane and slowed to a halt. The occupants sat motionless, observing a two story apartment building half a block down.

“So that’s it?”

“Mm hmm. That’s the address I have. Apartment 4. We’ll have to go see which one that is.”

Jack placed a hand on Lara’s arm. “Not we. Me. He knows you, but he’s never seen my face. I’ll recon the building and come back here. Then we’ll plan our next move.” With that, Jack checked his pistol one more time and hopped out of the car.

“Be careful, Jack,” Lara called after him. He turned and winked at her as he walked away. That caused a strange flutter in her that she hadn’t felt for anyone in a very long while. Not now, she thought. This isn’t the time.

Just as Jack neared the building, a man stepped out to the street. Lara’s breath stopped. It was Rimoux, walking toward a gray Mercedes parked along the curb. Suddenly he froze. The hair on the back of Lara’s neck stood straight up and her pulse and breathing began to race. Her body already knew what was about to happen before her mind registered it.

Everything happened in slow motion. Rimoux looked

straight at Jack and reached into his jacket. Lara's heart started pumping. Jack seemed to react, crouching and reaching for his pistol. Rimoux produced a gun of his own and began to raise it up to fire. Jack dropped and began to roll into the bushes, drawing his weapon as well. Then Rimoux fired the first shot.

The sound of gunfire snapped Lara into action. She gunned the engine and the Audi screamed in response. As she sped toward the fight, Rimoux ducked into the Mercedes, shooting as he moved. Jack fired back from his partially concealed position, shattering the early morning quiet. As Lara pulled up next to Jack, the Mercedes bolted from its parking space into the street. That's when Lara first noticed a man behind the wheel. Rimoux wasn't alone.

"Jack, get in!" Lara screamed. She threw the door open and he jumped into the car. The Mercedes sped back up the street and Lara executed a perfect bootlegger turn and took off in pursuit.

"Jack, are you hurt?" Lara shouted over the squealing of the tires.

"No! Drive, drive!" Jack said as he attempted to sit upright. "We gotta catch those guys!"

The cars careened wildly through residential streets, barely missing parked cars, trashcans and the occasional pedestrian. Jack reached to put Lara's seatbelt on, then leaned over to the back seat. He fished around in the gym bag until he came out with an MP-5 and a couple of full magazines.

"Good Lord, Jack," Lara exclaimed. "You're not going to shoot the driver are you? They could lose control and kill someone!"

"Not the driver," Jack replied coolly as he slapped a magazine into the weapon and racked the charging lever back. "The tires. Shoot out the tires and they lose their speed."

Just then the windshield convulsed from the impact of bullets. Three spider webs appeared in the glass right between Jack and Lara. They instinctively ducked and

Lara swerved the car in an attempt to foul the shooter's aim. Jack rolled down his window and jammed the barrel of his weapon between the sideview mirror and the door to stabilize his aim.

"Get more to the right," he shouted. "I need a clear shot."

Lara swerved over and suddenly jerked the car back, barely avoiding a huge truck that shot past them less than three feet away. The sudden violent maneuver threw Jack back into the seat. Just then, another bullet shattered the sideview mirror.

"That was close," Jack muttered.

The Mercedes ran through a traffic light and turned left onto a major highway. Lara pushed the Audi through the intersection, weaving through several cars as she jockeyed for position behind her quarry. She expertly shifted all the way up to fifth gear with her foot pressing the gas pedal nearly into the floor. The traffic was mercifully light on the highway. The Mercedes dramatically increased speed, as did Lara, and they both flew down the highway at nearly 100 miles an hour.

"Where's he going?" Jack wondered aloud.

"This motorway goes to the airport," Lara replied. "My guess is he has a plane waiting."

"He's not gonna make it," Jack declared flatly. "Not while I'm still breathing." Jack stuck his MP-5 out the window again, and this time he had a clear shot. Setting the weapon to semiauto, he fired several times. His bullets struck the pavement and the taillight, shattering it. Fighting the powerful slipstream around the car, he aimed again and fired one more shot. The bullet struck the left rear tire of the Mercedes, blowing it completely off the wheel. A two-foot long shard of rubber sailed into the air and smacked the Audi's windshield, causing Lara and Jack to flinch.

A shower of sparks obscured the left rear area of the Mercedes. Their speed lagged a little, which allowed Lara to close the distance. Just as Jack started to warn

her not to do that, the windshield shuddered under the impact of several more bullets.

“Whoa,” Lara said to herself as she tapped the brakes. She fell back a little and maintained a distance of about fifty feet. Cars whizzed past them on both sides as Lara maneuvered to keep her position behind the Mercedes. Jack tried to aim at another tire but couldn’t get a shot, cursing in frustration.

Just then, Lara noticed a road sign. “Here’s the turnoff to the airport,” she observed. As if responding to her statement, the Mercedes abruptly veered to the offramp. The Audi followed. The turnoff fed into a side road that wound around some airport outbuildings and smaller hangars. Their speed continued even on this small road. Lara recognized this as the general aviation area. Rimoux was probably heading for a private plane to make his escape.

The two figures in the Mercedes were hunching down now, opting not to shoot at the Audi. Lara and Jack both knew what that meant. They’re making their final run for home. Jack checked his weapon, making sure there was a fresh magazine. He reached back into the gym bag and retrieved another MP-5 for Lara, slamming a magazine in place and racking the charging handle. Lara took one hand from the wheel to put the weapon in her lap. Her face was impassive behind her sunglasses.

This was it. They had crossed the point of no return without hesitation. Both had blood to avenge. Jack’s mind flooded with images of D.C. lying dead in that smoking cave, his rage building. This creep was going to pay with his life even if it cost Jack his own.

Lara thought of the villagers in Burma. She remembered seeing them lying dead, hacked to pieces by Rimoux’s men. Women, children... She shuddered. Her stomach turned at the thought. To Lara, Rimoux was a cockroach that needed exterminating.

Suddenly, the Mercedes darted to the right and disappeared between two buildings. The Audi followed. They shot down an alley of corrugated tin buildings and came out into an open area. Lara and Jack could

see that this was a hangar and they were on the tarmac. A Learjet sat nearby surrounded by a fuel truck and several cars. There were at least a dozen armed men standing around.

The Audi screamed to a halt as the Mercedes veered around and behind the screen of cars and gunmen.

Then all hell broke loose.

Chapter Thirteen

The Audi shuddered under the impact of dozens of rounds pouring in from Rimoux's men. Lara and Jack ducked down and crammed themselves below the dashboard just in time to avoid being shot full of holes. Shards of glass, metal, leather and fabric showered them as they hunched down. The duo shared a worried look, both wondering when the incoming fire would stop.

"Any ideas?" Lara shouted to Jack over the din. She tried to look blasé, but she was a bit concerned at their position. In response, Jack stuck the barrel of his MP-5 toward the back seat, hooking a strap on the gym bag. He yanked hard, and the bag plopped right between the front bucket seats. Wincing from the flying debris, he rooted through the bag until he found what he wanted.

"Here," he said as he tossed an object to Lara. She caught it and examined it. It looked like a smoke grenade but a label on the side read "Type 25 Distraction Device". Lara looked at Jack quizzically. A flashbang? He pulled the pin on his grenade and nodded back.

"Cease fire!" Rimoux ordered. "Check out the car. They must be dead." He doubted that anyone could survive that barrage but had to be certain.

Two men nearer the Audi moved up carefully. The rest covered the car with their weapons. As the two men came within about fifteen meters of the car, two small objects sailed out through the car's shattered windshield.

"Grenades!" someone shouted and everyone dove for cover. The flashbangs clanged and bounced on the concrete and rolled to a stop. A split second later, they detonated. The twin explosions were blinding and deafening even out in the open. The two men near the car became totally disoriented.

Jack kicked open the door and sprang out. Lara followed his cue and exited the other side. They both knew their only hope would be to get out of that deathtrap and get some solid cover and room to maneuver. The precious seconds bought for them by the flashbangs would make the critical difference.

Lara ran like a bandit for the rear corner of the hangar, rounding it just

as a few rounds slammed into the dirt at her feet. She worked her way down the wall and came to a door. Figuring she would have a better chance inside than out, she kicked it and leapt inside. She found herself in the short leg of an L-shaped room that extended around an interior corner to her left. There were some rough wooden desks and a dusty calendar on the far wall. The MP-5 firmly seated in her shoulder, Lara crept along the inside wall listening for any sounds that didn't belong. As she came to the corner, she heard a door open at the other end of the room. It sounded like a door to the outside. The sound was followed by heavy footfalls coming straight at her. She crouched, concentrating on her front sight, her finger feeling the trigger. Into her view came one of Rimoux's men, a weapon in his hands. Lara's weapon fired almost instinctually. Three 9mm rounds punctured the man's thorax, kicking him backward to the floor. He didn't get up.

Lara finally exhaled, reminding herself that she needed to remember to breathe. Carefully "slicing the pie" around the corner, Lara backed against the right wall and slid through a doorway into the next room.

Jack managed to get behind a large fuel truck next to the Learjet before anyone started firing again. He crossed onto a patch of grass and found a drainage ditch. He somersaulted in, coming up with his weapon trained in the direction he ran from. He fired a burst, forcing three pursuing men to dive for cover. He dropped to his back, taking a moment to think. With Lara headed back toward the hangar, these men would have to split up. What was his count? Twelve? Jack figured there must be five to seven men after him. He needed to take them out while causing mass confusion at the same time. Cutting Rimoux's escape route would be nice as well. How could he do that?

"Yes!" he said aloud. He sat up again and trained his sights on the fuel truck. He traced it to the left and saw what he needed. The rubber fuel line that ran from the truck to the Learjet's starboard wing. Hoping to God the valve was open he fired. The fuel line was shredded and fell to the tarmac, jet fuel spilling and splashing everywhere. Jack heard someone shout a warning from behind the truck. His plan was having the desired effect. Now he needed to ignite the fuel. Figuring the simplest plan was the best, he shot at the puddle on the concrete.

It worked. Sparks from the ricocheting bullets set off the highly flammable liquid. A sheet of flame spread and seemed to dart along the hose to the truck itself. Jack ducked in time to avoid being scorched as the truck disappeared in the explosion. A white-yellow fireball consumed the fuel truck and the three men behind it. The force of the blast picked the Learjet up and slammed it down hard, blackening its aluminum skin. The windows in all the cars smashed. Shards of metal and glass became missiles and the air was nearly sucked out of Jack's

lungs. For a moment he feared he would be killed by his own plan. An ugly black mushroom of smoke rose into the air as flaming debris fell all around. Fighting every instinct to take cover, Jack jumped and ran down the ditch in an effort to flank Rimoux's position and catch them all from behind.

Lara found herself in a workshop of some kind. A plywood workbench ran the length of the opposite wall, littered with grimy engine parts. Shelves of tools and a pile of aircraft tires filled up the rest of the room. The smell of motor oil and dirt was everywhere. She crept across the room, her weapon swinging in low arcs as she scanned for threats. A door leading to the main hangar was to her left. Holding her MP-5 out away from her as she rounded the corner, Lara stole a quick peek through the door.

In the main hangar sat two more aircraft, another Learjet and an aging twin-engine Cessna 421. The tail of a third aircraft could be seen in the far corner. Tires, acetylene canisters, hoses and tool stands were all over the concrete floor. Steel girders supported the tin roof. The hangar didn't appear to be occupied.

Just as Lara prepared to enter the room she heard a sound behind her. She ducked and whirled just in time to avoid being shot in the head. The doorjamb shattered from the fire of the goon's AK. Splinters peppered Lara's face and eyes, but she managed to return fire. Her shots went a little wild but one bullet hit the gunman in the right shoulder, cracking his scapula and severing his brachial plexus. His arm went limp, letting his weapon fall to the floor. Lara recovered in the next second and planted two rounds in the man's forehead.

She ran her fingers over her face to check for injuries. Her right eye was stinging mightily, and flecks of blood on her fingers told her the side of her face was lacerated. At least it didn't seem serious. Lara wiped the blood on her shorts, dropped her magazine, checked it and, satisfied that there were enough rounds left, slammed it home and continued into the hangar.

Jack low-crawled up the length of the ditch. It appeared Rimoux and the remaining men were still concentrating on the fiercely burning fuel truck. Maybe they were checking for survivors. Jack came to a deeper depression in the ditch that allowed him to almost stand up and still stay below ground level. This was a good defensive position with at least thirty yards of unobstructed terrain in all directions.

Jack took a moment to size up the opposition. Hiding behind the Mercedes was the man he traded shots with earlier. He looked fit, but not in a military way. He looked more like the product of ritzy health

clubs, deeply tanned with close-cropped silver hair. Jack saw a pistol in his hand. That had to be the Frenchman. Next to him was a tall black man dressed in British camo fatigues and carrying a 5.56mm FNC carbine. From his focus and alertness, Jack guessed he was the Frenchman's bodyguard. He looked like a pro. He'd have to be taken out first. That wasn't a problem. Jack was in a killing mood.

Lara entered the main hangar, sweeping left-right-left as she walked. Beads of sweat covered her forehead and slid down into her eyes, further stinging the cuts on her face. Her arm was throbbing from Harris' knife wound. The thought of a nice hot Jacuzzi ran across her mind as she came around a pile of engine parts. The area was clear. Pushing away thoughts of comfort, Lara concentrated on the hangar. Something wasn't right here. She had killed two men and knew at least four or five were still out there, but couldn't sense that anyone was in the hangar. That didn't make sense. They should have come in here to cut her off or set up an ambush. Although Lara had learned never to assume in a combat situation, she sensed that no one was here. It didn't matter. She would have to clear this hangar anyway, then link up with Jack and go after Rimoux.

Jack kept the Frenchman and the bodyguard in his sights. The Frenchman was talking into a cell phone but was too far away for Jack to hear. The bodyguard kept his vigil, weapon at the ready. It seemed strange to Jack that none of the other men were moving. Just as Jack began to sense something was wrong a rifle butt swung into view and knocked his lights out.

"Lara? Lara, come out. Please, mon petit. Come join us."

Lara's head snapped around at the sound of his voice. What's going on? She crossed to the outside door of the hangar and peered out. What she saw chilled her to the bone.

Rimoux was standing in the open, smiling like the Devil himself. His bodyguard stood nearby, holding his rifle to the head of...

...Jack, who was on his knees, hands on his head. There were the rest of Rimoux's men and a half dozen Kenyan Army troopers standing behind them. Lara's heart sank. They had walked right into a trap.

"Lara, my darling. Please don't make us wait. I wouldn't want to hurt your gentleman friend here."

Rimoux's voice coiled like a snake and gave Lara the shivers. She was nearly vibrating with rage at what she saw, but realized her position

was hopeless. Jack would certainly be killed if she didn't comply.

"All right. I'm coming out," Lara announced. She carefully opened the door and exited. Rimoux's gunmen tensed upon seeing her. Slowly, ever so slowly, Lara unslung her MP-5 and gripped it by the muzzle. She made a show of delicately placing it on the tarmac.

"Excellent," Rimoux observed. "Now your pistols, please."

Lara wordlessly unbuckled her gunbelt and let it slide to her feet. Her eyes locked with Jack's. For the first time in many years, Lara Croft felt absolutely helpless. Not for herself, for she had gotten out of worse fixes than this. She felt that she had led Jack into this situation and now his life was in immediate peril. The sorrow and shame she felt was evident in her eyes. Jack gazed back at her steadily. A faint trace of a smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. Everything's all right, he seemed to say. Lara allowed the barest hint of a smile in return, although she didn't feel like it.

"Ah, there you are, cherí. So nice to see you again. Oh, but you have been injured," Rimoux prattled on, noticing Lara's face and arm. "Please, come sit with me."

Lara must not have noticed it before. Next to Rimoux stood a small table and two chairs. The table was covered by a spotless white linen tablecloth. On it sat a bottle of wine and two glasses. Was this man trying to charm her? The thought made Lara sick.

Rimoux must have noticed her reluctance, because he snapped his fingers at his bodyguard. "Jamba, if you please..."

The tall African violently jammed the muzzle of his rifle in Jack's ear. Jack winced but did not make a sound. Lara gasped, her eyes going wide. Rimoux's smile grew even colder in response. Lara got the message and stepped carefully to the table. Finally she took a seat, assuming the stiffest, most British posture she could.

"Ah, Lara," Rimoux crooned as he took his seat opposite hers. "Ever ze proper lady. You know, even though I never forgave you for Burma, I have always admired your..." He paused to pour Lara a glass of wine, then himself, then place the bottle back on the table. "...Form."

"Yes, cherí, I never forgot what happened in ze jungle. You cost me a lot of money." His tone of voice was that of a parent scolding a naughty child. It made Lara furious, but she didn't show it.

"Please, my dear, try ze wine. It is a very nice Bordeaux." Noticing

Lara's reluctance, Rimoux added, "*I inseest.*"

Lara took an obligatory sip. It was excellent. The man did know his wine.

"Those artifacts meant a great deal to me. I had a client in Saudi Arabia who was prepared to pay more than ten million dollars for zem. But then, you became involved. You took from me what was rightfully mine. And killed many of my best men. And so, mon petit," Rimoux paused to take a sip. "I must now exact my revenge.

"I should give you my compliments. You handled yourself expertly in Burma. And here as well. I have not heard from Harris, so I must assume that you have disposed of him. Alerting the American commandos to attack the embassy was also inspired. But of course, I was prepared for that. Yes, Lara, your reputation is well deserved. And your friend here," - Rimoux waved toward Jack - "seems to be quite the professional. Ah, but that is all for naught, yes? Neither of you knew of my other—" Rimoux indicated the Kenyan soldiers, "— employees". What this all means, my dear, is that you will both die today."

Rimoux threw his head back and laughed. It was guttural, evil. Lara looked at him through narrow, hate-filled eyes. She wasn't so much afraid as disgusted. This filth was going to kill her and Jack and get away scot-free. After all this work. After losing D.C. It was too much to believe. Lara stole a glance at Jack. He looked back with a stony expression American soldiers call a "war face". Brave warrior to the end, Lara mused bitterly. Oh, Jack. If only we had more time...

"Etienne!" Rimoux called to one of the men. "Allez!" The goon jogged over to the shot-up Audi and looked inside. He rooted around in the back seat, opened the trunk and searched there too. Finally, he looked at Rimoux and shook his head.

"What?" Rimoux exclaimed. He rose from his seat and pushed his face near to Lara's. "The stone is missing. It is not here!"

"C'est dommage," Lara replied coolly, a confident grin slowly appearing. "What a pity."

"Yaaahhhh!" Rimoux screamed like an animal, kicking the table away. His breathing became rapid and coarse, as though he was hyperventilating. He spat and cursed in vulgar street French. Finally, he composed himself and looked Lara right in the eye.

"Kill zem both."

Jamba flicked off the safety and aimed at the back of Jack's head.

Two more goons came up to Lara and leveled their weapons at her. Rimoux turned his back on them.

Lara could hear a bird singing...

The sun felt good on her neck...

She closed her eyes.

The shooting started. Lara flinched. Something was wrong. Lara opened her eyes. What she saw was not what she expected. Rimoux's men and the Kenyan soldiers were diving for cover. Geysers of earth erupted everywhere. Some men were cut to ribbons. The heavy chattering sound of a machine gun was coming from somewhere.

Lara snapped into action. She jumped the two confused gunmen. One tried to shoot her, but she knocked his weapon away and delivered a Jiu Jitsu backhand chop into his Adam's apple. The other man got a shot off, narrowly missing Lara's head. Lara whirled and roundhouse kicked the weapon out of his hands, then jammed the heel of her hand into his nose. The force of the blow drove a bone into his brain and killed him instantly.

Taking advantage of the confusion, Jack spun around and pushed Jamba's rifle away. The two struggled for a moment, then Jack twisted it out of the African's hands. The two men stood facing each other, unarmed.

Jamba el-Sayeed was a committed terrorist. He was trained in Libya, Syria and Iran. He had operated in Beirut, Belfast, Athens, and a score of other cities. He had killed many people over the years. Car bombs, boobytraps, it didn't matter. Jamba was a killer. And he enjoyed it. Reaching into his jacket, he pulled out a large combat knife and smiled wickedly at Jack. Time for another kill.

Jack pulled his Gerber Mark I from his jacket and assumed a fighting stance. It was about time he'd gotten a chance to get up close and personal.

The carnage around them grew. Men ran for cover only to be shot to pieces. The sound of heavy gunfire filled the air. Lara looked around frantically to see where it was coming from. Suddenly, she saw it. Out from behind the hangar rose a shape. It blocked the sun and slid into view. The scorpion-like shape told Lara it was some kind of aircraft. Then it turned...

The shape became a pale gray SH-60 Seahawk helicopter. On the tail,

in bold black letters, were the words “U.S. NAVY.” Behind the side-mounted M-60 machine gun was Terrell, blazing away, shell casings falling everywhere.

Lara was elated. But there was no time to gloat. She had to get Rimoux. Looking around, she didn't see him anywhere. She ran toward the hangar.

The Seahawk settled to the tarmac. Terrell grabbed his CAR-15 and hopped out. He ran toward Jack, seeing the fight that was taking place. He was fully prepared to shoot the guy, but Jack seemed like he wanted this one himself.

Jack and the African traded feints and parries here and there, feeling each other out. Jamba moved with savagery and speed. Jack possessed the focus and technique of a trained professional. The two circled each other like feral cats, each waiting for the other to misstep. Suddenly, Jamba lashed out. His blade cut Jack's coat inches from his belly. Jack dodged the blow and countered with a slash to Jamba's knife arm. It connected, and since Jamba didn't wear a long-sleeved shirt the cut went deep, severing a tendon and dousing the front of Jack's sportcoat with blood. The African flinched, his concentration momentarily blinded by the sudden pain. Jack took advantage of the moment and moved in for the kill. He knocked Jamba's knife hand away with his left and, stepping inside, drove his Gerber deep into the African's neck. He twisted the knife for good measure, and the African went down. Seconds later he was dead.

“Not bad. You even got wet this time,” Terrell observed laconically.

“I ordered you to get out of here,” Jack spat.

“Yeah, well I don't hear so good. Besides, looked like you needed some backup.”

“Yeah,” Jack admitted. He looked down at the dead African, then around for Lara. “C'mon, T. We gotta find her!”

Lara found Rimoux in the cockpit of the other Learjet, frantically trying to power up the aircraft. So focused on his task was he that he didn't notice Lara coming up behind him. She grabbed him by the collar and yanked him back into the cabin. She threw him to the deck, jumped on top of him and began beating him savagely. He tried to block the blows but she was too fast. She hit him about the face and body, raining blow after blow. Rimoux grabbed and flailed, and finally

got hold of Lara's long ponytail. He pulled hard, jerking her head back. His other hand came around fast, catching Lara squarely in the jaw. She fell back into the cockpit.

Rimoux leapt to his feet and lunged at her. Before Lara could react, he was on her, his hands to her throat. Lara tried desperately to get him off her, but he was strong, squeezing her throat for all he was worth, driven by rage and vengeance. Lara clawed and kicked, unable to get a grip on him, her limbs blocked by the close confines of the cockpit. She looked around for something; some weapon or object she could use. Her vision began graying around the edges. Her head began throbbing. If she didn't move quickly it would be lights out.

"I will have my revenge," Rimoux growled. "You took the stone from me. I have nothing left but to kill you. Die, Lara Croft!" His eyes bulged with fury.

Lara's right hand found something. It felt solid. She grabbed it and swung it as hard as she could. It connected with Rimoux's head, knocking him back. Lara made it to her knees and swung again. The pilot's flashlight smacked Rimoux across the face, knocking out a couple of teeth. Rimoux fell back into the cabin stunned and disoriented. Lara tossed the flashlight and descended on him. She roughly turned him over on his stomach and wrapped her right arm around his throat. She wrenched his head back and applied all the pressure she could.

"For the villagers in Burma... for D.C. ... for..." She pulled harder, gritting her teeth, fighting his attempts to free himself.

"...Me!"

It was both audible and palpable when Rimoux's neck cracked. He went limp. His head slumped. Lara let Rimoux's body drop to the deck. She slid against the bulkhead and closed her eyes, letting out a long, labored breath. After a moment she drew herself up in a ball and buried her face in her knees.

Minutes later, Jack and Terrell burst into the aircraft. Jack saw Rimoux's corpse lying there, his head at an unnatural angle. And there was Lara. Jack rushed to her and sat down right next to her.

"Hey."

She looked up to him. Her face was bruised, her arm was bloody and her eyes were wet. He touched her cheek gingerly, smiling at her.

"It's over. Time to go," Jack whispered. Without saying a word, Lara

stretched her arms around Jack's neck and held him tight. Jack was genuinely surprised at her reaction. But it felt right.

It felt so right.

"Yeah," Jack said softly, taking her in his arms. "We're getting out of here."

Epilogue

In a remote corner of the Fort Bragg cemetery a memorial service was taking place. At the center of attention stood an elegant white marker built from Italian marble and Indiana limestone inscribed with these words:

SSGT David Samuel Collins
U.S. Army Special Forces
Born
Pawhuska, Oklahoma
14 March 1969
Died
East Africa
01 September 1997
He Gave the Last Full Measure

On one side of the marker stood an Army chaplain and full honor guard. On the other side stood D.C.'s wife and his parents. Behind them stood Lara, Jack, Terrell, and several other Delta operators.

Lara was grief-stricken on this day. Not only was she sharing in the mourning of D.C.'s death, she had just come from London and the funeral of her friend Princess Diana, who was killed the same night Lara was in Africa. The black Armani dress Lara wore on this day was the same one she wore then before the eyes of the world. Despite her stiff British exterior, she was gripping Jack's hand through most of the ceremony. Jack was stoic himself, though Lara knew he was deeply sorrowful. Terrell stood on Jack's other side, a tight expression on his face.

Lara took a moment to look around at the scene before her. All the soldiers were resplendent in dress blue uniforms, their medals and badges glinting in the sun. D.C.'s young wife was overcome with grief, clutching a folded American flag to her breast. His parents were obviously rural people, uncomfortable in their dress clothes and all this ceremony. Especially moving to Lara was the sight of D.C.'s father, tenderly consoling his sobbing wife, his sunken eyes reflecting what everyone felt.

After the ceremony, Lara and Jack had a brief time together before her flight out. They walked hand in hand through a small garden talking about life and their future together. They both agreed that any relationship would be difficult given their demanding careers. But there was no denying the powerful feelings they had for each other. And Lara was surprised to learn that Jack was actually a soft-spoken and thoughtful man when not "on the job". Nevertheless, they agreed that

they needed to put things on hold for now. They kissed and parted.

The latest exhibit in the British Museum was an enormous raw diamond that made the Hope Diamond look like a pebble. Its origin was a strictly kept secret despite rumors of its association with the recent violence in Kenya. It was known that Dr. Lara Croft, Oxford adjunct and renegade adventuress, was involved in the stone's discovery. Late at night, when no one but custodial and security staff were in the building, people reported seeing an ethereal green glow from the stone and the unmistakable feeling of a presence in the room. When asked about this presence, people would characterize it as "blissful and calm".

TWO WEEKS LATER:

Lara was in her downstairs office working at the computer when she heard the doorbell chime. Remembering that Jeeves was taking a day off, she got up to answer it. As she crossed the tile floor of the massive Great Hall, she wondered how the security system failed to register the arrival. Well, it wasn't likely a threat. People with ill intentions don't generally come calling in the afternoon. Lara glanced at the small TV monitor by the vestibule. The figure standing outside seemed vaguely familiar but she couldn't place him. She opened the door. To her surprise, standing before her was Jack, wearing a leather jacket, jeans and black T-shirt. His hair had grown out a bit and he had a couple of days growth on his face. He looked fabulous.

"Hey, kiddo."

"Jack! My God, what are you doing here?"

"Well", Jack replied, "I'm on assignment to the SAS for cross training. I'll be in Hereford for the next year."

"That's brilliant!" Lara exulted. "But wait. How did you get through my security? Where are my dogs?"

Jack laughed. "Boris and Karl are chowing down on a nice flank steak I bought in town. As for your little burglar alarm here, well, that's what I do for a living, isn't it?"

Lara giggled despite herself. She threw her arms around Jack's neck and held him tightly. "Jack Kraemer, you are a man of many talents."

Jack grabbed her around the waist, beaming. “Yup,” he replied. “And I’m also a great cook.”

Lara pulled Jack inside and slammed the door.

“Prove it.”

A Personal Note

Writing this story was something of an adventure for me. This was my first attempt at Tomb Raider fan fiction and by far the biggest project I’ve ever written. Although I can look back and see stuff that I want to change, the story stands on its own and I’m pretty happy with it. Over the last year (!) I have been fortunate enough to receive advice, inspiration and encouragement from some very talented writers and great people who are well known in the TR community. Chuck Brite, Richard J. Pugh, Luis Cunha, Sarah Crisman, and Ross Jenkins stand out in my mind. Also my thanks go to all the webmasters who have published this story on their sites, as well as all the readers out there who have sent me tons of Email. Thanks everybody!

I felt it in a personal way when the terrorist attacks in Kenya and Tanzania took place. It was very strange to see a situation actually happen that was so similar to one that I imagined. I tried to give the storyline some “current events” credibility, but had no idea I would pull a Tom Clancy! At any rate, it reminded me what a dangerous world we live in. I want to publicly praise the brave men and women who dedicate their lives to bringing these criminals to justice. Truly, you do God’s work.

This story is dedicated to the memory of two brave Americans. Delta snipers Randall Shugart and Gary Gordon were killed in Somalia in 1993 while fighting to save the life of helicopter pilot Michael Durant. They were both awarded the Medal of Honor for their actions. The full story of that day is here. No one can read the story without being humbled by the courage shown by these men and others like them. Gentlemen, wherever you are, thank you.

Bob Patterson
Orlando, Florida
1998