

Tomb Raider: Raw Recruit

Chapter 1

How many days had it been?

Her phone was dead. Her flashlight broken. Her pistols out of ammo. Not that this was a problem she could shoot her way out of.

Trapped in an ancient burial chamber deep in a jungle.

As soon as she'd lifted that damned crown off its pedestal, some millennia-old mechanism had activated. Brought massive stone blocks down to block the only way out. A trap to 'punish' graverobbers.

"Claim the dead's possessions," Lara croaked out, throat dangerously dry. "Claim the dead's grave."

A rough translation of the tomb's warning.

If she'd been paying more attention... If she'd taken that warning seriously...

But she hadn't. Since when had warnings ever kept her from chasing a trinket or prize? Practically every grave and tomb and temple she'd ever delved had given her similar warnings. Stealing from the dead; bad. Don't do it or bad things will happen.

Bad things that she'd always been able to handle before.

How'd she fallen for a trapped pedestal?!

It was basic, fundamental stuff. Check for pressure plates before picking up ancient, priceless relics. A newbie on their first archaeological exploration knew that.

So why hadn't *she*?

The question was as infuriating as the answer.

Complacency.

Overconfidence.

Arrogance.

If she'd just taken a few seconds to check...

But it was done. And here she was. Trapped.

Doomed.

No-one knew she was here. No-one but her even knew where 'here' was. As far as the rest of the world was aware, this temple and the burial chamber within were nothing but myth.

Another of her failures.

Too prideful to work with others. Too proud to ask for help.

How many days had it been?

Too many.

Trapped in total darkness, with no way to tell the time. The only means she had to gauge the passage of days was her sleeping and waking. And how many times had she slept and woken in this blackness?

A dozen? More? It was hard to tell.

Enough that her rations were gone. Her water canteens empty.

Enough that she was scared to let sleep take her again. Scared that she wouldn't wake up this time.

All she could do was sit there in the darkness, muscles too weak to move, stomach too empty to ache, mind drifting someplace between awareness and unconsciousness. Waiting for the end to come.

If it hadn't already.

I worry about you.

Words that a Croft family friend had once said. A friend of Lara's late father. An explorer and treasure hunter like her.

This isn't a job for loners.

She'd gotten offended back then. She wasn't a 'loner'. She just didn't like relying on

others. The only person who she could trust to do their part was herself. Others... They just complicated things.

Arrogance. Idiocy.

If she'd been part of a group, instead of trying to do everything by herself...

Too late to think about that now.

When you're young, an echo of the older man's voice sounded in Lara's head. *You think you're indestructible. Give it a few years. You'll see the benefit of having a solid team around you.*

A lesson she was learning all too well now.

In her mid-twenties, very much aware of how she wasn't 'indestructible'. Learning it just a little too late.

When she heard a distant rumbling, she thought nothing of it. Her mind playing tricks on her, or rubble shifting elsewhere in the ruins. Nothing relevant to her. But, as the rumbling grew nearer and clearer, she perked up. Hope flaring in her chest.

That noise; it was a drill. A *big* drill.

And it was coming from the massive stone slab blocking the burial chamber's exit.

Lara tried to call out, cry for help.

Only a soft groan squeezed past her dry lips.

The wait was agony. A lifetime spent staring in the direction of the sound, not allowing herself to believe it was real.

When a tiny spec of the blackness crumbled away, a tiny spot of flashlight shining into the chamber, Lara winced.

The first time in days her eyes had experienced *light*.

More crumbling, the sounds of rocks falling, men shouting. Lara closed her eyes, slumped, passed out.

The next time she woke after that, it was to someone pouring water into her parched mouth. Voices all around her. Light and noise battering her senses. She ignored it all, gulped down every drop of water as if her life depended on it. Which it probably did.

Lara moaned. Felt every muscle in her body relax.

Warm water sprayed her face, ran down her chest and arms and legs. Washing away weeks of grime and dust.

Her first shower in what felt like an eternity.

She tilted her head back, grinned wide.

Alive.

She was *alive*!

Saved by group of rival treasure hunters led by a familiar face. Fed and treated and brought back to civilisation.

In the end, Lara probably spent upwards of an hour standing in the shower. Barely cleaning herself, she just stood there and relaxed. Relished in her survival.

She'd been in life-threatening situations more times than she could count. Somehow, this felt *different*. More *real*.

When she finally stepped out of the shower, her body clean and her mind sharp, she'd made a decision. Throwing on a fluffy robe, she stepped out of the bathroom and went in search of George – family friend and, it would seem, her saviour.

He'd set her up in a hotel room right next to his. And, when she knocked on the door, it took the older man only a few seconds to answer.

The door opened and there he stood. Looking every bit the affluent English gentleman he was. With a bushy, greying moustache and a round, jovial belly. Wearing a tan suit that looked as clean and fresh as Lara felt, and polished shoes. Save for a black band around one of his biceps – a white, crossed-swords emblem emblazoned on it – he'd have been easy to mistake as a businessman or a tourist.

George's eyebrows rose when he saw her standing there.

For a millisecond, the man's eyes flicked to Lara's cleavage. Bushy eyebrows rose, and he schooled himself. Turned his gaze back to Lara's face.

She was used to it.

Years of wearing tight tank tops and short shorts had all but desensitised her to wandering eyes, provided they didn't linger *too* long.

"Lara, my dear," old George said, "shouldn't you be resting?"

"I am," Lara said before wincing, her throat still raw from dehydration. "I will... Can we talk?"

"Of course," George nodded his head, smile, stepped aside as he opened the hotel room wider for her. "Come in. I was just going over some excavation reports."

As she stepped into the hotel room, Lara saw a table covered in documents. A half-full glass of wine acted as a paperweight.

George didn't show her to one of the chairs around the table, however. Instead, he strode over to a plush couch and dropped himself onto it. A moment later, with a smile on his face, he patted the spot next to himself.

Lara strode over, sat down.

And then... silence.

He waited for her to speak, and she hesitated.

Feelings she hadn't felt in years began to surface. Nervousness and uncertainty, vulnerability. Things she'd almost forgotten after countless perilous adventures.

"I've been thinking..." She began slowly.

"Not too hard, I hope," George chuckled.

"Hard enough," Lara forced herself to smile. "Do you remember the offer you made me? Back when I beat you and your mercs to Pharaoh Thutmose's lost tomb."

"They're not *my* mercenaries," George said, the corners of his mouth twitching. "And no. I'm afraid I don't."

"You..." Lara gulped. Steeled herself. "You offered me a job."

"A job?" George's eyebrows furrowed. "I don't..."

"In the mercenary group," Lara said. "Your *Vanguards*. You told me you worry about me, and that there'd always be a place for a 'talented woman' like me in the Vanguards. That, if I ever decided to stop doing this alone..."

She didn't finish the sentence. The message was clear enough.

"Ah," George hummed thoughtfully. "I see..."

"I don't care about pay," Lara said quickly. "I don't do *this* for personal gain, as you know. But there are other demands I have. Selling artefacts on the black market, for example. I don't think..."

"Yes, yes," the man grinned, sitting up straighter. "Of course. Many demands. *Reasonable* demands. We can discuss all of that once you've passed basic training and earned a place in the group."

"Basic training?" Lara balked.

She was so taken aback by that, the mere *notion* that she was expected to undergo some 'basic training' routine, she didn't even think to argue the other issue with George's statement. That they'd sort out the details – Lara's demands – *after* she joined.

"Yes," George nodded eagerly. "If you want to join the Vanguards, you *have* to complete our basic training. Everyone does."

"But..." She stared into his eyes, searching for the jest. But there was none. He was *serious*. "You know what I can do. You've *seen* it. How many times have your Vanguards actually beaten me to a tomb or prize? I'm *more* than qualified to join. At the risk of sounding arrogant, I'm probably the most qualified person in the *world* to..."

"It's not about 'qualifications' my dear," George smiled, a twinkle in his eye. "It's about *character*. If you can't – or are unwilling – to complete training, you don't deserve a

place in our ranks. Everyone, from veterans with years of active duty under their belt, to boys straight out of high-school and college, *everyone* completes basic training."

"Can't you just... pull some strings?"

"I could," George chuckled. "But I won't. If you want to change how the Vanguards operate, you need the men to support you. For that, you'll need to earn their respect. Something you won't do by 'pulling strings' to get in."

Lara groaned.

She wanted to argue it. To push the issue. For as long as she could remember, she'd lived by her rules and her rules alone.

And how had *that* ended up for her?

"Fine," she muttered.

"Excellent!" George clapped, hopped to his feet. "I'll let the other commanders know of your... interest. For the time being, rest up. Recuperate. Won't be another bout of basic training for a month or two. If you still want to join then..."

Pack slung over her shoulder, Lara Croft strode into the compound.

In the middle of a deep forest, surrounded by large fences and armed guards, the place was everything Lara had been expecting. A small selection of buildings; mess hall and barracks and command station and gymnasium. A whole lot of flat ground to practice military drills, and very muddy obstacle courses.

At the centre of the compound, a flagpole flying a black flag with crossed white swords. The Vanguards' emblem.

"A little obnoxious," Lara whispered to herself as she walked.

But then, what did she expect? This was a mercenary group that imagined itself as some militaristic organisation. All the ranks and bells and whistles of a real military force, with none of the oversight or legitimacy.

They were, at best, overly enthusiastic adventurers. And, at worst, wannabe soldiers with little in the way of morals.

Lara stopped, looked down.

Was she judging them too harshly?

It was *her* who'd decided to join them. Did she *really* want to go in with that sort of prejudice?

She inhaled a breath, held it. Slowly exhaled.

When she started walking again, it was with determination.

There'd be things she liked here. There *had* to be. And all those things she didn't; selling relics on the black market and working for suspect individuals, all the unscrupulous ways the Vanguards went about collecting information and leads. Well, she'd just have to change those things. With her experience and expertise, climbing the Vanguards ranks would be a cinch.

Hell, by the time 'basic training' was over, her instructors would be all but begging her to teach *them* instead.

Head held high, she made her way to the barracks.

The group she found there were... interesting.

All of them, every single one, was younger than her. Eighteen and nineteen years old, the lot. And all of them were guys. Not a single woman in the mix, except Lara herself.

As expected of younger, muscle-headed guys, the entire pack looked her over as she approached. Taking in her figure, nodding and smiling appreciatively. Unabashed in their staring. One muttering something to the others that got a smattering of laughter. No doubt, some slimy comment about Lara.

Her initial instinct was to put the brats in their place. And how easy it would've been. She could incapacitate all six of them before they even knew what was happening.

You'll need to earn their respect, George's voice echoed in Lara's mind.

Kicking their asses would earn their respect, wouldn't it? That's how macho, meat-brained morons worked, wasn't it? If she just showed them who was boss...

No.

Tempting as it was, she knew better.

If she wanted to earn their respect – and, more importantly, the respect of the superiors and bigwigs – she'd have to do it the old-fashioned way. Hard work and much effort.

Fun.

"Hey," she said, coming to a stop before the group. "You all new here too? I'm Lara, nice to–"

"Lara?" One of the shits muttered to another. "More like 'larger'."

The snicker that followed caused a vein in Lara's temple to throb.

With effort, she restrained herself. Kept herself from knocking the idiot's teeth out. She forced herself to smile instead.

"Brock," one of the guys grunted. "Squad leader."

The others followed up with their own names, all of which Lara consigned to memory. Brock, though, she focused in on. The guys' – and, it would appear, *her* - group leader.

For now.

If she wanted to climb the ranks, becoming 'squad leader' was undoubtably the first rung of that ladder.

"Nice to meet you," Lara smiled, holding out her hand.

Brock didn't shake it. He just smirked at her.

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"Lara fuckin' Croft," one of George's colleagues barked out a laugh. "And how, pray tell, did you manage *that*?"

"Luck," George smiled. "A near-death experience taught her the importance of teamwork. I was simply in the right place at the right time."

Not *entirely* true. He'd been tracking the Croft girl's movements for years. Keeping a close eye on her. A far closer eye than Lara's father had intended, when he'd asked George to 'look out for her'. But that was neither here nor there. He'd been in the right place, with the right information, to act and aid poor Lara in her time of need.

And, in return, he'd been handed everything he'd ever wanted on a silver platter.

The debt and loyalty of his colleagues. The keys to the excessively wealthy Croft Estate. And a hott piece of well-trained ass to keep his cock warm at night.

He sat back in his chair, a satisfied smile on his face.

Around the table, the other Vanguard commanders considered him.

"My nephew is among the new cohort of recruits," one of the commanders said, drawing every pair of eyes to himself. "He's already positioned himself as their leader. With a bit of *chemical* help, he'll have the slut brought to heel in no time."

"Assuming the concoction works on her," another commander mused.

"It will," George supplied sagely.

He did have some concerns – this was *Lara* they were talking about. If any female could resist the drug's mind-altering effects, it'd be her. But he made sure to keep those concerns from his face and voice.

To project confidence was to inspire it.

"You're certain?"

"I am," George smiled.

It'd worked well enough on Lara's mother. And every other woman it'd been tested on. There was really no reason to believe it wouldn't work on Lara herself. As successful

and competent as Lara Croft had proven herself to be, she was still just that – a woman.

It'd work.

"The orders have already been given. Tonight, Lara Croft will receive her first dose during a 'routine medical evaluation'. After that, she'll be as good as ours."

No more would the impeccable Lara Croft get in the way.

By this time next month, the bitch would be as meek and servile as all the others. A woman in her rightful place.