

The Mystery of the Red Diamond
by nightcat

Chapter 1

LARA, 16 YEARS OLD, sat with her mother in the livingroom of Croft Manor and listened to her favourite story. Outside, the rain clattered against the window panes. The fireplace was burning and ensured a pleasant heat while Laras mother told further on: "Kate threw desperate glances around the room. She was surrounded and backed away, but she was already close to the mirror. What should she do? In her despair she had an idea. She took a stone from the ground and threw it against the mirror. It broke, but instead of the expected shards the red diamond lay at her feet. Adrian's men were surprised and Kate seized the moment, ran with the diamond to the door, but Adrian grabbed her."

"And what happened then?" Lara asked. "I will tell you tomorrow, it is late now. You better go to bed now, or do you want to miss my exhibition tomorrow?" Lady Croft joked and looked at her daughter with a played stern glance. "Mom, you know me, I would never miss one of your exhibitions."

Laying in the bed, Lara thought about the story. If it was true? Her father always said on every myth a grain of truth could be found, so he had to become an archaeologist. She always was excited about his excavations, and hoped to be as him. She missed him very much.

The clock struck midnight and Lara shot from her dream. But it was not the gong that had awakened her, but a faint creaking of a door down in the main hall. Whether Winston was probably walking again?

She got out of bed, took a flashlight and went out into the corridor toward the living room. On the stairs she heard several voices, discussing whispering. Lara turned to the railing and ducked. There were 6 men, all wore dark clothing, night vision devices and weapons! One of them raised his voice slightly and Lara pricked up her ears.

"You know what to do. Find the records and kill everybody in your way, if needed." Kill?! Lara was shocked, her heart began to race. And what kind of records? The men wandered off and Lara froze. She had to warn her mother quickly! With hasty, but soft steps she crept into her room. "Momy", she whispered in her ear. No reaction. Lady Croft was deeply asleep. A creaking from the door made her look up, startled. The door opened slowly. Lara jumped into her mothers closet and left only a small gap open to follow the action. One of the men entered the bedroom. Lara immediatly dropped his hook nose, which was clearly visible even under his mask.

He crept through the room, searching every angle. She was afraid. What if she was found? Would he kill her? Her mother opened her eyes and shrugged back, screaming. The man threw himself on her and kept her mouth shut. "Shut up, bitch! Where are the records?" lady Croft looked around in panic. Lara had to do something, but the intruder dragged her mother already out of the room. She remained still for a moment and then rose anxiously from the cabinet.

Another scream rang out, followed by a shot. This time from the library. Lara ran. She had to save her. When she finally arrived in the library, it was too late already. Her mother laid on the ground and blood leaked onto the carpet. Lara fell on her knees before her and pressed an ear on her chest. Her heart was still beating! "Thank heaven," she breathed, and began to sob. A sound dried her tears. The men! Where were they? Reluctantly she stood up and turned back to the stairs.

The men stood together and talked loudly on the man with the striking nose. "We could not find the records of the diamonds anywhere. Are you sure that they are here?" „Definitely, Lord Croft found them during one of his excavations." the apparent leader whispered. Lara thought feverishly. She had to stop these people before more were injured. She tiptoed back into the bedroom of her mother and took the firearm from the nightstand Lady Croft had placed there for all cases.

Lara hurried back to the stairs. The men were already back on the road, no one was to be seen. She crept down the stairs and looked around hastily . Still no one there. Lara hurried to the automatic emergency locking area of the front door, which was active in trying burglaries. It was disabled. The men had probably found a way to get around. "Who do we have here?" asked a rough male voice. She turned around and pulled her gun on him. He also aimed at her. "Oho, the small has a gun," mocked the hook-nosed. "You injured my mother,"said Lara, still aiming the gun at the man. "She was defiant and wanted to call the police. That was pure self-defense." Lara was angry and unlocked the weapon. "What kind of records are you searching?" she growled without taking the look from him. He seemed visibly relaxed and just started chatting. "Oh, just some old sheets with information about a mystical diamond. Nothing special." Lara gasped.

Could this really be the diamond? Suddenly she heard a loud siren. The Police was there. The intruder quickly overcame his rigidity and rushed Lara over. She shot but the man dodged and escaped. "I swear I find you, "she called out behind him. That evening, all 5 remaining men were arrested.

9 YEARS LATER

Lara drove her jeep Through the icy wastes of Khumbu, the wind pulled single strands off her ponytail and let them dance wildly. It was bitter cold and she saw her breath clearly despite her speed.

Suddenly she heard a loud beep and pressed her headset to accept the call. Alister was on the other side of the line and immediately began to babble on, "Lara, during your absence I studied the records further. According to the information is a small cave entrance near the top of Mt. Everest. It is on the north side of the mountain and will lead you directly into the inside." "All right, I've understood. Will call you when I have found the panel." Lara replied and ended the connection. In the distance, the mountains of tibet slowly climbed up, she shifted up. Some minutes later the car stopped and she jumped out. Lara stood in front of the Everest and shivered. The road up to the top was certainly not alight one.

She went to the trunk, got their gear and put the headset away. With backpack, pistols and ice axe she started to climb. The rock was icy and Lara had to be careful not to slip and fall to death. The air was getting thinner and her hands were lightly shaky. Do not panic. This is normal in such heights. Carefully she continued on her way until she arrived on a platform, breathing quickly. Lara pulled herself up and finally settled to take a break. She looked up, the top was still a few hundred meters away and it was dark. "Guess I have to rest here," whispered Lara and set up her camp. In the evening, the wind howled loudly and pulled her tent.

It took a long time to fall asleep. She dreamed of her mother, who was stationed in Croft Manor. Since the attack 9 years ago Lady Croft was in a coma and had to be fed artificially. The doctors said there would be no hope for an awakening, but she could not believe it. In archeology, there is always a solution.

In the morning, Lara woke up drenched in sweat. In her mind's eye she always saw not the corpse of her mother. „Calm down, it was just a dream.“ Shaky she crawled into the open. The sun just rose over the mountain range and Lara went to the dismantled of the camp. She ate some of their provisions and continued to climb up the Everest. There was still a long way ahead of her. Fresh snow was fallen and Lara had much trouble not to slip.

Hours seemed to pass as she spots a small crevice east of her. She shimmied to the entrance and pulled herself up. Inside the mountain it was a little warmer than outside, but Lara felt a weak draft. With steady steps she went deeper into the darkness of the tunnel and turned on her headlamp. The way in front of her seemed to squirm to infinity, it seemed to swallow her.

Lara ran through the icy course as it suddenly opened into a huge cave. She let out a low whistle that echoed through the room. Lara saw little drawings on the walls of the cave. She went to the images and took a look. Lara quickly recognized the relationships, this was the story of the red diamond. She stepped into the middle of the cave to gain an overview, when suddenly the ice beneath her feet gave way and she fell into nothingness.

With a loud splash she landed in an underground lake. She quickly showed up and took air, coughing. The water was unnaturally hot for that she was in Tibet. Around her it bubbled and light steam rose. This was not a lake, but a hot spring. She gazed into the depths. Her headlamp was at the bottom of the spring and enveloped the cave in a ghostly light. She dipped down and picked it up.

In front of her a tunnel system stretched and Lara swam quickly into the maze of corridors. It didn't took long to find the end. Lara pushed through the water surface, gasping for air. She was in a kind of grave chamber, which was neatly carved into the stone. Lara got out of the water and turned her hair to dry it. In the center of the chamber stood a small altar with offerings for a bygone ruler. But she was not interested in the gold, no, Lara was interested in the coffin in the back part of the room. She opened it.

There it was, the table of Alakanta. Lara lifted it up. The table was heavy and full of strange symbols. She took her PDA from the backpack and called Alister. After a few beeps he took off. "Lara! Do you have the table? "" Yes. Send the helicopter to get me. I I'll soon be out." With these words she put on the phone and stuffed the table into the backpack.

She began to scan the walls piece by piece. Nothing, no switch or hidden door. Then she got down to the coffin and the altar, but even here there was nothing but stone. She checked the ground. Again, no hidden mechanisms. Slowly, she became nervous. Stay cool. There is always a way out. Lara started again from the beginning.

This time she felt at one of the chamber walls a groove, she hadn't noticed before. She rammed her fingers in it and moved with all power she got. A door opened and icy wind slapped against her. She had her way out. It was already dark when the helicopter gathered Lara up at the top of Mount Everest and flew home.

Chapter 2

IT WAS ALREADY NOON, when Lara entered the main gates at Croft Manor. Winston had been busy carrying some boxes into the living room. Now he put them down and wiped some sweat off his forehead with a handkerchief. "Lady Croft, you have returned. How was your journey?", asked he and approached Lara. When she gave him her coat, dirty rags fell down on the floor. The butler silently cursed under his breath, pouted and jokingly said "I see you have brought the Everest home with you." Lara eyed the pile of boxes curiously and replied "Oh Winston, and now I have spoiled the surprise for you." Winston followed her sight and remarked "Those are Christmas decorations, milady. I had planned to start decorating the hall tomorrow, since it will be Christmas in four days."

Christmas? Lara was confused. She had been so busy over the past few weeks that she had totally forgotten about that. "I shall inform Alistair about your returning home, shan't I?" asked Winston and jolted her out of her thoughts. "Yes, please. Prepare a bath for me afterwards, will you, please?" she said and dismissed the butler, who instantly hurried away. Lara sat down on the couch next to the hearth and looked into the fire inside, whose flames blazed and flickered.

Suddenly, she heard a loud calling. Alistair was running down the stairs and when he halted in front of her, he was out of breath. "The Tablet, can I see it?" was everything he could say. "It's in my backpack," Lara said, grinning and amused in view of his excitement, "let's go into your study." Together they went through the glass door in the living room and sat down at Alistair's desk. His study was stuffed with instruments of all sorts: printers, measuring equipment for ultrasound, microscopes and even a drill piled up in between several computers. Everywhere you looked, there blinked small lights in all colours, and a low purring noise filled the room.

Carefully, Lara took the tablet of Alkana out of her backpack and reached it over to Alistair. He looked at it closely, flipped it over in his hands and took a magnifying glass to see the symbols in detail. "What language is it? I can hardly make out the symbols," he declared and scratched his head. "They are symbols from a very old Incan language. I believe it isn't spoken for about 1500 years." Lara replied. Alistair murmured something and opened a drawer from which he took a scanner. "Well, I guess my little friend here can help us out with that. It will simply measure the difference in altitude. Based on that, a computer programme will be able to reconstruct the symbols." he said and turned on his computer. "Spare me the shop talk, Alistair, you know I know the drill already," Lara teased him and went back into the living room. She continued up the stairs and went into the bathroom.

Winston had already drawn a bath for her. Lara took off her clothes. Slowly she entered the hot water and sighed with comfort. She closed her eyes. Having a bath after five days without a shower was pure delight. When she opened her eyes again, she realised that she had dozed off more than one hour ago. Still drowsy, Lara got dressed with the clothes Winston had already put there for her. Then she subsequently trotted into the kitchen, where she picked an apple from a big bowl. She took a bite and down her chin went some juice, which she instantly wiped off with her sleeve. After that little refreshment, Lara decided to go in the garden.

IT HAD GOTTEN COLDER OUT since her last stay at Croft Manor. Lara shuddered and rubbed her arms. She strolled through the outdoor facility and took a look around. The wells had been passivated and now you could see the bunches of fallen leaves filling their bowls. It seemed Winston had not yet been able to remove them. Lara strolled away and stopped at the vegetable patches. In the middle of the patch for courgettes and tomatoes, there grew a single white rose. Where did it come from? She bent over it and gently pulled out the flower.

It was only with a drag though, that it would let go of the ground. Lara stood there for a moment with the rose in her hand.

Back in the house, Lara took a vase and filled it with water before placing the flower into it. She went for her mother's bedroom. Lady Croft lay in her bed fast asleep, with tubes connecting to her mouth and veins. Lara slowly approached the bed and put the vase on the bedside table. She sat down at the edge of the bed and touched upon her mother's cheek. "I miss you," she whispered and her eyes glistened with tears. She pressed her hand and suppressed a soft whimper. Once again, she hoped the doctors were wrong, that her mother would wake up again and tell her how much she loved her. But instead, the chance for her to get well continued to grow smaller with the years. A sudden beeping noise disturbed her lamentable thoughts. Alistair. The scan must have been completed. Reluctantly she got up and took another look at her mother. "I will be back soon," she promised and sneaked out of the room. Silently she closed the door and hurried downstairs.

WHEN LARA REACHED ALISTAIR'S STUDY, he was already impatiently walking up and down. He welcomed her with a "There you are. Finally." and sat down in front of his pc. "I took the liberty of running it through a translation programme I made myself," he explained and went through his hair, "but so far it only spits out rubbish." He looked at the screen unnervedly. "Hm, I guess your programme is not ready yet to enter the marked then," she teased him and turned the monitor to face her. Alistair was right, the translator had mixed up everything, some of those words did not even exist. She laughed. "Okay, let's try this again," she said and minimised the failed translation. She opened the tab with the scans and started to translate the symbols. Ten minutes later, it was done and Lara read out loud her solution:

The foot is our home

At the rim of the blue wideness lays our world

Hidden deep within the thicket of trees

Lays what many desire

* *

You must search east

Where the mother of earth resides

Sierra will guide you

To the mother's house of stone

It's a riddle, but I am not sure what it means," growled Alistair and damandingly looked at Lara. "Hm? I believe I know what place it refers to. It

should be someplace in Peru - it's in the east of South America. There's a region there called Sierra, a highland spreading out to the jungle," Lara started her interpretation. "Lara, just to make sure we are still on the same page, how do you know it's South America?" Alistair asked and reread the translation. "Haven't you ever looked at a map and seen the resemblance of South America to a foot?" Lara laughed. "Well, be that as it may, how do you suppose could the Inca have possibly known the shape of the continent they lived on?" Alistair demanded, "They didn't have satellites like us, mind you."

Lara told him that, according to records of Incan priests, they went out for travels near the sea a lot, and kept track of their position based on the solar altitude. "Those holy men would be out and about for years at the time, and when they returned home, they could produce a rough map of the continent" she went on. Alistair leaned back in his chair. He was flustered, "I thought the calendar was the most notable Incan invention, nobody has ever mentioned anything about maps to me." "True. There are no official records on that," Lara approved, "however, there was an interesting find at an Incan pyramid in the north of Bolivia some years ago: some patterns of lines there had striking similarities to modern maps. Combined with ancient priest records, this strongly suggests that the Inca did indeed use maps." "Okay, but I still don't understand what the riddle signifies with the mother of earth" Alistair said. "Mother of earth, that's a translation of the term Pachamama. She is also referred to as the mother of time, sometimes. If I understand the text correctly, we are looking for a temple dedicated to her. I am satisfied that what we are looking for is situated somewhere between the cloud forest and the Peruvian highlands. If I am not mistaken, I think I heard of that place before", Lara concluded and looked Alistair in the eye. "Call Huan Carlos. Tell him to charter an aircraft; I have to go to Peru." With these words, she took her leave. Now it was time for packing.

LARA WAS SITTING IN THE REAR OF THE AIRCRAFT and busy pondering over a map. She murmured something and drew a line on the paper. "Carlos, are we nearly there yet?", Lara asked and entered the cockpit. "It won't be long now. We should arrive at the airport in about ten minutes." replied he and happily smiled at her. Lara sat down in the co-pilot's chair and looked out the window. They were crossing the barren Peruvian Highland at the moment. A few trees contrasted the mountainous landscape, and big flocks of birds avoided the airplane. "Beautiful, isn't it?" Carlos whispered and clicked something on the control panel. Lara did not reply. She was mesmerised by a goat that fled over the rocky ground in panic, but she couldn't make out what it was that chased it. "Here we are," called Carlos and launched into landing.

Lara had not noticed how much time had passed. The nose of airplane had went down, and with a slightly bumpy landing they arrived at the landing strip, where the machine eventually came to a halt with squeaking wheels. Lara got up and went into the back of the vehicle to collect her belongings. She carefully packed the map into her backpack and strapped it on. Together she and Carlos descended down the staircase, at the end of which some personnel was already waiting for them. These men were heavyset and tall and they looked down at Lara from dark eyes. "Passport," demanded one of the men and reached out his hand. She obliged and handed over her travel documents while Carlos did the same and waited impatiently. The men let them pass and together Lara and Carlos left the airport to find a Jeep standing at the ready outside. "This is as far as I can take you, Lara. I have to go back to Bolivia. We'll meet again, yeah? You take care." said Carlos, turned on his heels and started his way back while Lara gazed after him. With a sigh she entered the Jeep and started it. With squealing wheels she chased down the street, towards the distant region of Sierra.

UPON DUSK Lara arrived at the village Pozuzu. She stopped the car and jumped out on the sandy ground. The inhabitants of the village opened their doors to see whom it was and gave Lara a warm welcome. She approached a small boy, who instinctively took a step backwards. Slowly she crouched down on eyelevel with him and looked him in the eyes. "It's okay, I am your friend. Could you tell me where I can find the house of the elder?", she asked and he pointed at a hut at the fringe of the village. Thankfully, she straightened up and went over to the house of the elder, followed by a small bunch of people. The elder had already been awaiting Lara and now she waved her nearer. It was sticky inside, and the air was filled with a sharp smell. "What's that smell?", Lara wondered and curiously took a look around. The tiny hut was filled with old stuff and ritual utensils. "That's bear leek, child. I am having a cup of tea, do you want some?" asked the aged woman and went over into the kitchen without waiting for an answer. One moment later she returned with two cups of a hot brewage. Lara said thank you and sat down in an armchair next to her.

"So, tell me love, what brings you here to old Mezuka?," queried the old woman and sat down. "I need your help. I am looking for a temple that is supposed to be somewhere in this area," Lara began and took a sip of the beverage given to her. It was tasty and rich in vanilla aroma. "You mean the temple of mama? Child, you should know that this isn't the place for a young person like you. You would really better discard that idea," Mezuka warned her and looked at her with worry. "I am touched by your concern, Mezuka, but I can take care of myself. Please, tell me where I can find this temple." The room fell silent, the heavy breathing of the old woman was all you could hear. "Listen carefully, child, I am aware that you can take care of yourself, otherwise you would hardly have come here, but that place has an aura of danger," argued Mezuka and walked up and down in the room. „Mezuka," Lara insisted, but was instantly cut short. "You are looking for the diamond, I take it? Is that why you ask about the temple?" demanded the elder and stood still. After a moment of silence, Lara confirmed her assumption, and apprehensively looked into her cup. "Mezuka, I do not want to anger you, but it is important to me to find it. It could heal my mother," she said in a calm voice and looked up at the elder. Mezuka's stare bore into her, but Lara held her gaze all the same. Eventually the elder spoke again, "I see. The temple lies north from here, deep in the cloud forest, but remember my warning." Lara had heard everything she needed to hear, "Thank you Mezuka. Don't worry about me, I'll be fine." she whispered and exited the hut.

Night had fallen over the village. Only few people were still about and Lara decided to rest. She knocked at one of the houses in the vicinity and a young man opened. When she asked him if she could sleep over, he hesitated for a moment but eventually bid her in. He made her a simple bed of straw and Lara laid down to sleep.

A loud noise jolted her out of her dreams and Lara rubbed her eyes. Some sunlight illuminated the room through a small window and the adventurer packed her things. She said thank you and bid the man goodbye, got out the door and hurried towards the Jeep. She entered the car and drove off north. In the rear-view mirror she could see some people waving at her from the fringe of the village and subsequently waved back at them.

MANY HOURS HAD PASSED since Lara had left Sierra behind and entered into the cloud forest. It was dim, only little light came through the thick leaf canopy and so she switched on the headlights. The trees were enormously tall. Tendrils wound around them and seemed to strangulate them. Birds of all colours fluttered about in between treetops and made screeching noises. With a sigh Lara leaned back in her seat. She loved the jungle with its evergreen splendour and the ancient ruins hidden within.

And there it was, the temple of Pachamama. Lara abruptly hit the brakes and got out the car. The temple was not particularly big, but its detailed decorations of bizarre grimaces gave her the impression of being watched. The adventurer pushed her way through the thicket and set foot on the first step. She took a deep breath. Finally she had reached her destination.

Chapter 3

SHE ENTERED THE DARK CORRIDOR. She quickly got the headlamp from her backpack, put them up and turned on the light. The walls were decorated with scary Images of gods and monsters of the underworld.

Carefully Lara went further. The ground was uneven and led diagonally into the underground. The lamp lit up their surroundings poorly and Lara had to pay attention not to slip on the wet stones. A sudden click let her scared raise her foot. Lara knew what came before it could be heard. She stormed off and with a loud crash a rolling ball landed right behind her and rolled towards her. With a deafening noise he approached and she ran as fast as she could around the next corner. In front of her a bright light came through a door, with all her strength she rushed on to it. Lara made a pike jump through the door and rolled quickly to the side. The ball broke through the wall and shattered into thousands of pieces.

She let her gaze wander over the surrounding area. Lara was in a large sandstone hall, held by tall columns. Tendrils overcame around grotesque statues that stood like soldiers in front of a room large wall mirror.

"As in the story," she whispered and turned to the glass wall. Before her, she stopped and put a hand on its surface. "Impressive, isn't it?" Hissed a rough male voice and Lara turned around scared. She was surrounded by 3 soldiers. In the middle of the hall was a hook-nosed man, looking triumphantly. Lara swallowed. "I know you. You shot my my mother." whispered Lara and drew their pistols.

"Na na na, who's going to shoot right now? Why don't we settle it peacefully?" Laughed the leader and ordered his men to whip out the weapons also. Lara looked around nervously. Left and right of her was ever a soldier waiting for further instructions. "In your place I would not blow up like that," they mocked him and undid the backups of their guns. The man growled, gave his men a sign. Slowly they came closer. Lara departed like a frightened animal back. "Do they know what you are? You are a coward! Let others do your dirty work," she snapped and shot down the soldier left of her. With a jump Lara disappeared behind one of the stone figures, just in time. Exactly where her head was a bullet flew through the air and crashed into the mirror. Instead of the actual shards a bright red diamond laid next to Lara's hideout.

She grabbed it and shoved it into the backpack. "Miss Croft, you can not escape. Why don't you just give up and let me have the diamond? So that we could save ourselves a lot of work." it echoed through the room. "Not I should give up," she remarked caustically and rolled to the next column. Footsteps came toward her. She peeked around the stone and set their weapons at the nearest soldier. He fired, but she evaded cleverly and gave him the rest. Lara ducked and went further on tiptoes. The last companion of the hook-nosed looked frantically around the room. "So Pretty" she whispered in his ear, and appeared in front of his nose. He pointed his gun on her, but Lara kicked it out of his hand and struck him with her fist to the ground. The man tried to sit up, crawled to his weapon. even before he reached it she fired a bullet through his heart. "It seems we are now undisturbed." he chuckled visibly pleased, "but you lost something."

Lara reached into her backpack. The diamond! It was gone! "Only a minor setback!" she called to him. "Sure, just a little? What about your mother? She is still in a coma, right?" he asked and Lara got angry. How could he know of her situation? "I still remember as if it was yesterday. Your panicked eyes wide and her cry" sigh, "music to my ears," the man cackled mistaken and she became furious. "You're crazy," she yelled and turned frantically in circles. Where was he? "I'm standing right behind you," he breathed out of nowhere to her ear and pushed her against one of the pillars.

Her arms fell to the ground and the air was forced out of her lungs. "You can not win." he said calmly. His hands clawed at her hair and pulled her head around so that she had to look in his eyes. "Remember my face, honey." he murmured softly, "It will be the last thing you see." "You are wrong," she whispered and pulled up the leg. With a howl the Hook-nosed collapsed and Lara lunged to her guns. Whirled around and shot. The man looked at her dumbfounded. Blood oozed from a wound in his chest and he fell over. "The diamond is mine," he gasped, powerless and desperate for oxygen. She walked up to him and bent over him. "The underworld is waiting for you," she whispered and took the diamonds out of his hand. There was silence in the hall and slowly she straightened up. Her journey was not over yet.

THE SUN HAD ALREADY SET when Lara arrived at Croved Manor. In the living room, the last bit of firewood were burning down and Lara collapsed on the couch. In front of her was an enormous Christmas tree, decorated very colourfully. When she let her eyes wander across the room, she saw that Winston had done a great job. There were garlands, mistletoes and holiday lights all over the room. A warm feeling emerged from her stomach. Somewhat... Christmassy. After all those adventures of the past weeks, Croft Manor seemed comfortably peaceful.

With a sigh Lara got to her feet. There was still something to do. Careful not to wake Alistair and Winston, she silently tiptoed towards the cellar. She gingerly opened the door at the end of the corridor, and entered the study room that once was her father's. The research material on the Red Diamond was still where she left it on the desk a few days earlier. Lara took a seat and skimmed through the notes until she found what she was looking for: the recipe for a panpharmacon. "Let's do this," she murmured and read aloud:

2 chopped mandrake roots,

10 spoons of hawkweed juice,

A handful spring water,

10 grained copper berries and

A tear of lifeblood

Boil until the brewage turns grey

Then dip in the diamond.

Brimming with thirst for action, Lara started up from the chair and went straight for a wall. With clever fingers she sensed the surface for the hidden switch and soon made a find as expected. A light clicking noise echoed through

the room and the wall swung open. She hesitated for a bit before entering the secret room. Now she was in Lord Croft's old alchemy laboratory, with a small bench at its centre, and dozens of shelves filled up to the ceiling with herbs and substances of all sorts. Lara hurried towards one at the time and rummaged through the supplies. Her father had been fascinated with alchemy. Unfortunately, that was what had eventually led to his doom. After a long while of rummaging around, Lara found what she needed.

She carefully put the vessels containing the first three ingredients on the table. Then she unsacked the Red Diamond and lighted the Bunsen burner on the bench. She quickly chopped the mandrake roots into tiny pieces, pressed the hawkweed juice, and mixed it with a handful of spring water in a bowl. With a steady hand, she then placed the mixture on a grid over the flame. "Now I need those copper berries, but what are they?" she wondered and kept thinking hard. Passing one of the shelves, her eye fell upon a bottle of firethorn. She triumphantly picked it up and carried it over to the laboratory bench. She swiftly grained the fruits and added them to the concoction. A repulsive smell greeted her nose. She wrinkled her nose and saw that the brewage had turned bilious green. "Now all I need is a tear of lifeblood. Pretty much a gimme." she uttered and picked up a knife from one of the drawers.

In a flash, Lara cut herself and blood gushed out of the shallow wound. A single drop of it fell into the bowl and she heard a loud sizzling noise. The liquid bubbled, and turned into a thick, grey slime. Lara took the mixture off the flame with a pair of forceps and extinguished the Bunsen burner. Slightly shaking now, she took the diamond and paused. She was just one movement away from happiness. Without any further ado, she dropped the diamond into the concoction.

Nothing happened. "What?! No! It can't be!" Flabbergasted she stood there and looked at the would-be panpharmakon as a wave of despair carried her away. That was it. Her mother was not long for this world. Lara turned away, when suddenly a blinding light made her turn back again. The green colour of the concoction got replaced by shining red. When the colour changed again into a warm golden tone, Lara took the diamond back out of the slimy mixture. There it was, the panpharmakon. Only moments later, Lara stood in front of the door to her mother's bedroom, and sneaked inside.

Lady Croft still lay there how Lara had left her. She sat down at the edge of her bed, and used her free hand to lift her mother's head. She carefully fed her little sips of the potion. Now all she could do was hope for the best. Hours ticked by, to no effect. *I killed her!* This heavy thought echoed through her head and pierced her heart. The clock struck midnight. Christmas had started and in Lara's imagination her mother was no longer with her. An unexpected movement gave her a start and she looked upon her mother. Lady Croft had opened her eyes just a bit and looked at her in confusion. "Lara, is that you? Where are we? Why are you still up?" she asked and wrinkled her forehead. "Mother! You are in your bedroom. You were in a coma for more than nine years." Lara uttered and broke out in tears. "Oh my Lara," she whispered and caressed her cheek, "It will be okay. I am back." That said Lady Croft sat up and hugged her daughter warmly. "I have to tell Winston and Alistair. Oh, and the doctors, of course!" Lara said, radiant with happiness. "Who is Alistair?" was all her mother asked.

A COUPLE OF HOURS LATER, everyone had gathered in the living room. The doctors had been quite amazed by Lady Croft's mysterious recovery. Even so, they had not been able to detect any anomalies when checking her. "How peculiar" they had remarked, and confined Lara's mother to bed for a few days. The atmosphere was relaxed and Lara started to confide in her mother the events of the past couple of years. Lady Croft tried to listen carefully. Sometimes she seemed to

nod off for a bit, only to start up moments later. According to the doctors, this was completely normal for someone who had been in a coma for that long, and over time this effect would cease to occur.

The Christmas tree glittered and shone truly flamboyantly and everything was just perfect. Well, almost everything. Nobody noticed the burglary that took place right under their noses. It was not before the next morning that they discovered what had happened. The diamond was gone.