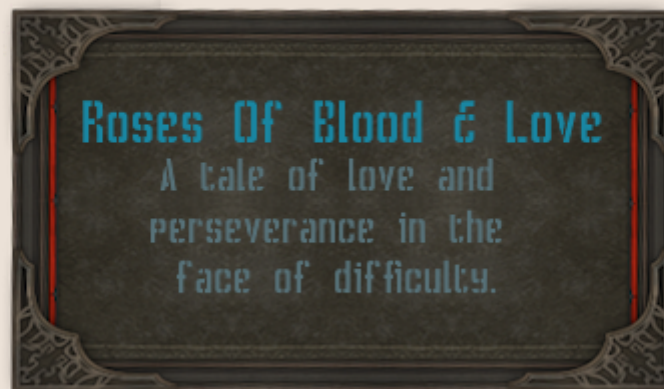


# TOMB RAIDER



*Lara's escape from the silent streets of Venice was not forgiving, requiring her to put in the genuine effort required to escape the dreaded place. Her casual outfit- the loose denim jacket that hanged comfortably on her chest, the denim pants that felt tighter the more she parkoured around the place, her backpack, holstering the shotgun she found. Even in the face of a wedding, she was prepared for action. Perhaps it was meant to be.*

*Lara didn't think that Larson or Pierre had it in them to send her to a place that would lead her to her death- no, that is an irrational thought, she thought to herself- the coincidence of having her end up in this place, and the real letter appearing out of thin air is simply unbelievable. Even as her hands shook the fuel into the helicopter, the groans of the undead and crazed kept her on the edge, never close nor far away from her only chance to escape before this place began to take pieces of her for itself. Her tired eyes longed for rest; her headache was unbearable at this point, and even with the painkillers she had on her it was not going to make her last much longer, not without a rest. Her only hope that was dimming like the sunlight on a winter night dimmed ever so slightly each second, and only erupted in a fiery rage when the helicopter's internals shook to life all of a sudden. The hope, a metaphoric fire place, raged with a dangerous fire as she scrambled inside of the cockpit, manoeuvring around the controls to get the plane started with a desperation of the people who have nothing to lose. Yet it was almost all for nothing.*

*In her eyes, she saw the library begin to change, figures emerging from behind bookshelves and heading to her direction. Her hope began to extinguish as if a horrific wind began to blow on it. Fear settled deep inside of her chest, the controls turning on and off, the blades of the chopper not fast enough to raise the helicopter up. There was truly no hope.*

*Yet that's not what happened. The library's doors somehow slammed shut, closing everyone inside, and a lone figure stood in front- one of the bloody soldiers that were attacked, his hands coated in blood, and... a remote switch to the doors in his right one. He stumbled forward, the blades of the chopper spinning rapidly, the body of the chopper raising ever so slightly. Lara quickly opened the other door to the cockpit, the man stumbling inside in a heap of pain. No words were said.. None needed to be spoken. Her worried and thankful eyes said it all.*

*His pained, resting eyes said more than any kind of language could.*



*There was no reason to not push the chopper upwards, the controls following her orders and hand movements perfectly. The chopper rose above the courtyard, and slowly rose above the venetian buildings, like a towering pair of royalty reaching above what the mere creatures could ever reach. Even when the library doors broke apart, there was nothing anyone could do- even the rogue soldiers were unwilling to try. Even when they had ammo in their guns, they saw the pointless nature of going against what seemed to have to be- that the two would escape from this place somewhat intact.*

*Lara did not care. She looked forward and began to pilot the chopper forward, ensuring they get out of this hell as soon as possible. After the chopper stayed at a certain altitude, there was nothing. Nothing new, only buildings that bowed to their feet, the fog and the cracks of the sky coming onto the ground, avoiding them like they were holy- gods in a sense. As if they did something that was not humanly possible, but so possible in a sense. They rose above the common kind and the mindless and became human deities to the ones who did not understand.*

*Like the figures of time. Like the leaders of the past. They shined for a moment to the ones who could only dream of touching the skies.*

*Lara's eyes glistened with hope and relief when the skies broke apart from the hellish red, the black fog fading slowly, revealing the black void of space which filled her with so much agony and pain that her tears and sobs, screams and weeps were not unheard. She felt her body twist in agony as she kept the chopper in control, all the pain of what happened seeping out in heaps, as if it was rust and blood that blocked her from feeling. She never cried as hard as she did in that chopper, her ears deafened by her own screaming, her vocal cords tearing ever so slightly, the body she was contained in reveling in the relief of her escape. The feeling was unreal, inhumane, and yet despite how badly it hurt, her eyes looking at the black void, the normal world.*

*It made her feel everything was so much more than she ever thought it was.*

*Every Adventure she went on.*

*Von Croy's entrapment in the Cambodian temple.*

*Her rivalry with Larson and Pierre for the stone of immortality in Rome.*

*Her first adventures.*

*They were nothing more than a grand grain to such a bigger picture, an enigma that was bigger than her and anything she could think of, and now she understood. This pain, it was not of any human source, it simply could not be. The way her body trembled and shook with the unsettling, unfathomable feeling of relief was only explainable by something supernatural no matter how stupid that sounds.*

*When the skies cleared however, the remnants of the red sky fading into nothingness, the pain subsided and the relief flooded her body like a thunderbolt just hit her. It was immense, and her tears faded slowly down her cheeks and neck, landing on her jacket with a certain gentle touch she couldn't quite recall about it. She looked to the man beside her, and to her shock he was alive- breathing, staring forward and looking at the normal world, his quiet sighs of relief saying everything. Lara could only fly the helicopter forward until they reached a spot where she could take him to a hospital.*

*There was nothing to say when they finally arrived, Lara hiding her pistols and ditching her other guns. Her explanations would falter to the insane idea of what they experienced. She instead said they were attacked by some thugs, enough for the Italian Hospital. She was also admitted because of her injuries, and the next few days were spent in that forsaken place, although the truth was that she didn't truly mind. It just sucked to be bored and unable to do anything.*

*Beats death, she guessed.*



~~~~~  
Lara's Home - 2 Weeks After Her Escape  
The Year Of 2004, 5th December  
~~~~~

*Can my manor be farther away? My legs are killing me.*

*That was the only thought Lara had for over two hours now, walking through the British countryside because she forgot her wallet with some spare cash in the Italian Hospital and could only use the cash inside her backpack. She didn't know that the Italian Hospitals even took any money, but alas she had that much. Nonetheless, it's not as if her wallet had anything of worth aside from cash- she had her documents and pictures in the passport that never seemed to let her part with it, for some strange reason.*

*Whatever, Lara thought. All she wanted to do was to get to her manor, inside and upstairs, and crash onto her bed in a heap of muscle and skin and sleep for however long she could. Her body longed for sweet rest desperately, the light snow falling onto her tired clothes, creating an ever so thin layer of snow as she walked further into the manor's property. She could see the manor's outline through the trees, and her body pumped itself with as much strength as it could to get to it. Eventually, her feet finally arrived at the front gate, and through the main gate she could see the external decorations made to the manor, and her heart melted into a symphony of what could only be described as joy that ran through her veins and arteries, even ignoring the exhaustion:*

*Her manor windows had been covered in bright, colorful lights that ran all around the frames with snowflakes attached to the exterior side of the glass. There were lights hanging from many surfaces, which made Lara question how Winston had gotten everything into its place considering his age. However, she did not think it was of that much importance and she was happy to be greeted with bushes that were turned into snowman, their tops shaped and decorated as various characters, with one in particular having its clothes and accessories resemble Pierre and Larson, which was hilarious and made Lara laugh, although that laugh caused her body to ache with pain. She slowly walked through the main courtyard of her manor, the decours complimenting the rushing atmosphere she could hear inside- as if several... cats were running around.*

*She summarised that Delca's cats must have joined her for this Christmas. But there were more voices inside of the manor, and only when she got close to the door could she hear that it was in fact people and not her imagination. She slowly rang the doorbell, which was switched out with a Christmas one. After a moment, she was greeted by the door opening, and a sight of a Pierre out of all the people, the ugliest damn server she could have ever seen in her life on his chest, with a complimentary set of wool pants, and a pair of somewhat decent slippers. His hand had been holding a large cup of hot chocolate, some of it which was leaking due to his momentum. More spilled when his eyes went wide, a stutter coming out of his mouth before he walked out of her path. Lara entered while looking at him with a strange glance before feeling the heat envelop her tired form, a cinnamon smell assaulting her nostrils and senses gently, and her guess on the cats was correct- they were trying to drag and hang the Christmas lights everywhere before she presumably arrived back to her manor.*

*A voice besides her broke her out of the trance she had gotten in somehow, shaking herself out of it and looking at who else than Pierre.*

*"Why Lara, you seem to be back from your adventure quite early! You unfortunately had missed our wedding, but oh, I mustn't distress you, it was a small one." His voice rang an innocent tone, which soothed her despite the whole situation in Venice. After emitting a sigh, she shook herself more aware and decided to get the conversation out of the way right now.*

*"I was travelling to your wedding, monsieur. However, I... had been tricked. Your letter... it had spoken of Venice."*

*Pierre's look became sullen and worried, deeply so at that.*

*"What are you speaking of Miss Croft? What happened to the original?"*



Lara reached into her bag, slowly taking it out and opening it. There, it spoke much like Larson and Pierre did, with the couple clearly having had written the Letter by hand to each guest, and it spoke of Vegas instead of Venice.

"City of Sin... Must have had fun." Lara sighed. She couldn't... Oh she couldn't. She couldn't spoil this.

"What had happened?"

Lara smirked tiredly, deciding Pierre was innocent and just decided to lie. "A prankster swapped your letter with a forgery. I ended up in Venice and chased around some of Bartoli's dogs in the dog center."

"Sounds like you Miss Croft. Chasing dogs, what you wouldn't do to hang around those doberman for some reason or another."

"Now then, you hadn't told me about your wedding Pierre. How was it?" Lara chirped up, wanting to know what she had missed.

"Ah, it was wonderful! One of the best times in my life! Miss Natla had her, um, mutants there too! She had engineered them to help her with a business of hers, that technological form of Miss Natla's Future."

"Go on..." Lara urged, taking off her backpack and tossing it onto the couch in the living room. She also took her jacket off, letting her arms finally breathe and to soak in the atmosphere as the two sat on the couches."

"They had prepared such a massive cake, and dear it was full of flavour! You'd think fleshy mutants were bad cooks, but they made something that got addicted in an instant!" Pierre waved his arms around in a passionate explanation of his wedding, from how the ceremony itself went to how Von Croy had accidentally set loose the pack of doberman of Mister Bartoli that had also been there, who Lara knew from her adventures to find the Dagger Of Xian... and which Bartoli really wanted in spite of its uselessness due to the power having shunned out after only a few years since the war. Nonetheless he paid good buck and they stayed somewhat of friends. The doberman ate some of the cake and played with the mutants who were far gentler than some humans, which everyone found... adorable if not for the appearances.

"Sounds like you had a lot of fun then." Lara smirked, the exhaustion slightly gone. Not fully, but it's a start for sure.

"Ah yes, we had lots of fun, mostly gambling- we hadn't lost much in all honesty, but Larson had drank one too many drinks and puked on this pretty plant, oh you'd waste him away if he were to do this here."

On cue, a voice from her Kitchen had rang out- Larson's chirping voice rang through the busy manor, as well as the shuffle of Winston's feet which could finally be heard. Cups that clinked against the usual tray sent Lara into peace once again. At last, Larson's handsome face could be seen peeking from around the wall, the same kind of ugly sweater that Lara would like to tear off in an instant regardless of context due to how ugly it was to her, but nonetheless, his eyes widened in a positive manner as he saw her, walking up to them and somehow managing to trip and fall behind Winston who carried a cup of hot chocolate to her, steaming hot. She could only smile and greet him.

"Hello Winston. It has been a while, hasn't it?"

"Yes miss croft. Emperor Jiafei had come around and ordered a full Christmasification of your manour as per her request. I was helpless to stop her, and could only allow the cats to do all the work."

Lara took the hot chocolate and took a careful sip- It was heaven, and she felt her body quickly heal up.

"Healing Chocolate? You're a clever one Winston."

"A winter without a restoration like this is a sin, Miss Croft. Ah, and Sir Pierre and Sir Larson had arrived a few days in concern of your safety, and I had allowed them to stay until you had returned."



*"Thank you Winston. Now, Larson, how did your wedding go? Pierre had told me that Natla had brought her mutants to the party. Nobody had an issue I presume?"*

*"Nope Miss Laura Croft, not a damn issue with those grotesque overgrown puppies. Oh the heel of a cake that they had made was beyond delicious- I had the urge to smash a chunk onto this handsome fellow I get to call my husband without a moment of thought-"*

*"-Thankfully Miss Natla had stopped him, nearly ruined my precious suit!" Pierre playfully yelled out, smacking the Larson who had snuggled up next to him.*

*Lovers. Who knew.*

*"I assume she gave you a handful for your silly behaviour."*

*"Oh she did Miss Croft. That she did." Pierre remarked, remembering how Natla pulled his husband aside and yelled at him for trying to ruin their wedding in such a primal way. To say he was polite and changed for a whole is put lightly. At least she put him in place and stopped anything weird happening... until the casino and such.*

*"Ah yes, I also had seen Natla's newest securitrons, very large and if I may say, muscular looking machines that roamed and guarded the streets of Vegas, making sure none of the people stirred trouble. Oh how the woman is terrifying but so genius at the same time."*

*Lara nodded, drinking the chocolate, now tired in the sense of not having slept a day as opposed to before, and she felt far better now.*

*The cats were bickering at this point because the decoration came out wonky, play fighting and some actually fighting about it. Winston simply was sat and ignored it, taking one of the gingerbreads and dipping it into his own hot chocolate, the 4 sat down and enjoying the atmosphere. One of the cats even snuggled up to Lara and made her feel much better about the whole situation. Although the truth was...*

*The truth was she didn't really care anymore. Trauma or not, it was yet another Tuesday for her. Is it bad to say she misses Venice already? Probably.*