

Christmas in Braga

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(inspired on the “classic” Tomb Raider storyline)
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From up there, Lara could drink the whole city in. The sun had just gone down. All the Christmas lights were joined by lamps shining from posts and every home around. The hills were also bright. The sanctuaries overlooking the valley from the holy mountains around Braga stood out, radiant. All of the lights couldn't drown out the city's outline, still glistening from the last of the sunshine.

Lara hugged the rib of an arch above the bell tower. She had noticed those cool empty domes that decorated the cathedral's bell towers from below. Of course she couldn't help herself from getting a better look. The crossed arches, like unwallled ribbed domes, had clearly been added on top of both bell towers more recently, yet they certainly gave some flair to the ancient monument, already over nine centuries old.

It had been easy getting up to the top of the cathedral. As easy as vaulting over a wall, forcing a couple of thick yet harmless doors, and climbing a flight of stairs. Okay, there had been another – more difficult – climb up the bell tower to the roof with the arches. But what was that when compared to what she had been used to before? Lara Croft hoped that her mission in Braga would be a bit tougher than climbing a bell tower. She needed the workout.

There was another purpose to climbing to this vantage point. It was Christmas Eve, yet the city wasn't as deserted as Lara hoped it would be. After parking her bike, she had seen groups of people delving deeper into the historical center, which was supposed to be almost abandoned these days. She followed them only to find many more. Hundreds more, in fact. They all seemed very cheerful, and some were already beyond that, from

the looks of their wine bottles. Lara's grave face flourished into a dimpled smirk when she saw banana peels on the floor. Those swaying straight-out-of-the-bottle drinkers wouldn't stay upright for too long around those.

Earlier in the evening, Lara had noticed people gravitating towards a liquor store, "Casa das Bananas". Lara recognized the Portuguese easily: 'the house of bananas'.

"What is this all about?", she asked a passerby.

"The Banana Christmas Party", he said. "Just enjoy, don't think too much."

Lara entered "Casa das Bananas" and made a purchase: a bottle of moscatel wine and a couple of bananas, all of which fit snugly in her backpack. She would have to eat something on her way back. There wouldn't be many other open shops on her way to the Eurotunnel. The bottle would be useful too. Relaxing had been impossible for almost a year now...

Yeah, the guy she had spoken to was right. Lara *should* just enjoy herself. Before that, however, she had to make sure no drunkards would call the police on her too soon. That was the practical side of her decision to climb up to the beautiful empty domes. From there, she could make sure nobody was really paying her any attention.

Beyond the streets around the "banana house" liquor store, everything seemed quiet. Looking around the Braga cathedral, she couldn't help but notice the Palace of the Archbishop. Lara was sure that a region ruled by archbishops for seven hundred years

would hide many delightful secrets. Where would those secrets be, if not in the old Palace? Alas, those would have to be exploits for another time.

Braga looked beautiful from atop the cathedral towers. However, Lara wasn't there for the sightseeing. When she looked around to the other side, in front of the cathedral, Lara's sights were finally set on her target.

It was a small noble palace, much smaller than Croft Manor. Still, it was some impressive real estate, located in front of the cathedral in this two-thousand year old city. The palace was painted in a pale pink shade that made it look silly. It was a 19th century building, although there was a tower in imitation of the medieval gothic style at the back. Again, that was just plain silly.

After quickly climbing down the façade of the cathedral, Lara walked around the small palace, which was three-stories high and was about as wide as it was tall. The main façade had a dormer on top. The window on it was oval, carved in stone. The whole construction was granite, like everything else around, in fact. Since the building had been long abandoned, like she expected, most windows had been bricked off, and painted the same shade of pale pink. How was she supposed to get in?

Around the back, Lara found a crumbling gate leading into a small courtyard besides the medieval-looking tower. It led nowhere, but Lara didn't want to go inside the gate. Instead she pulled a crooked piece of metal off of it. It would be the ideal crowbar to creak open the front door with.

Like she expected, the door offered no real obstacle to her breaking and entering skills. Even so, she felt her heartbeat pick up the pace a bit. For how long had she not done anything like this? Egypt seemed an eon ago.

Everything inside the palace appeared quiet as she clicked the door shut. Lara drew her dual pistols from her backpack and finally put them back where they belonged, on her gartered thigh holsters. A smirk colored her lips again, squinting as her eyes adjusted to the lack of light. She knew very well that this house was not as innocent as it looked. She would have to tread carefully.

The house was unlikely to be guarded. That was part of the reason why she wanted to come here. After a few silent and still moments in the dark, Lara was finally content that the place really was unoccupied. She pulled a flashlight out of her backpack and switched it on. Now she could have a good look around the hall. It was beautifully decorated with stuccoed shapes of angelical figures and Greek goddess-looking women. The chandelier at the center looked amazing too, shining and refracting the flashlight's beam, livening the place.

An inexperienced explorer might have walked straight through the hall, in awe of its majesty. Lara, though, hugged the wall, intent on avoiding the house's wrath. Soon enough she felt her foot sink. Some quiet tension filling the air was snapped mercilessly. A heavy hollow sound was the trigger for Lara's prodigious jump, one she didn't know she could still pull off. She had been close to the wall, but very much in the proximity of the simple trap. As the enormous chandelier dropped down with a crash, the sound hurt

Lara's heardrums. Millions of bits of crystal were thrust – dagger-like – through the great hall. Her timely jump got Lara out of it with a scraped knee from a wayward shard. Had she stayed close to the wall, she'd be bedazzled now. Bright blue glass and darkening red blood would have colored her outfit at her last dying sigh. However, the threat to her life soothed her racing heart down to a purr. Lara Croft was in action now.

The hall led into a staircase. She climbed it almost in a run. Something that looked like a saw narrowly missed her ankle just as she got to the first landing. She didn't bother looking back, taking a left at the bifurcating stairs. That was the wrong choice, apparently, as a large chunk of the crumbling ceiling came falling down as she set foot on the next step up. She quickly grabbed her pistols and blasted the chunk of roof to pieces before it hit her.

"I don't feel very welcome here, somehow", she thought.

Lara *wasn't* welcome. *Nobody* was. This wasn't a mere small palace, and Lara knew that very well. The family who owned it may have fallen in disgrace, but they made sure no one else was getting rich at their expense. The house was stripped clean. There was no reason for a burglar to break in. Except for one small item that only those who had been initiated knew about. Hence the traps. Deadly, deadly traps.

Lara hadn't quite been initiated like some had. However, more than one of her life-long friends had mentioned the legend behind it. Charles Kane couldn't shut up about it, Jean-Yves too... and yes, even the constant presence in her raiding life, for the good

and definitely the bad: Werner von freakin' Croy... For a long time Lara had laughed at those who took it seriously. Yet still, this time she needed something fun and Christmassy, so why not?

Step by step, she cleared the staircase. The balcony upstairs showed her a great view over the statue gracing the wall, almost to the ceiling. Diana, the Greek goddess, hunting through a mixture of sheer seduction and legendary bow and arrow skills. As Lara admired the beautiful statue, she heard a deep, sharp crack as she innocently grazed the balustrade. She jumped back immediately on her swift feet. The entire balcony where she had just stood collapsed below, while Diana threw herself at her. The wall where the statue was just crashed down, liable to crush a less limber tomb raider.

"Nice try" Lara quipped.

She went around the second floor, heading towards the entrance to the tower . How much noise would be heard outside from all the falling stones and pistol shots? Luckily, by now everyone was probably home, far away from the crumbling historical area of Braga, enjoying Christmas Eve with their families.

That was good. What came next was going to be loud. Very.

Thick stone walls tightly hugged the door to the medieval-looking tower. The door itself was solid wrought iron, so the makeshift crowbar Lara had collected earlier wouldn't be much help. Lara looked up and just barely saw the beautiful skylight hanging above. It would have been fun to have climbed into the palace through there, but she

could still have her fun with the grapple gun. Oh, plenty of fun! Wasn't that what this was all about, Christmassy fun? Lara tied the spiked end of her grapple gun to the solid handle of the door.

She thanked the stuffy old fools who had put all of this together. Silly as it undoubtedly was, it made for a wonderful excuse to create some mayhem. Who would have thought of all this besides a bunch of vengeful entitled snobs? Delightful!

Legend said that many years ago, sometime in the 19th century, one of those aforementioned snobs had the most delightful idea. He was a businessman, a trader, much like almost all his friends and most of their enemies. He rounded up his mates just before Christmas and told them of his idea. Every year they exchanged lavish holiday gifts, not only with one another, but also with their foes. It was just good business. What if this time, besides being a great gift, their presents were also great pranks?

The others were immediately into it, even before knowing what the actual deal was. The snobby trader explained: they would offer their competitors beautiful antique items of great value. Then, they would make it known to all criminals and robbers in Europe that these artifacts held the clues to finding a mysterious treasure! Their enemies would surely be robbed and have their homes raided by the most dangerous thugs... All because of them, hahaha.

The group of bourgeois friends agreed on the exquisitely wicked plan. They were sure that it would be a success even if only one of their enemies saw their luxurious

palatial home invaded for their new trinket. They proceeded to buy the expensive artifacts. Each of them gifted one item to a competitor on Christmas.

Then, the trader with the idea paid a crook to sail to every port and spread the word: there was wealth beyond one's dreams to be had, if just all of these artifacts could be collected and put together. For that, he said, many criminal minds across the continent would have to get together and hash a plan. Otherwise, it would be impossible. These artifacts were spread throughout all major cities, so no one man or woman could get them all by themselves.

Soon enough, many criminal minds, the best of their time, formed a coalition to collect the items. Just as soon, they started betraying one another. Some laughed at their foolishness, still the rumors spread and the legend grew. Over time, no one knew for sure how many artifacts there were anymore. Nobody could prove the treasure existed. Still the rumors spread, the traders got robbed time and time again, and their enemies laughed at the shifty gifts they had been deeply thanked for. The rest was history.

Pulling on her grapple gun, Lara made sure it was soundly tied to the thick tower door. She thanked the many months she spent over her seemingly pointless research on these thirteen artifacts. It had taken her to this palace, in the innocent city of Braga, in the north of Portugal. Soon, there would be little palace to speak of.

Lara rolled her grapple gun around the balustrade. It was the only part of the balcony that still remained on the second floor, and it would be the perfect pulley. She

then used some cracks on the closest wall to climb up. The crumbling ceiling allowed her to the roof. The dormer above the façade had made the house look sturdy from below. Now it still stood strong, but the roof around it looked like part of a war zone. And the idiots said there were no good ways to celebrate the new millennium. Utter nonsense!

Lara used the grapple's rope to tie around one side of the dormer's stone window. Then, smirking again, Lara planted one foot solidly on the stone margin around the roof, while pushing the other foot and her hands against the dormer's façade wall. It was hard work, and her smirk waned, but still she felt like it would crack. Slowly, the wall folded inwards. When it was tilted enough, Lara stood atop the wall, like she was riding a surfboard, holding on to her grapple gun as a single rein.

She let herself drop near the bottom of the wall, and took out a pistol. Peeking below the wall, she located the iron rods keeping the façade and the dormer just barely together, and shot them out. The heavy stone wall dropped very quickly, straight down. Lara laughed heartily, alive again. Soon enough her impromptu balustrade pulley had the wall traveling straight ahead, with brutal force. She and the wall went through the back of the staircase, where the Diana statue used to be, and Lara leapt away just as the dormer wall crashed into a different room at the back of the palace.

There was only one thing keeping the dormer wall inside the palace. The thick tower door had been pulled off its hinges by the grapple's steel rope, just like Lara wanted, and violently crashed into the balustrade.

She climbed up again, this time much slower and harder. Still, now almost nothing could get rid of her smirk. She felt like her old self after having destroyed half a palace to open a pesky door. Yet, when she used her flashlight to look inside the tower, she was thrust into the past . All of a sudden, the dusty air inside brought her back to Egypt, one year earlier, almost to the day. She was buried inside a crumbling tomb, *her* tomb, with no hopes of getting out.

“Pull yourself together this instant!”, she growled to herself.

A couple of seconds later, after the echo of her harsh voice died out, Lara focused on what she could see. The room was fairly large, and almost as empty as everywhere else inside the building. There was something like a plinth inside, though. On it was the artifact she was looking for. There was an incredible amount of dirt floating around after her sparring session with the palace. It allowed her to see a series of laser beams surrounding the plinth. She carefully navigated around them, taking care not to accidentally graze one, until she stood in front of the artifact. It was supposed to be a beautifully decorated gold chalice. Yet, Lara couldn’t make out any such decorations. Maybe it was because the light wasn’t very good. She had left her flashlight at the entrance to light her way without hampering her agility.

She touched the top of the plinth and realized the chalice stood on a pressure plate. The base of the plinth had slits at the corners, and Lara pictured massive blades on loaded springs just waiting to slice her to bits.

Lara just stood there a while, hesitant. She didn't even believe the silly legend behind the thirteen artifacts and the treasure they guarded! She didn't even think this was the chalice she was supposed to find! What was she doing here!? Oh, but her fingertips still tingled for the touch of that gold cup. Why? Maybe because it had been so long... Egypt had her trapped, and then lying in bed for almost a year. And this? This is easy! Who cares if it is true? Who cares if there are no gods and monsters waiting to eat her up this time!? At least she is out of the training ground at the Manor...

There probably is no treasure. There probably are no thirteen artifacts. This one probably isn't real. But this raid is real! This building shot to pieces is real. And I need the money. Not the silly impossible treasure money. The actual, real money from selling this story to some magazine, to be able to travel some more, do it all over again... The money I'll need to pay Winston's wages and the Manor's upkeep.

What am I doing here? Who is this person in my stead? Did I die in that tomb? Did Set, or von Croy, or whoever that was actually *get* me?

Completely still, Lara didn't know what was true anymore.

She had spent the better part of a year pushing her friends aside, avoiding even Winston, spending her days either in bed or on the training ground. This trip was only the latest installment of the "Where the hell is Lara?" show... When she and Winston were about to leave with Charles Kane for Ireland, to meet up with father Dunstan for

Christmas, she was gone. Winston found her note, only two scribbled words. “don’t wait.”

What was true? Was she still the old Lara? Or should she just go back to the English high society, marry a snooty man to maybe one day plan some intricate vengeance with, like those traders had done centuries ago? Should she just get back to her parents, and her inheritance?

Her love of old mysterious things had kept her close to older men. What kept her away from her friends in Ireland now?

Doubt. So self-confident, she had pretty much died in Egypt because of it, almost dragging the whole world down with her. She had emerged weak, if alive. Wounded with doubt.

She should just go to Ireland. Walk away from this trinket. Forget about this silly legend that so many crooks allegedly died for, killed by rivals looking for the same unlucky thirteen artifacts. Who was she now, if she wasn’t laughing at this story?

Hell, the time for doubt was up. That smirk of hers reappeared as she decided that the *real* Lara was back. She was leaving this behind and going to Ireland, to Winston, to Charles and to Bram, her ancient friends. There was just one more little question...

Was this artifact real?

It didn't look real. Lara was going to leave it, yes. But she could just as easily take it from the plinth, handle the consequences. Then she'd examine it and set it aside. However, she decided against that. It would take too much time from her Irish Christmas. Still she had to know: was this artifact real?

Maybe she could just flick her nail at it. Listen to the resulting "pling" to grasp whether the sound was that of real gold or not. That would be enough.

Lara reached for the chalice, held her pointer finger back with her thumb, and aimed the tip of her fingernail at it. She flicked.

Damn! The chalice was lighter than she thought...

Her flick sent it dancing around the top of the plinth, barely balancing on it. Lara had to immediately jump back into the lasers, barely avoiding death as the blades sliced through the plinth. They crushed the gold-plated cup like they would have cut her up. By then, very loud alarms had begun wailing.

Lara ran out of the tower and swiftly jumped down to the middle landing of the stairs. Another sound joined the alarm. Police sirens... She bolted towards the entrance, leaving the door open as she fled the scene. At least she knew now, panting as she threw herself on top of her motorbike, that the chalice wasn't real. Had someone replaced it? Or was it all just a hoax? That was a matter for another day.

Lara drove out of the parking lot from the entrance ramp. She couldn't be bothered with following silly traffic rules. She was already being chased by the police, after all.

There were no cars on the streets, so Lara continued her reckless driving by going the wrong way up the street. She wanted another glimpse of the crumbling palace.

Police officers ignored the bike rider. They were too busy calling for help. One of the cops raised his hands to his head upon the sorry sight of the palace façade. Lara slowed down and saw herself – her *true* self – in that soon-to-be ruin. The blinking red and blue Police lights made it all look like Christmas. After a mere moment, Lara sped up again, taking the road south, headed for the highway.

When Lara got to the airport on her way to Ireland, she decided to check her satellite phone.

There was a missed call. The number was French. Could it be Jean-Yves? Maybe so, but there were rumors someone else was in Paris. An old friend who had become something of an obnoxious acquaintance. Von Croy.

Another issue to be dealt with some other time, she decided.

Soon enough Lara was in Ireland. When she went into father Dunstan's humble home, she *was* finally back. Her friends saw the old Lara Croft, the one who had left for Egypt almost a year earlier, come through the door. They hugged her dearly.

All had a merry, merry Christmas!

–The End–



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Tomb Raider Community's Advent Calendar – December 6th 2022