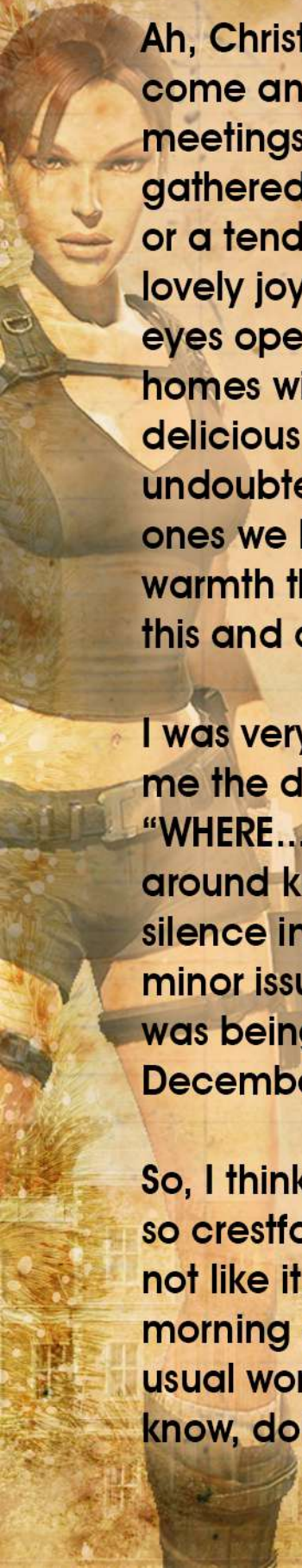


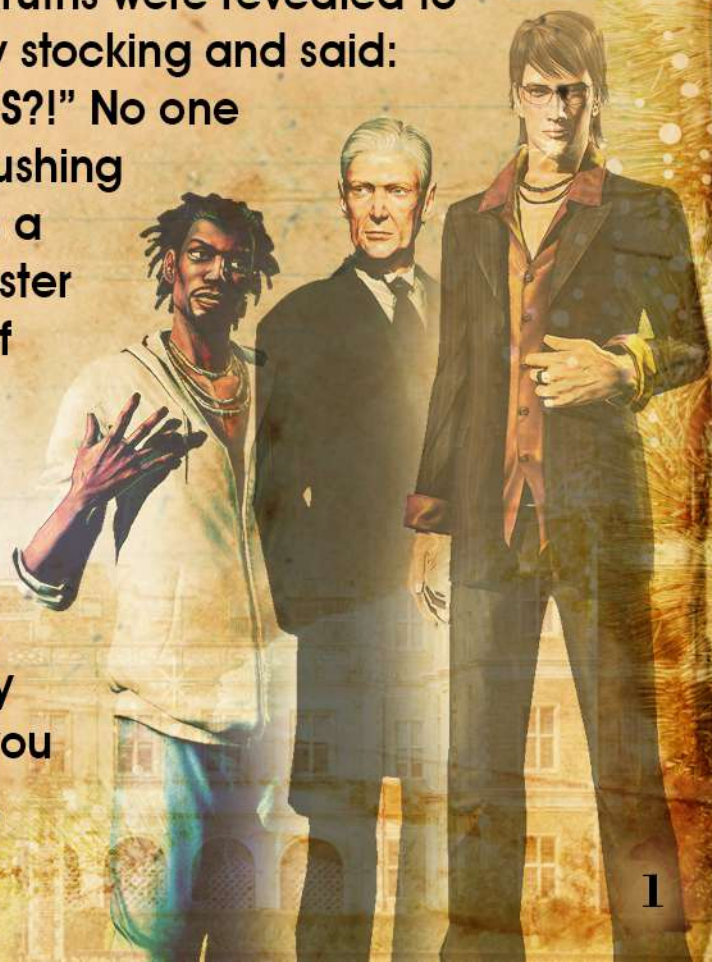
- THE FAMILY YOU CHOOSE BEYOND BLOOD by A.C.R. -



Ah, Christmas... The season everyone is passionately wishing to come and once it is here, it brings in surprises, happiness, meetings full of love, homes with dearly beloved families gathered... Maybe it also brings in a first kiss between two lovers or a tender caress from a mother to her children... That always lovely joy when you receive presents, or you dream with your eyes open... The timeless stamp of families decorating their homes with Christmas trees, baubles, garlands... Or just cooking delicious food to be served and tastily devoured... We undoubtedly sing songs and listen to carols. We remember the ones we lost and we cherish the ones that are with us. The warmth that this festivity brings in cannot be matched. Because this and quite more is what Christmas is about. But not for all...

I was very little when forgettable truths were revealed to me the day I held aloft my empty stocking and said: "WHERE... ARE... MY... CANDYCANES?!" No one around knew what to say but a gushing silence imposed... Surely, this was a minor issue compared to what Alister was being through the morning of December the 24th.

So, I think I had never seen him so crestfallen and honestly, I did not like it. It was a stunning sunny morning and I was performing my usual workout inside the manor (you know, doing some exciting vaults,

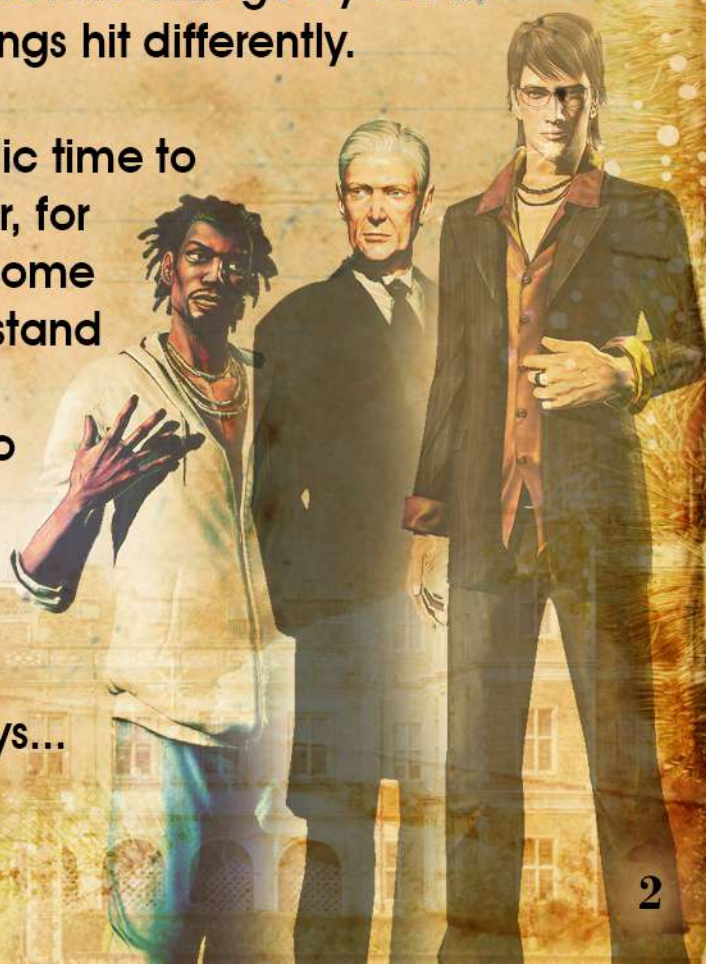


risky flips, intense pistol training...) when I dropped by Alister's room. The door was half-opened and I could not help myself but taking a peek at what was going on inside of it.

Yes, I know, spying on people is a no go. But I am Lara Croft, I would not be the Tomb Raider I have come to be if I were not this curious. I certainly inspected every little detail of the scene: he was lying on his bed, browsing his personal photo album... With every turn of the page, tears were falling from his eyes. It was so heartbreaking, that I had to stop from making a mess at home and tried to cheer up my dear friend.

But if I did that, he would know that I was behind the door spying on him! I decided it would be best to sit on a little couch nearby, have a sip of my favourite Lucozade drink to replenish some vitamins and wait. Meanwhile, I started to count the times I saw Alister in that mood. He has always been very happy and active, but the Alister I saw that morning was quite the opposite. I remember being at his aunt Petunia's funeral and no surprise, he was devastated and yet he recovered his goofy self in some hours later. But this time, things hit differently.

For many, Christmas is a very idyllic time to celebrate and to forgive. However, for others, Christmas is a time to do some introspection, to try and to understand the complex world we live in... Sometimes, there is no need to go that far beyond thinking, though what would you do if family matters take the whole of your own self? They are a thing of their own. Many of us spend hours, days... even years to cope with.



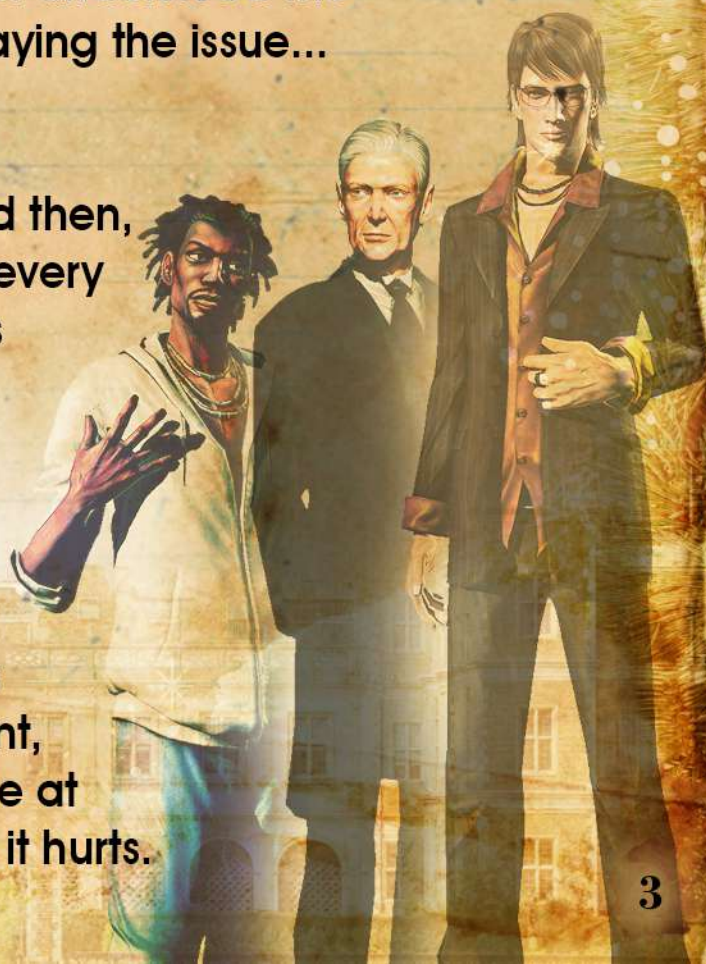
I learnt through past experiences that Alister was one of those people that put on a brave face, it is his own manner of keeping pain deep inside. I cannot blame anyone for being reserved, but that morning of the 24th... Oh, how I missed my jolly friend...

Suddenly, a phone call was heard and I rushed to know more. Trust me, it was not my intention to eavesdrop, really, but I just had to do it and luckily for me, the speakerphone was on. The man at the other side of the phone was Jason Fletcher, Alister's brother and the tone of the conversation sounded very abrupt, as if they were arguing... It got confusing at some point, still I got enough information to understand why that day, Alister was that dispirited.

He once briefly told me that he had a heated discussion with his brother about something very sensitive. That happened during past Christmases. And due to the nature of the subject, he deliberately decided to split ways. Jason understood that Alister was overly dramatizing it all. Alister understood the opposite: that Jason was downplaying the issue... Whatever it could be...

A lot happened between now and then, my dearest was stigmatized and every time he tried to share how he was feeling to his family, his parents would get offended and would stand by Jason's side of the story.

You know... Stuff like this happens everywhere: if you are just different, others will do everything they have at their hands to put you down. And it hurts.

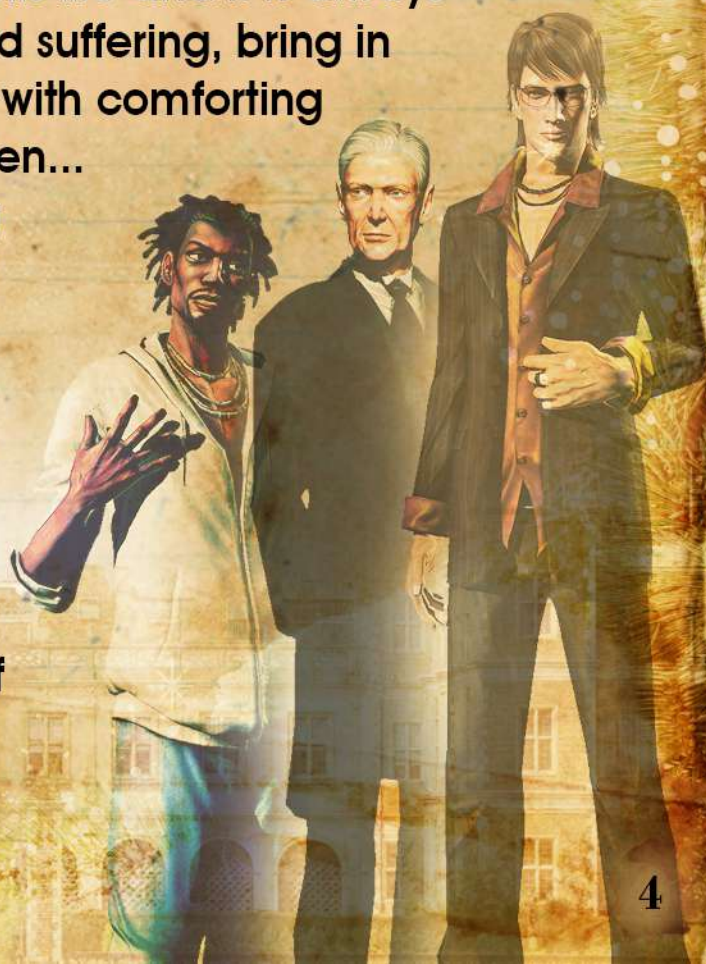


Since that fateful day, Alister has been trying to reach his family. And all he has been getting is their rejection. The last thing I was able to hear nearly ending that uncomfortable phone conversation was: "I love you, dear brother", from Alister (between sobs) to Jason. The call was hung up with no response whatsoever.

I felt so sorrowful, that I did not notice Zip and Winston had already caught me red-handed. At that moment, Alister went out of his room and without understanding why we were all there, he was courageous enough to say: "No luck, once again..." You can easily imagine our faces right there... We all surrounded him without hesitation, making him fully supported and sharing strong hugs and affection. Because at the end of the day, sometimes, your real family is not the one given to you, but the one you choose and stay by your side. No doubt he will always have us by his.

Oh, Christmas... Out of all presents we could wish upon, to forgive should be one of the greatest and the most important. Maybe everything has a true solution in this life and it is always good to talk so that you can avoid suffering, bring in peace with an emotive hug, seal with comforting words the link that was once broken... Forgetting pride in favour of living again that wonderful feeling of a first step...

With all that in mind and sadness yet overshadowing the manor, our hearts stood still, united and powerful and we spent a very special holiday season full of love and dedication.



And lots of Scrabble rounds filled the entire Christmas Eve by the way... That made for a wonderful night, for sure! Because, no doubt once again, this and quite more is what Christmas is also about!

