

REINS OF THE TOMB RAIDER

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CHAPTER ONE

ARRIVING EARL

It was late spring when the Earl of Faringdon came to the glorious kingdom of Parmistan.

I, Zamir Pokupec, had been given the task of meeting him and showing him around our small yet rich country. We were able to keep track of his coming by radio and did so, for the going is a week long excursion fraught with peril. Very few make the trip successfully, and never in months outside this one. Our Emperor found it curious that a man such as this, an Earl of far off Britain, would accept the offer we had made so long ago to all the nations of NATO – that of embassy. Perhaps that was why I was chosen for this task.

Parmistan is a proud country located in the mountains between Afghanistan, China, Pakistan, and Pamir. Founded in 39 AD by Gaius Caesar, we have since maintained our independence in his name, and our modern Emperor is a descendant of that long ago king. Many times nations have come against us, and many times they have been repelled, for the pathways to our country are treacherous and easily defended.

Even in this modern world, there is no place for an airplane to land, and the winds of our home make flying or landing helicopters far too great a risk. Our country is small and independent, needing for nothing, and the world was content to let us live in peace until the early eighties of your twentieth century. Towards the end of the Cold War, both Soviets and Allies had wooed our nation, recognizing that through a trick of geography we were perfectly situated to spy on any political power.

The Americans had won our favor, stopping a royal coup while also winning the Great Game, a means by which our royalty has always judged the worthiness of foreign entreaties. NATO gained our aid, and less than ten years later the Soviets fell... and yet, no power has ever taken up the offer of embassy, and we have never seen fit to send an ambassador to any other nation.

What could they offer us that we do not already possess?

Until Lord James Berners, the Earl of Faringdon.

My cousin, Ivo Paley, is head of the security apparatus that protects all of Parmistan. He tells me that he has looked into this man, and so I am not surprised by his feminine physique when he arrives. This is a man who faints during fox hunts, who prefers composing symphonies and poetry to any true physical exertion. The journey should have killed him – his guide, who has made the journey many times, looks exhausted.

“Hello,” I say, greeting the man and slapping him on the back. “I am Zamir Pokupec, and I will be your guide from here.”

“Lord James Berners,” the boy answers me. He is clean shaven, and I think him weak until I see his eyes. There is anger there, and hurt, and I see it is both of these things that keep him upright. “A pleasure.”

His hand finds mine and his grip is strong. I offer him a drink and he takes it, a full swallow of the strong vodka we brew in the snow-capped mountains that surround us. He is impressed by its strength, I see, and takes a second helping. I am impressed he is still upright.

Waving away offers of help for himself, I lead both him and his guide to the home that has been set aside for him. It is a modest place, a mere two stories with ten rooms and two bathrooms beside. A small gated garden and staff have been provided. There are guards that have been assigned to him, four, that have been ordered by the Emperor to keep him safe. I tell him this.

“They will die for me?” he seems amused.

“Yes,” I answer. “It is their duty and their glory.” James nods, accepting this.

Over the next few days he sheds his drab English clothing for the bright colors and warm fabrics of our people. We go to the tailor together, and he accepts my advice on coloring – a yellow shirt and red jacket, all the better to display the fire that drives him. He is amused by this, and asks the tailor to trace the cut of clothing to that of his homeland, but in the colors I recommend. I wonder who would find his look more ridiculous, his own people or mine?

Word of the Englishman spreads, and the people offer him their wares. We are celebrities, and celebrated, and he takes to the spices of our food and the strength of our drink happily. I steer him from things that might upset him, the traditions established two thousand years before, but I can see that his mind is elsewhere, that it is pain that has brought him here.

And as summer fades and autumn settles, I come to care for him. He grows a beard and keeps it neatly trimmed, and he has composed a symphony for us – *the Triumph of Neptune*, an honor of the Roman Gods we worship. He has dined with the Emperor but asks for nothing, content to be present among us and learn our ways.

We travel together, he and I, throughout the capital. We pass the statues of Bacchus and Neptune and he makes the proper offerings at each. He asks about the other villages that litter our land, but they are few and with threat of winter we are more concerned with the fight to come. I tell him we will go and see them in the spring and summer and he is content to hear this. We drink, play chess, talk music and world events. The technology NATO brought here has only been improved by us. There is nothing that happens in the world that we do not know about, no secret that is safe.

One night, we sit together at the pub and we drink.

“My friend, my friend, why did you come here?” I ask him. He fixes me with narrowed eyes, but I press on.

“You are a good man, one I proudly call friend, but our glorious country is small and harsh. There is music in your eyes, my friend, and such anger.”

“You ever been in love, Zamir?” he asks me. His words are slurred from drink, but he has learned our native tongue well. “I am. W-was. There was a girl, a Duchess I was engaged to. You wouldn't think there'd be romance there, but I liked her. Was used to her. I was gonna marry her. She was going to be my wife.”

“Was she good looking?” I ask. He hands me a picture. Short hair the color of chestnuts, chocolate eyes bright with intelligence. She wears brown pants and a blue shirt that reveals the top of her breasts. She is beautiful. She is breathtaking. I tell him so.

“Yeah, she is,” he agrees. I hand him back the picture, but he tells me I can keep it. “Fucking bitch. She went to University College London. Worked her way through it. That was fine, we would meet for lunch and... and things. And then she met this Japanese bitch, Sam Naka-something. Nisha-something? I don't know.”

“Your girl, she is lesbian?” I ask, making a mental note to look into the Japanese bitch.

“She seemed to like my cock enough when we were together,” James answers, scowling and looking into the night. “No, Sam wanted her to go to some fucked up island in the middle of nowhere with some famous nutjob. Something Whitman.”

“James Whitman?”

“The only good thing about that man is his first name,” James grumbles. I disagree, but hold my tongue. *Whitman's World* was a popular show here, an excellent comedy. “Something happened out there. She came back and was all stand off-ish. Ducking my calls, breaking dates. People were saying she'd gone nuts. And then I find out she's fucking off to Syria and I go to ask her about that and she... she...”

I nod and place my hand on his shoulder. I understand. We finish the bottle in silence.

We finish late, the guards helping us both to stand. He offers to let me sleep in his home that night, and I take him up on the offer. There is something about being the guest of a man who is my guest that I find funny, and he laughs when I share the joke. We are nearly to his home when we see it – a farmer coming to market early, his wares in a cart pulled by a pony.

“What the...?” says James, and I turn to look at him. He has stopped, staring at the farmer and the mostly naked girl that is his beast of burden, and I remember that the English do not have this.

“It is a ponygirl,” I tell him. “I will explain in the morning, when we are both sober.”

CHAPTER TWO

TOURIST TRAPPED

For three winters, James joined our struggles against the harsh winters of glorious Parmistan. The conflicts had put hair on his chest; slim though he remained, my friend the Earl of Faringdon still came out into the drifts with us. Hard wire of muscle dwelt under his flesh now, the pain of his eyes turned to light of purpose. The ambassador had become a welcome sight, and the people of my homeland made an effort to pronounce his name properly, from JAH-mez to JAE-mz. He appreciated it, though not so much as we appreciated his efforts to learn our language.

He wrote a concerto about our struggles against the seasons, celebrating the strength of our people. The Emperor himself declared it a masterwork, and people from other villages tuned in over the wireless internet connections that percolated over the whole of our small country. Even the Village of the Damned heard the concerto, the madness of that terrible place brought still by the glory my friend had crafted.

I had never been prouder of any human being.

And so it was with trepidation that I went to my friend with news one day in the early weeks of spring.

“Morning, Zamir,” James greeted me, clasping me on the back and looking out over his gardens. “The thaw is mighty, my friend, and this summer will yield excellent wines for the winter ahead.” I smiled at him – he had even come to sound like one of us. I shook my head to clear it, as he had to be told of what had come, following him from his past to our present.

“My friend, my friend, I have news,” I told him. He looked at me, frowning, and accepted my invitation to follow. We walked through the streets of beautiful Candover, capital of our great nation, stopping only to make the proper offerings to Bacchus and Neptune. He noted our journey, recognized the home of Parmistan's intelligence apparatus, though he kept his silence.

My cousin, Ivo, greeted us as we crossed the door.

“Greetings, cousin and friend!” he said, throwing his arms wide. Ivo was a boisterous man, loud and exceptionally good at his job. “I am glad that you are both here. Come.”

He took us to a closed room, within a series of screens that showed the dangerous mountain pathways and treacherous shallows that were the only lead to Parmistan. A guide and a girl were walking them, a rare sight given how few visitors dared the journey, but the girl had caught Ivo's attention, then mine, and now that of my friend. I held the picture the Earl had given me so long ago up to the monitor, and looked back upon him.

I did not want to hurt him.

“She says her name is Amelia DeMornay,” I said. “We know this is a lie.”

“We need to be sure,” Ivo said. “And no one would know this woman better than you.”

James stared for a long and silent moment. It was her, then, and we both knew it. This was the Croft woman – the Duchess of Arlington, the woman that had broken my friend's heart so long ago. I saw that pain threaten him again, the wavering in his eyes, but his time in glorious Parmistan had made him strong. He mastered the pain, and himself, and I was proud of how far he had come.

“It's her,” James said. “Amelia was her mother's name. DeMornay is her uncle. She's probably coming here to steal something. She's not sane, you know.”

Ivo and I looked at one another. We have read the reports from Syria and Siberia and it is the root of our concern. The Croft woman is dangerous, a violent psychopath who leaves destruction in her wake, stealing relics from the past and claiming her title as a means to escape punishment. Ivo shares his worries with James, but James sets us both at ease.

“We don't know why she's coming here,” James says. “But if she breaks any of your laws, I assure you that England will honor our extradition treaty with your mighty nation.” We thank him for this certainty. She is royalty, and it had been weighing heavily upon our minds.

Lara Croft goes through Candover, picking up supplies on her way to noble Routard, a village north of the capital. We watch as she pays for a room and settles in. She has smuggled weapons into our country, two pistols, a small cane which she curves into a bow, some sort of climbing tool. She has a map, and we watch as she spreads it, marking a path.

She means to go to the Village of the Damned, a place that is strictly off limits, excepting those times when there are players for the Great Game. The Village is a dangerous place, full of the violently mad, but there are treasures there – it was the home of Gaius Caesar in ancient days, but now is an echo of the glory that was. All good people avoid it. Under cover of night she creeps inside.

We watch, transfixed. She is an adept athlete, and her acrobatic skill keeps her safe as she explores the terrible village. Her path is littered with broken things, buildings and bodies, but she will not stop. Ivo's camera drones, no bigger than insects, follow her and record everything – her every movement, her every crime.

Deeper and deeper she goes, into the heart of the ancient village, to places no sane mind would ever venture. She finds armor there, an old Roman chest plate. It must be centuries old. Neither James or Ivo recognizes the Latin in the room, and mine is faded but not entirely gone – still, I am able to identify the long dead owner.

“That armor belonged to Gaius Caesar,” I whisper, unable to take my eyes from the metal, glittering even now, untouched in almost two thousand years. I swallow. “The Emperor will want it.”

We watch as she leaves, as ruthless out as in. It is almost dawn when she slips back into her room and hides the armor. We stare as she cleans herself and then slides into bed, exhaustion claiming her waking mind.

“We could arrest her,” Ivo whispers. “She broke into the Village of the Damned, assaulted people, stole a national treasure.”

“You should wait,” James says. He sits, hands in his lap, head tilted back and eyes staring at the sleeping girl. Her breathing is steady, gentle. His is a ragged thing he fights to control. “If she leaves your borders with the chest plate, that's smuggling. Four charges, not just three.”

Ivo nods, and I clasp my friend on the back and smile. He is wise. We will listen, and we will wait.

CHAPTER THREE

STOP THIEF

“Good morning, Zamir, my friend.”

The Earl of Faringdon came to me the next morning, well rested and eyes clear. There was a halo around him that I had seen surround brave men in the harshest winters, after those warriors had bested the unending snows and howling winds that assailed the mountains. He smiled and clasped me on the back, rocking on his heels when I did the same to him. He no longer winced when my palm met his shoulder blades.

“James, my good friend, good morning,” I answered, pulling him into a tight embrace. “You look well slept. Have you taken food or drink to break the fast of sleep?”

“I have not, my friend, but if that is your invitation I will accept it,” he said, grinning. We went in and helped my lovely wife complete an adult's meal, we all dancing around the children as they cleaned the remnants of their feasting. She gave my friend a wry look, commenting that his figure was like her own, and he flexed and stood back, placing his hands on his hips, saying that she was his ideal. We all laughed, the sound rich and loud, and the children laughed with us.

After the meal, we tended the garden outside together. There was a comfortable pattern we fell into knowing one another, collecting avocados and pomegranates until the sun reached its zenith. I handed him a towel to wipe the sweat from his brow as the children took the baskets towards our house. When he offered me a drink from his flask, I took it, though the whiskey within was weak like water. It was an import, he told me, from the conquered neighbor of his homeland, Scotland.

“I was wondering if I could talk to your cousin,” he said. I handed him back his flask and matched his grin with one of my own.

“Of course!” I said. We paused only to make the proper offering to Bacchus when we passed his fountain, and my cousin came out to meet us with wide arms and a wider smile. The cameras that covered our land gave him ample time to prepare. We all embraced, each of us in turn, clasping one another in proper custom.

“Do you wish to look at the Croft woman?” Ivo asked. “We are recording all the evidence we might need.”

“No, no, nothing so base,” James said, leaning closer to us, his smile born of secrets. “I would like a chance to speak with her, show her the local cuisine.” There is some concern here – Ivo and I wondering if he might be trying to warn her out of some misguided softness, but he assures us both that our winters have made him hard.

“I did not know myself until I came to this great nation,” the Earl of Faringdon tells us. “By blood, I am a noble of some far off land, but my soul belongs to glorious Parmistan. In fact, I urge you to watch in on our dinner and to record every word.” The glint in his eye made Ivo think that perhaps our friend had some ulterior motive.

That very night, my friend approached the inn in Routard, feigning surprise when he found Lara sitting down to a traditional Parmistani meal. He had switched back to the drab clothing of his homeland, kept apart from his normal wear and yet still hardy from disuse. Lara looked delighted to see him, standing up and pulling him into a warm embrace.

“James!” she said, and when she stood back, she looked at him with clear affection and ran one of her fine-boned hands through his hair. Her voice, even in excitement and surprise, held a smoky quality, and she pulled him to her table, sat him down, stared at him with a steady and confident gaze. “What are you doing here?”

“I took an ambassadorship,” James said, bowing his head in a demure fashion, so very much like the woman he resembled. “I heard there was an Englishwoman staying here, and it seemed prudent to look in on... Amelia DeMornay, was it?” He offered a soft chuckle.

“I’m something of a celebrity now,” Lara’s quiet laughter was an echo of his, and she shrugged with her elbows on the table. I swallowed, felt my cheeks flush – this was a woman for keeping warm in winter, I thought, and I could see the effect she was having on my cousin and on my friend. “I prefer traveling incognito these days. But you? Here? An ambassador?”

“I needed to get away from home after you left for Syria.”

“After what happened with Sam-”

“I heard she got better from whatever happened,” my friend said, his fingers brushing the back of Lara’s hand with some semblance of sympathy. “What was that, exactly?”

“You’ll never believe me.”

“Try me.”

“You remember the stories of Yamatai?” Lara asked. James shook his head no – I had learned that he had little interest in her antiquated hobby of historical study. “Okay, well, there was a Japanese sorceress named Himiko that was revered as a god and it turned out she was real.”

“A sorceress? Really?”

“I know how it sounds. She possessed Sam and we thought we’d gotten rid of her, but then she came back. I chased her all over Europe and got Himiko out of her, I think, but her parents took her away and hid her in some asylum somewhere.”

“No wonder you ran off to Syria.”

“I had to get away. And I was short with you before I left. James, I’m-”

“It’s okay. Water under the bridge.”

“The country has been good to you,” Lara said, wiping away a tear. The grin that followed this small action was infectious, her eyes roaming him all over. As lovely as the picture of her was, I found that she was yet more beautiful in motion, at once wild and dignified. “Have you looked into the history of this place at all?”

“A bit,” James shrugged, though I knew that despite his apathy for world history that he had gone deeper than that when it came to our glorious home. We people of Parmistan are proud of our heritage, and any one that claimed our nation as their home would know much of the land and those that lived upon it from one century to the next. I wondered at the purpose behind this charade, but trusted that some game I did not know was being played between them. “I know it was founded twenty-hundred years ago by one of the Roman emperors.”

“Gaius Caesar, though he's better known as Caligula.” Lara's eyes flashed with excitement, her accent cultured. I felt myself harden, wondering what it would be like to ride such a mare. “The place they call the Village of the Damned is where he lived, and where he was finally buried. Did you know that? They snuck his remains all the way out here and buried him in that village.”

“I didn't,” James said, and his smile was a sly thing. “Please, go on.”

And she told him: that Parmistan had started as a pleasurable escape for that long dead Emperor, that his wildest excesses had been brought to life here. This was why Bacchus smiled upon us, even to this day. As to our human beasts of burden, well, that was why we paid homage to Neptune; there had been no way to bring larger domestic animals up the difficult terrain, so criminals and slaves had been turned into low beasts of burden in their absence.

And that tradition we had kept alive since the most ancient of days. Our line of Emperors traced their blood back to Gaius Caesar himself, and every child of Parmistan knew the stories: the institution of the monarchy, the fights for independence, the history and majesty of our proud country. The establishment of the Great Game, and the refinements it had undergone. The means by which we had become a hidden world power in the Cold War, a power kept hidden by our desire to be left alone and our holding of all the world's political secrets.

“I should warn you, the people here take the law very seriously,” James said, leaning closer to her, resting on his elbows. He looked and sounded bored. “Their location and political position makes it difficult to protect foreign nationals. Be careful, okay? Don't break any laws while you're here.”

Ivo sucked in a harsh breath at these words, thinking we were being betrayed, but I laughed as I saw the game our friend was playing. I explained it to my cousin and we both laughed and laughed, rumbling from deep in our bellies. By giving her this warning he had doomed her in any legal sense – we could back date her crimes and make it look like he had provided counsel that she had then ignored. He was protecting himself and us, for no one would doubt our right to punish her after she had been so warned.

“He has done our glorious nation a mighty service,” Ivo told me, clasping me on the back. “We must do him one in kind.”

“I have a gift in mind,” I answered, unable to keep the grin from my face. “I will talk to the Emperor.”

“I have my own preparations to make,” Ivo grinned. “Go. My wife hunted Markhor just yesterday, and the children should have it ready for dinner tonight. Will you, your family, and our dear Earl join us for dinner?”

“Myself and my family, certainly.” Looking back the monitors, I could see my friend continue his conversation with the Croft woman. “I can make no promises for our friend.”

Ivo grinned at me, nodding, and we left to fulfill our tasks, knowing that this night was the last night that Lara Croft would stand free.

CHAPTER FOUR

RAIDER ARRESTED

I awoke in Ivo's bed, holding my cousin's wife. He was holding mine, so it was a fair exchange – the sort of night we had not had since we were teenagers. We all four of us laughed about that, remembering our youth. The history of Parmistan was rife with such mischief, though we were careful never to get offspring from such unions.

Our good friend, the ambassador James Berners, Earl of Faringdon, rarely partook in such pastimes, and we all knew why. He mourned the lady that had walked away from him and broken his heart. We thought ourselves lucky in this, proving that with all bad things there must be good: yes, his heart had been shattered, but that shattering had brought him here, forged him, remade him into something stronger.

And today, this glorious day when spring gave way to summer, this day would see the wrong we had made right become more right still.

James joined us for our morning meal, bringing fresh cheeses from Routard, and we gathered together to laugh and smile, speaking of the harvest festivals to come when summer finally died. Ivo explained to our wives and children that there was work to be done and justice to be served, for the goddess Justita had turned her eyes to our proud country and was trusting in us to right crimes ignored by weaker countries.

"It's true," James told our children. "Your people are the purest I've known."

We made the proper offerings to Bacchus and to Neptune, then paused to look at the fountain of gentle Justita. James wondered why there was no offering to be made to her, and Ivo and I looked at one another.

"I work in the temple of Securitas," Ivo said. "My offering to Securitas is my service. I am a priest of the god that keeps proud Parmistan safe. So it is also with Justita." James nodded his understanding, and I clasped him on the back, knowing how hard it was for him to see beyond Jupiter and Mithras.

Such a strange world, outside of Parmistan.

We watched on the monitors as Lara's guide took her down the most treacherous of pathways, he seeking to exhaust her, but she was so much stronger than any of us had given her credit for. Ivo's guards were waiting close to the third place the guide demanded they rest, he breathing hard while she had only worked up a light sweat.

Ivo was dismayed by this. Originally, the plan had been to have her arrested when she was exhausted, but such was her fitness that had he not placed the guard ahead of her, we might not have caught her at all. Even now, having seen her capabilities in the Village of the Damned, he was unsure that the guard would be able to do more than slow her down. He had hoped fatigue and numbers combined would overwhelm her enough for them to use the chloroform they now carried.

"I have an idea," said James, his eyes narrowing as his head tilted back. We listened to it, our smiles growing, and we both clasped his back while relying his instructions.

The guards revealed themselves earlier than they had expected to, acting as if they were on routine patrol. They stopped by the guide and spoke with him, looking bored as they checked Lara's passport. Lara seemed concerned at first, but as the guards paid less attention to her she relaxed somewhat. The guards passed around a bottle of water, the guide drinking from it, and in the moment that it was out of Lara's sight they dumped some of the chloroform into it.

When they handed it to her, she nodded and accepted the canteen, was bringing it to her lips when she detected something wrong. She frowned, breathing in to figure out what was wrong before throwing the canteen away. As she staggered back, wavering, the guards jumped on her, pressing a rag soaked with the chemical against her nose and mouth, kicking at her shins to make her breath in.

In the minute it took the chloroform to claim her she fought like a hellhound. It was impressive, the strength of this girl, and I thought she would have made a worthy mate for my friend had she not been a criminal. As it was, she knocked one man down and gifted another with a black eye. As her strength faded, though, the guard surrounded her, four of the guard binding her wrists and ankles in chains as another tended to the wounded. It was the guide who found the armor in her pack, and once that was done they dragged her back to Parmistan for punishment.

It took most of the day to get Lara back into Candover. The chains slowed her down a great deal, and by the time she returned to the Temple of Justita she was as exhausted as the others. The ankle chains had an iron bar between them that was barely a foot long, and kept her strides short and weak, while a similar bar rested on the roundness of her backside, keeping her wrists apart. The two bars were connected by a three-and-a-half foot length of chain, which limited her struggles, and a simple rope around her neck allowed the guide and guards to keep her on the right path once she was conscious again.

She spat and cursed the entire way back, but switches made of slim branches were whipped against the back of her calves and kept her moving all the way to the temple. There, we gathered, bringing our wives and select friends to watch as the neck of the English noblewoman was stretched, the rope pulled towards the ceiling by means of a clever pulley system. It forced her to stand straight but did not choke her. This was not the time for punishment, that would come after the trial. For now we only wanted her to understand the severity of her situation.

We watched, taking seats in the room next door while the iron bar between her legs was then chained to the ground and the guards left her. She could not see us, the room made of one way glass that showed her only herself and the room around her. With her was a table, and behind the table, a chair. Tied as she was, her breasts stood forward and her body tensed as she struggled in vain to free herself.

Ivo and I framed James in the other room, holding his hands as Lara Croft was admitted into the Parmistan justice system. He squeezed, a low sound thrumming from his throat and into the air.

"Wait here, please," Ivo said, the words meant for James, but all the while he was looking at me. "We need to make sure that this is fair and right. We are in the Temple of Justita. Will you all bear witness?"

“We will,” we all said, James answering quicker than the rest of us. We could see and hear everything as Ivo went to meet Lara.

“Miss Croft, good evening,” Ivo said, greeting her. Her pack and the things she had stolen had been placed on the table in front of her, a table that Ivo now sat on the other side of. “My name is Ivo Paley, and I am the chief of security here in glorious Parmistan. You stand accused of lying about your intent when entering this great country, providing false identification, trespassing in the Village of the Damned, assaulting the people that live there, endangerment of yourself and others, stealing important historical artifacts, attempting to smuggle those artifacts out of the country, and assaulting our guards while resisting arrest. How do you plead?”

“This is ridiculous!” cried Lara. She had to struggle to look at Ivo, curving her back. The motion caused James to growl softly, and none that heard him could blame him for the sound. “I’m a foreign national. You can’t do this. I have diplomatic immunity.”

“We will contact your embassy and let them know what is happening,” Ivo said, nodding sympathetically. He stood and walked around the table, resting a hand on Lara’s hip as an offer of comfort. He had always been such a kind man. “I assume you are entering a plea of not guilty?”

“Bloody damn right!” Lara hissed, bucking her hip in a failed attempt to dislodge his hand.

“Very well,” Ivo said. He patted her hip, moving away from her, taking her things and leaving the room. He flashed a smile in my direction, but James had eyes only for Lara.

The guards returned, six of them. A needle was injected into the back of Lara’s neck and she kicked and struggled until the muscle relaxant took its toll, leaving her weaker than James had been when he’d first come here. The guards then untied her, two of them holding her up while another unwound the pulley and allowed her to come to earth.

Gently, gently, they guided her down to the floor, unwinding her bonds from her. She tried to move but her muscles were unresponsive, the drugs doing their work, yet still each of her limbs was given to one guard as the other two looked at one another and licked their lips.

The first moved towards her top, peeling it away from her toned midriff, up her chest and over her shoulders. This garment was folded and placed in one of two boxes the guards had brought with them. Her sports bra followed, the elastic pulled off her firm breasts, her nipples hardening in the cold of the room. Wide-eyed, she managed to shake her head and tried to kick, but even her jaw and tongue were numb – she could not even curse the guard, not even scream.

As her bra and shirt were folded, cataloged, and boxed, the other free guard sat on her thighs, working her belt clasp undone, worming it through the loops around her waist. He handed the belt to the first guard, then unbuttoned her pants, deft fingers working button and then zipper. He then manipulated her hips to work her pants down her legs, the guards holding her keeping her steady as first one leg was revealed, and then the other.

The pants were folded, cataloged, boxed. All the guards lifted the woman, careful not to bruise or hurt her, placing her stomach down on the table, tying her wrists to opposite corners. Her panties were worked down her thighs, knees, ankles, and away, leaving her naked and helpless, her bum jutting out like an invitation.

James growled, deep and low.

“Patience,” I told him, clasping his shoulder. “She is still a person and not a prisoner. She has yet to go to trial.” He nodded, understanding.

Her ankles were then bound to opposite table legs. One of the guards put on a pair of gloves, adding grease to them, and Lara's eyes went wide and she tried to fight again as she realized what must happen now. Still, she squeezed her eyes shut, doing her best to scream as the guard worked her hand past Lara's holes, pausing only to exchange gloves before doing so.

Perhaps, when the guard was wrist deep inside Lara's rectum, she was grateful for the muscle relaxant.

When she was deemed to be safe and empty, a second box was opened and her prison clothes were removed – a pair of black panties and an orange button-up short-sleeved shirt. The guards untied her and pulled her off the table, and though she did not have the strength to struggle so soon after what had been done to her, she did twitch as they dressed her and helped her stand.

“You will be taken to a cell now,” Ivo said, returning from our room to that one. “Your things will be held for you, to be released upon the proof of your innocence or your release, whichever comes first. I have contacted the Emperor and your trial has been set two days from now. Your embassy has been contacted also, and once you are in your cell we will allow you ambassador to speak with you. Do you understand?”

She managed a passable nod, her eyes glazed and cheeks stained with tears.

The guards carried her to her cell, a simple stone room that was a six foot cube without window, empty excepting a mere pit for waste and some straw for sleeping. She was bound before being put into cell, again with a foot long iron bar between her ankles and then between her wrists, the bars connected by the same three foot length of chain. She was helped into the room, the guard doing their best to make her comfortable on the straw before leaving her to curl into herself and snuffle.

“Lara!” James said, coming into the room with her. She could only just adjust her body to look up at him, but he set down his lamp and went to her, holding her, stroking her hair and trying to comfort her. “What did you do?”

The drugs in her system mangled whatever response she might have had.

“It's going to be okay, Lara,” James promised her, pressing his lips to her temple, careful not to touch any of her exposed areas. Such a gentleman my friend is. “We're going to get you out of this.”

Lara turned so her face pressed against him, and then she wept.

CHAPTER FIVE

POLITICALLY SAVVY

"I am afraid of this, Zamir," my cousin admitted to me. We were standing outside of the temple where his work was prayer, considering all that had happened. "Already, there have been beatings from the outside world and it has not yet been twenty-four hours."

"Does the Emperor know?" I ask him. He shakes his head and tells me that the Emperor is out tending to the people hurt in the Village of the Damned and investigating the ruins that the Croft woman broke into to best understand the extent of the damage she had wrought. I can only imagine his fury at such a gross violation. At the very least, it has delayed the trial by another week.

"Good morning, my friends." James comes to us, smiling, and clasps us both on the back as the sun rises. We ask him about his countrymen, wondering how they might have found out about her. "Do not worry one hair, my friends. Lara likely has people waiting for her down in the countries below, friends who let those they think are in a position to help her to do their thing. Do not concern yourselves. I am prepared."

And, indeed, James lets us watch and listen in on a monitor as he sets up a video chat with a British head-of-state named Sir Neville Compton, who I am told is from some peasant stock and has risen above his station. James changes into the drab clothing of the outside world again, and then speaks of how Lara has been lawfully and legally arrested for a number of crimes. He reminds his old government that they have an extradition treaty with Parmistan.

"She is a Duchess!" Neville is old, his skin pale and wrinkled, and the clothing he wears is drab but expensive. He is a strange person, I decide, and I am not certain if I like him. "She was betrothed to you, man! We cannot leave her in the hands of those savages!" Ivo bristles at the word *savages*, but James merely smiles and taps one finger.

"You know that this is legally right," James says, his voice calm. "The Parmistani government has a right to enforce their laws, but they understand the difficulty this might present and are willing to provide a gift."

"What sort of gift?"

James speaks of the technologies that were placed here back in the cold war, and mentions that the technology has since been improved. He presents the carrot of financial information of corporations and political intelligence from other countries, and then warns of the stick: classified information from Britain itself.

"They haven't said anything, but if this is what they can offer us it stands to reason they can offer the same to others," James tells the man. His thick eyebrows furrow like caterpillars. "I believe we can trust the Parmistani people in this – they're angry because some of their people got hurt and some of their history was stolen. It's not like they're going to put her to death or anything."

He looked up at us as he said this. I did not need to look at Ivo to know that he shook his head as I did mine; we were not barbarians, and wasteful death was anathema to our proud nation. The old man sighed, removed his glasses and rubbed his temples.

“To be honest, old chap, the Duchess has become something of a political headache,” Neville confided. “The things she did in Russia made a tense situation so much worse. Perhaps she needs to be taken down a peg or two. You can observe things? Make sure she's treated fairly?”

“I can,” James said, nodding and hitting a few keys. “I'm forwarding you some images and video now of Lara's initial induction into the Parmistani justice system. You might want to make sure you're alone before watching them.”

The old man frowned, muttering something to someone off camera, and watched them leave. When he was alone, he replaced his glasses, looked down, and opened the files. We saw him, his jaw going slack and his eyes narrowing as he reviewed the video footage, and we thought our friend had made a misstep until the old man laughed.

“Very good,” the old man chuckled. “Showing the itinerant lass her place. You take after your mother when it comes to holding a grudge.”

“You approve?”

“I could use the quiet, honestly, other countries not complaining about her murdering their citizens or destroying their landmarks.” The old man shook his head. “It was much better when the colonies understood their place, what? Tell the Emperor that he can punish her by their rules in exchange for information on Russia and insider corporate information upon request, say once a month for the next ten years. That should about cover the reparations and losses the good Duchess has cost us.”

“The Emperor is surveying the damage she did to a place the locals call the Village of the Damned, but I'll see what I can manage,” James nodded. The old man smiled and shook his head when James mentioned the name, inquiring if it was anything like Wales or Manchester. James laughed at the question, so it might have been some sort of joke.

“Oh, and one more thing.” Neville leaned forward, smiling. “I will need copies of Lara's continued treatment, both images and video, as you have already provided.”

“That won't be a problem,” James assured the man. I looked at Ivo, who shrugged: it really would not be. The conversation with the old man ended shortly thereafter, James keeping Neville only long enough to discuss some minor legal matters regarding agency and rights of attorney. Ivo shuffled in place, listening to some information from his earpiece that I was not privy to.

“Is something wrong?” I asked him. My cousin looked at me, grinning and shaking his head, placing his hands on his hips.

“The Croft woman tried to escape,” he told me. James was winding things down with the old man, so we decided to wait for him. By the time we got to Justita's temple, a rope had been tied around her neck, the same pulley system she already knew used to keep her head up and straight, while the iron bars that kept her ankles and wrists had been chained to the floor. The net effect held her up and helpless, waiting for her punishment.

“What happened?” James asked. We were in another room, looking in on her as she continued to struggle with her bondage.

“The Duchess tried to escape,” Ivo said, shrugging. “Used fork that came with food to pick the locks on cuffs, and then used that fork again to pick the lock on the door. Is very resourceful. The temple was put on lockdown, but she still injured six of my guard before she was recaptured.”

“And now?”

“Now, she will be whipped. Zamir?”

“Wait here, my friend,” I tell the Earl of Faringdon. “Make certain that we behave in a lawful way.” My cousin and I prepared to leave our dear friend, the Earl, making certain he was comfortably seated. Silently, I hoped that our land has made him strong enough to witness what must come next. As we leave, my faith is rewarded as he makes a simple single suggestion before we leave. It is a good idea, we agree, and promise him it will find use.

I uncoil a whip before walking into the small room, cracking the length as Ivo introduces me.

“Hello, your grace,” Ivo says. “This is my cousin, Zamir Pokupec. We know that you tried to escape while your ambassador was discussing your problems with your home country. He might have got you out, Miss Croft, had you not just injured another six of my people. For this you will be punished before being taken back to your cell, and then these charges will be added to the crimes you already face.”

Lara's expression becomes one of hope as she hears the lie of James' efforts on her behalf, but we can see her mind change track in those chocolate colored eyes of hers, focusing on the last sentence my cousin gave her. She is about to ask what sort of punishment when I answer her with action instead of word, my whip cutting through the air before finding a home around her hips, hugging her closer than any lover.

She screams, surprised, the whip slithering off her and back to me. The welt starts to rise on her pretty flesh, and she squeezes her eyes, writhing as much as she is able, shaking her head. I do not think she ever considered that this might happen to her even once, but it happens another two dozen times.

The whip curls around her torso, her breasts, her thighs and shoulders. I am careful with the application, each strike a *crack*, she given enough time between each to understand what is happening to her without giving her enough time to prepare for the next. It is a delicate balance. Still, she does not scream so nicely as she did with that first strike, and she bravely tries to swallow the tears and sobs that threaten to overtake her.

When I am done, more guards come and gently lay her quivering body down, help her stagger back to her cell. She is told that her food will come without cutlery from this day forward, so that she will have to eat like an animal. With her eyes glossy and expression slack, I am not certain that she understands.

“It is okay,” Ivo tells me. “She will figure it out.”

CHAPTER SIX

INEVITABLE CONVICTION

I awoke early in the morning to the sound of a polite knock upon my door. My wife muttered something beside me, curling under blankets, as did her friend on the other side of me. I sat up and smiled down at them, shushed them both back to sleep. Yawning, I stood and slipped into a house skirt, then crept quietly down the stairs as the knock repeated. It was still dark outside, and the clocks around my home informed me it was some time after three in the morning. I opened the door, unsure what to expect.

“Zamir, my brother,” the Emperor said, clasping my arm and pulling me outside. I yelped, surprised by his strength now as I had been in childhood. His voice was calm but he was hissing, his cheeks flushed, his dark eyes black as coal.

“Brother,” I said, nodding, closing the door and standing outside beside him. “What has happened?”

“The Croft woman,” he turned his head and spat, the long bristles of his mustache shaking as he stared at me. “The trial will be in one hour. Fetch whomever you think is necessary.”

He stalked away, leaving me blinking in his wake. I had no doubt as to the outcome of the trial, but there were still people to collect – Ivo, James, specialist guard. To Drasha I send note, knowing that she would want to prepare a greeting for the Duchess of Arlington once the trial was complete.

Ivo had been expecting an event such as this one, but James was bleary-eyed and irritable when we went to get him. He claimed to need tea, settling on making some and bringing it with him. We had to remind him to wear his drab English clothing rather than the garb to which he had grown accustomed. He would thank us later. It was important that he maintain his facade.

We made our way to the temple of Justita, making offerings to Bacchus and Neptune along the way, only to find the Emperor already sitting in the throne of judgment. He was dressed in deep red robes inscribed with golden designs, his legs crossed and his hands clasped on one knee, the crown of his office resting upon his brow. He had removed his scarlet cloak, folding it over one arm of his throne, looking down on us all.

The Croft woman was brought in moments after we arrived. A bucket of ice water had been thrown on her to wake her up at this strange hour and she was still sputtering and shaking, too surprised to offer resistance as the bar between her ankles was fastened to the ground and, once again, her pretty neck was encircled with rope and cinched roofward, holding her taut.

“You are a stupid girl,” the Emperor began. Lara looked about to say something, but one of the guards struck her ass with a whip, causing her to scream and writhe with what movement she was capable. “You will not speak. You will listen. If you make the attempt, you will be punished and then you will listen. I do not care if you understand, I hope you do not. I hope you interrupt me.”

He paused. My brother had wanted to try the theater as a youth, and his flair for dramatics had only increased since he had taken the throne. Lara kept her silence, her eyes roaming around the room, fixing on James, pleading for help. He shuffled in place and I wondered if he and my brother had that in common.

"I know of the British," the Emperor continued. "I know you think you are better, that you can go and steal and destroy, spread your filth. You were no better than the Soviets and fascists you fought so hard against. A case can even be made for you're being worse. We are students of history in my country. We know what you did to maintain your empire, Duchess.

"So you may think you can escape your crimes. You cannot. Here in Parmistan, you will pay for what you have done. You will be my effigy, and you have earned it. Assaulting my civilians in the Village of the Damned. Destruction of property. Assaulting officers in their duties maintaining the law. Providing falsified documentation. All of this would be bad enough...

"I am told you are a historian. I am told you know who founded this place, and what blood flows through these veins. And so here is your greatest crime, Lara Croft, Duchess of Arlington – you broke into the Village of the Damned, the final resting place of the great Emperor Caligula, and tried to steal the armor of his tomb.

"Did you think you were doing the world some sort of service? Do you think we did not know where the armor and my ancestor rested? There was a demon born of him, a literal demon that consumed him all his life. A blackness of the soul that lives on even now in his corpse. It poisons the minds of those in the Village of the Damned, driving them to madness, perversion, and horror. They know they suffer and do not attack another, only outsiders. We care for them as best we can, because the madness that infects them? It is demonic in origin. *There is no cure.*

"And you, you stupid girl, were going to spread that madness out into the world. The armor bears seeds of the demon, and so we have replaced armor inside tomb and tomb has been resealed. Caligula was brought here after death in order to seal demon. We keep seal active. We protect world. *And you nearly ruined everything.*

"You are pampered, Duchess. I see that. You are pampered and perhaps you believe in curses and perhaps you do not. I do not care. You will serve the people of Parmistan for crimes. Yes, I said serve. We do not have prisons. We do not coddle our criminals or put them out of sight. We are a small nation and our own people do not commit crimes. It is outsiders that break our laws, and we will punish you the same way we punish them.

"Lara Croft, Duchess of Arlington, I sentence you to serve as a beast of burden for five full years, the start of which will be when you have been broken in and learn your place. Your things will be kept safe until your sentence is served, at which time they will be given back to you or your guardian. Until then, what you need will be provided to you.

"Guards, you may begin preparing the lady here for the next five years of her life."

CHAPTER SEVEN

DUCHESS DRESSAGE

Lara screamed. James thrashed, putting on a good show, but we held him back easily.

“You can't do thi**ahhhhhh!**” The guard who had whipped Lara before did so again, turning her last word into a mindless expression of pain. The guard on her other side moved closer, taking out a pair of scissors and pressing them against the small of her back, cutting upwards through the shirt she wore. She tried to struggle but her bonds held her tight as that same guard cut the sleeves from her, then down her front so that the shirt we had given her fell away, exposing her.

I appraised her, certain in what was to become of her now and weighing that against her. She was a fine animal in fine shape, the muscles of her back and shoulders sleek, her long legs meant for running, jumping. This was a beast used to movement, a powerful animal, one that would be enjoyed again and again once she learned her place.

The scissors press downward, cutting into the hem of the panties she was given, and she stiffens when the cold metal presses into her cleft. As the gauzy material falls away, I see that she tenses and smiles – a chemical is applied to her body with horsehair paintbrush, everywhere from neck down, and she screams again as her hair is burned in the follicles. It is a healthier choice to make her like this, and we would do this for the hair on her head as well if I did not think that James would regret that.

Nude and denuded, a shocked and bewildered Lara's arms are wrapped in leather before her wrists are let free. It is simplicity itself for the guards to fold her arms into a square behind her back and to fasten them in place, each wrist pressed against the opposite elbow.

“I'll kill you for this~!” Lara screams. She is cursing, trying to free herself, but she shuts her mouth when she sees what is coming next – a bit gag. A guard chuckles and shakes his head before grabbing her by the tit and striking her ass with folded whip, causing her to gasp. They are used to dealing with prisoners like Lara, and have fought the harsh winters of our country: what is her strength compared to that?

The bit is worked into her mouth. She tries to force it out with her tongue, not knowing that it is designed to clasp on that muscle. She tries to free her tongue only to draw the bit further in, until the hard rubber bar rests on the corner of her lips. Her smoky voice is now robbed of words, capable only of making animal sounds: grunts, moans, and screams.

As she struggles to free her tongue, the rest of the headpiece that the bit is attached to is fitted around her lovely features. The blinders limit her vision to what is directly in front of her, and a high-necked collar is fitted under the rope, then fastened to it. Her neck is now locked stiff and in place, facing forward, and we can see her terrified eyes as she tries to comprehend what is being done to her.

One leg is tied at the knee before that ankle is released, but any freedom is short lived – the same clever pulley system that holds her neck pulls her leg up, holding her helpless and forcing all her weight on other quivering leg. She stops struggling, trying and failing to see what will be done to her. We watch with no such difficulty as a long leather boot is wrapped around her calf and thigh, the shoe portion forcing her onto the ball of her foot with a vicious high heel.

The exterior of the boot has a weighted and elongated bottom that will make walking both easier and more difficult for her. The ankle support is quite good, I am told, though the lack of movement there will keep her from making any unexpected leaps. Given what we saw she being capable of, it is important to enforce such limitations.

After the boot is secured, her leg is lowered, refastened to the ankle bar, and the same process happens with the other. With both boots in place she has gained six inches in height, and she teeters as she tries to adjust. The guards re-adjust her neck rope, helping her and holding her steady, but I do not think she would thank them if she were still capable of speech.

The corset comes next, the steel-reinforced leather wrapped around her slim midriff. I explain to James that this is to help with her training – the corset will keep her posture steady and force her to behave. Indeed, with tightening, they are able to compress her waist by two inches, taking a lot of the fight out of her as she struggles merely to breathe.

I share a look with the guard tightening the corset. She is the one that Lara gave a black eye to, so it is not surprising when she tightens the corset another inch. Lara's eyes bug out and she whines in protest, but the corset is fitted and secured. It will not go anywhere, and it will keep her on her best behavior.

The corset is part of a larger harness that cups and frames her chest, presenting her breasts in a way that is inviting to the eye while still offering support. The guards fasten other straps from her corset to her collar, forming a harness, and Lara is trying to look downward – she can feel the weight dangling below her, but not see what it is awaiting her.

A loop on the front of the corset is found, the strap dangling between her legs worked into it and pulled just tight enough for Lara to feel the two intruders that will soon have a home inside her. Both are modestly sized, but she still tries and fails to shake her head, denying this truth as they are lubed and placed at the entrance to her holes.

Carefully, both are fitted inside her. She closes her eyes when the first is worked into the slick folds of her pussy, perhaps praying to some deity, then opens her eyes wide when the other is forced into her rectum. She tries to scream, shaking, but all the guards must do is pull the strap tight to force them in and there is nothing she can do to stop them. Whimpering, begging with her eyes, she is shattered as both dildos finish their invasion.

The strap is secured to the corset, one of the guards patting the exposed skin beneath her legs, tracing the line of her hip downwards and pulling the soft flesh of her lower lips around the line that holds dildos inside her. There is nothing that Lara can do about this, and it brings a smile to the faces of we just people of glorious Parmistan to see this foreign criminal brought so low and humbled.

Process is not done, though. She is a beast, an animal to be trained, and she must be directed as an animal. The reins go through a ring at the back of her neck, six lines of three different lengths, three to a side with the twin lengths beside one another.

The first two, the shortest are fitted to either side of the rubber in her mouth, allowing anyone to guide her by pulling left or right. She tries to buck her head, but this rebellion is not unexpected. A few quick pulls settles her body, though the fear in her eyes and panicked whimpers let us know that it will take her time to accept her fate.

Ice is brought out and placed against and around her nipples. She shivers and tries to move, but there is nowhere for her to go and no movement that she is capable of. As her nipples harden, the two reins of middle length are worked into place and clamped to one nipple, then the other. Lara screams, trying to shake her head, but even that is not possible for her.

Lastly, the final two and longest of the lines fall out of Lara's sight, tickling her inner thighs. The puffy outer lips, slick with sweat and arousal, are pulled taut, the lines fastened to each of them. The reins that are attached to her nipples and labia are tested, found tight, Lara whimpering at the test as her face turns red. It is unlikely that she could ever have imagined being directed in such an intimate way, but this is her reality now.

We watch as that knowledge settles into her. She is trying not to cry.

Small bells are connected to her nipples, pulling down on those sensitive parts of her body, wavering as she moves and making a sound that we all find pleasing to the ear. Well, all of us that are human – the great Lara Croft, Duchess of Arlington, Tomb Raider, is now nothing more than a beast.

As a final touch, a small portal in the harness above her clit hood is opened. Pliers are used to expose this most sensitive part of her anatomy. She screams when a piercing gun is brought out and used on her, screams again as a small bauble is looped into her flesh. She is disinfected, the pliers removed and the portal locked back in place.

Ivo picks up a data pad, frowning as he presses his fingers to the screen. I clasp his shoulder and he shares his vision with me – the bauble is a small computer that can track her anywhere in the world, keep track of her health and well-being, and administer small shocks that can be pleasurable or painful as needed. We allow James to test the last functions and he spends some time making certain that everything works while the Tomb Raider screams, whimpers, moans, and shakes.

He notes the options for video feed and presses that button, is surprised to see options for a variety of camera angles.

“How is this possible?” James asked, impressed.

“We have small drones everywhere in our country,” Ivo explains. “They all shoot video in gorgeous 4k and upload directly to a high-speed cloud server. That bauble is charged by her body heat and will let us know where she is at all times, so we can look in on her whenever we so desire.”

James smiles and tells us that he understands.

The strap that holds her ankles in place is released, but not before a hobble rope is set to restrict her stride. She has two feet of slack with which to walk. The guards disconnect her collar from the ceiling, then help her take her first tentative steps. She stumbles, nearly falling, but I am certain she will relearn grace.

We watch, Ivo and James and I, the sway of her ass as she is led from the courthouse and over to the farm, where Drasha waits to begin the Croft woman's training.

CHAPTER EIGHT

UNDER REIN

It is quite a sight, to watch the lovely Duchess of Arlington led to a waiting cart. Another pony will pull that one – the Croft woman has yet to be trained, but it is interesting the way she so clearly struggles with both her sudden change in status and the throbbing between her legs caused by dildos that move inside her with every movement. James chuckles a little, to see the proof of her arousal dribbling down her inner thighs.

“Where are they taking her?” James asks. The woman that Lara gave a black eye to fastens her reins to the back of the cart.

“Why, to Sirgeof, of course,” Ivo responds, clasping his back with a wide grin. “To Drasha.”

“Who's Drasha?” James asks. “I'm not... it's not that I don't respect your choices, but Lara is dangerous. Willful.”

“It is being taken care of,” I tell him, looking over his head at my cousin. “If you wish to check in...?”

“No, no, I trust you,” James says. “It's just... well, could we watch? From here? Just to make certain that everything goes according to plan?”

“Yes, of course,” Ivo says. “You are like family, my dear friend. You have fought the winters with us.”

“Besides, here is the best place to watch from,” I add. “Drasha says it is important for criminals to separated from their old lives, especially in the early days, especially when they are willful.”

Ivo and myself have tasks to take care of, but watching Lara is the task of James – he is her ambassador, and what else does an ambassador do other than look in on wandering people from home? So he checks to make certain that she is treated fairly on her journey on Ivo's tablet. Ivo and I have seen such travels before, so we know what will happen: the guard will take Lara from Candover to Sirgeof, through the rugged and rocky landscape of glorious Parmistan.

A full day is required to make the journey and Lara struggles along as best she can. The hobble and boots limit her stride, but she is in excellent shape and manages to keep up with the beat the other criminal sets by his feet. Still, by the end of the day she will be glistening with sweat like any other criminal in our system, her cheeks flushed, her obedience compelled by the unwanted pleasures of sex.

She will be too tired to fight when she finally arrives at Sirgeof, a town that is more a stable. Built in 1379 as the Gregorian Calendar measures time, it is a wooden town that has seen much in the way of innovation, especially in the past few decades. The only marble in town is a fountain, where from the goddess Poena can view all that transpires in the place that was built in her honor.

It is doubtful the poor Duchess of Arlington will notice these things as she is taken to her cell – a small walled space, three foot squared with a seven foot ceiling. It is a shame, as the craftsmanship of the statue would appeal to one with her interests.

James will wonder where and how she is supposed to sleep, and will be surprised when they strap her harness to the ceiling and pull her reins straight and down, fastening them to holes in the posts of her room. This will lock her head so that she can only look down. With the blinders, she can only see what is directly in front of her. A screen is there, but it is silent for now.

Her hobble will then be fastened to the ground, and she will be left to try and sleep. Most criminals do not sleep their first few nights, not until exhaustion claims them, but this is a prison and they are criminals: they are not supposed to be comfortable.

Later, James tells me that the woman she gave a black eye to gropes her ass on the way out, and she tries to lash out but can barely move.

“I recognize the turn of her hip,” James says. “She was trying to kick him.”

We review the footage, Ivo and I, and we agree with his assessment and let Drasha know.

“Thank you,” Drasha says. We speak to her on Skype, a lovely woman with strong shoulders and a crooked smile. “I had heard that she might be one of the willful ones. That's why she's not eating tonight, to help break her in, to help her understand her place.”

“Excellent,” I say. “Now, about the other thing?”

“Your gift?” Drasha asks, and her smile widens as she looks at our dear friend. James looks confused, so Drasha explains it to him as Ivo and I beam and clasp our dear friend on the back. “An animal needs to be owned, and your friends have seen to it that the owner of this Croft woman is you, James Berners. As such, she must be marked with your sign. A brand or a tattoo on her ass or flank.”

“Ass,” James says, flustered. He looks at the two of us, then back at the screen. He swallows as he sees another picture of Lara Croft helpless in her cell, her ass facing us. Her hips are one of the few things she can move, and they circle as Lara tries and fails to make herself comfortable. “I don't want her to see it until I want her to.”

“That will not be a problem.” Drasha nods, wishes us well, and leaves.

“Women are best at training women,” Ivo says. “And Drasha is best at training everyone.”

“Your Lara may be willful,” I tell my dear friend, “but in a contest of wills Drasha will always win.”

We stay to watch what happens next. It is morning when a bleary eyed Lara Croft is unstrapped from the ceiling and left to stand on unsteady feet. Her reins and hobble are untied from their posts, and Lara is led out of her cell, then stumbling down a long hallway to the outside runnings of Sirgeof.

Her typical grace has been stymied somewhat by her bondage and exhaustion, but the sway of her hips and her exposed flesh is still enticing to the eye. I can see how taken my dear friend is with the woman that now belongs to him.

She is taken out further, into an enclosed area by Drasha, who uses Lara's reins to pull her over to a post, then bends her over at the waist. Lara wails and protests as best she is able with her tongue trapped by the bit, the dildos in her ass and cunt pushed deeper inside her glistening sex as she is bent at a ninety degree angle.

A post is placed underneath her neck and her collar is fastened to it, her hobble then tied to the post. Lara is now helplessly bent over, but is still struggling to find some way to free herself. She does not know what is coming next – *how can she?* – but she is scared, and the animal sounds she make are proof of that.

“Hello, Lara,” Drasha says. She walks around the Tomb Raider, letting her nails trace the edges of the bound woman's haunches, spine, shoulder, neck, and cheeks. She pulls up a chair and sits in front of the Duchess of Arlington, yanking her head up by the hair with one hand so that they can look one another in the eye. “My name is Drasha, and I am the last person that will call you by your name for quite some time.

“You probably have many questions, and I will answer some of them. This is not to say that you will be given a chance to speak, as those days are either behind you or in front of you. I will merely tell you the realities of your life now, Lara Croft, and I recommend that you listen. I will not repeat myself.

“I look into your eyes and I see a fierce intelligence and strong will. It would take such to come to our country, to break into the Village of the Damned, to commit the crimes that you have been found guilty of. So, Lara, let us be clear right from the start: I respect your intelligence and your will, but I will still break both.

“First, you must understand that I control all the things that you do. I will train you to walk, I will train you to eat. You will shit and piss when I will it. You will sleep when I decide you have earned it. You are a criminal, Lara Croft, and you will be treated as such.

“You will be whipped to help correct your mistakes when your training begins, and I will whip you. You will be rewarded when I feel you have accomplished something with a quality that I deem adequate, like so.”

As she explains, she lifts up a small remote and pushes a button. The dildos in Lara's lower holes come to life, massaging her aching muscles, and we watch as Lara's resolve melts in her panting, eyes glazing over. Drasha yanks her head up and pushes another button and Lara screams, her body going taut and writhing, her eyes sharp and wide and tearing.

“You will be punished for your defiance,” Drasha says, releasing the button. “That is but a taste. Eventually, when I deem you worthy, you will be given a new name. Your owner has chosen Duchess, but that is a present you must earn. For now, you will be assigned three numbers, three different numbers every day. If you respond to Lara or a previous number, you will be punished. I would ask if you understand, but understanding is secondary to obedience, Lara.”

Lara nods her head, wary and weary, and is punished for doing so. She tries to scream, tries to kick, tries to free herself as Drasha holds her head with one hand and the button with the other, shocking Lara in her most sensitive places until we think she must pass out. Only then does Drasha release the button.

"I told you, one-nine-six, that you are not to respond to your old names or numbers," Drasha says. The sounds Lara tries to make might be some attempt at a simpering apology, but Drasha and the rest of us know such sounds are meaningless. There is only right and wrong behavior, and the latter is to be punished. "You are a smart one, Lara. Let your mind focus on the training to come and the numbers that are your name."

Lara shivers but does not respond. Instead, she sags in her bondage, coated in sweat and still twitching, her head hanging limp. Drasha smiles, ruffling the suffering woman's hair.

"There is one last thing, one-nine-six," Drasha says cupping the Tomb Raider's cheek and patting it playfully. "You are an animal, a piece of living property, and you must be branded as such."

Lara's eyes go wide at this and she tries to struggle again. Drasha lets her – it is important that the Duchess of Arlington learn that she has no choice in this or anything else now. It is only when she is exhausted that Drasha claims the branding iron from a nearby fire.

It is a small brand, barely a square inch, made in the house coat of Faringdon. Ivo is proud to have found the coat-of-arms and James laughs to see it. I do not think he fully believes that the Croft woman is now his until the brand is applied to her pristine backside, until Lara screams and screams and sags when the brand is removed.

A healing salve is then applied to Lara's new decoration, and finally the shattered and sobbing animal is led back to her cell and properly settled therein.

"There, there," Drasha coos, brushing Lara's hair in a soothing manner. "We'll let that heal for a few days, take that time to teach you how to eat and drink. Then your training. And, remember, when you have pleased me with your training, your sentence will begin."

Drasha leaves her, then, and Lara's shoulders slump as she tries to curl into herself to cry.

CHAPTER NINE

EARLY TRAINING

The next weeks they were full of entertainment for my dear friend, and of many great learnings for Lara Croft. As predicted, the Croft woman proved to be a fighter. The reality of her circumstance and the branding had shaken her, but she recovered much of her spirit in the time she was left to heal.

“She's smart,” James told us, me and Ivo and Drasha. “You need to watch her. If you give her any chance to escape, she'll take it.”

Drasha just smiled and nodded her head, and we smiled with her. How could we not? We knew that there would be no such chance, not now or ever, and as the weeks they progressed Lara's mind was claimed by what was being done to her. The old freedoms meant nothing in the face of the reality she lived.

Every morning, Drasha would come to her and bring her out of her stable. She would then smile and write three digits on the Tomb Raider's forehead with a marker, and tell Lara what they were.

“Your name, it is Zero-Three-Nine today,” Drasha would tell her. There would be three new numbers every day. Any response Lara made to another name or to a different set of numbers would see her punished. Soon, we could see Lara struggling with the numbers, trying to remember them from one day to the next – Seven-Seven-Two, Five-Zero-Eight, Eight-Seven-Three. Drasha would tease her with her old name or old numbers when she was tired, looking for any chance to punish her, and after the punishment had been applied Lara's lessons would continue.

The first lessons were the easiest ones, but also the most important for Lara's new life. She was taught how to eat with the bit trapping her tongue, how a feed bag could be attached to her jaw. By raising her head, she could get chunks of a special grain into her mouth, which she could chew and then swallow. The mixture was dry tasting, not unpleasant but very dull. These grains were genetically modified, containing all of the vitamins and nutrients that she would ever need. It also gave her the benefit of not needing to void her bowels often, though the means of doing that was a lesson, too.

Three times a day, Drasha would remove the plugs in Lara's holes and allow her to empty herself. Lara was forced to perform in public, and at first we could see her blushing furiously, fighting her natural impulses. All her life, she had been taught to behave like a civilized woman, but such teachings were meaningless and counter-intuitive to the animal that she now was. Lara had tried to resist at first, hoping to hold onto some scrap of dignity, but Drasha was fierce with her whip and soon a weary Lara had given up, and given in, and would empty herself as instructed.

After her first and last voidings, Lara would be taken to a special place for cleaning. Her harness would be used to lock her in place, connections to neck and shoulders holding her torso, her ankles strapped to the ground and spread so that none of her was hidden. Her bindings would be worked loose and off, her arms caught and stretched far to either side. Only once all this was done would the very naked woman be scrubbed roughly by stable hands. Lathered to a soapy mess, she would then be rinsed off via hose, left sputtering but cleaned til sparkling.

Chemicals had been applied to her body everywhere below the neck that would kill of all offending hair on a permanent basis. James had made a request for this, asking only that the hair on her head be left alone. Ivo had been happy to pass on these wishes, Drasha happy to apply them. The result was itchy skin, but Lara did not know that this was anything other than the soap that was used to clean her. Drasha believed her mind would be gone by the time she might have noticed, and she and Ivo struck a wager over this possible awareness. A week of the application ensured Lara would never grow hair below her neck ever again.

Sometimes, when the bit was removed from her mouth, she would try to speak. Such efforts were met by a whipping, then proper punishment once she was redressed and before her lessons began.

“It is important you understand this thing,” Drasha would say, brushing the whip along Lara's cheeks. Their eyes would meet because Drasha would force such while pinching Lara's nipple. “Animals do not speak. I know you would like to say you are sorry, but animals do not apologize. They are corrected, and then their training continues.”

Drasha was liberal in her application of the whip. Lara learned to respond to the reins, turning this way or that, stopping upon command. Her normal grace was stymied by her limited vision and the boots at first, but as she became accustomed to the weight and arch her movements took on a languid quality that I could see my friend enjoying.

Yet, that was not enough for Drasha.

“There is a way that animals such as yourself are expected to walk,” Drasha told Lara. “You will learn it.” And so Lara learned to bring her thighs up to a ninety degree angle from her torso with every step, her calves expected to do the same. Drasha's whip flicked out, dancing along Lara's ass and thighs with every infraction. Where James or Ivo or myself found perfection, Drasha found adequate effort. Her praises for Lara were few, but when they did come they were often accompanied by a sugar cube.

It was fascinating, to watch Lara's eyes flicker with gratitude at that gift, and then the self-hatred that would inevitably follow.

And so Lara learned to cantor, to trot, to jump and preen. The stablehands attached a cart to her hips and repurposed her hands from behind her to the poles connecting her to the cart, so that she could better lift and move the weight behind her. Drasha used the reins and the whip to keep Lara's attention on her paces around the tracks.

This was her life now. Early morning feeding, voiding, cleaning. Five hours of movement directed by Drasha, unable to see anything save what was directly in front of her, learning to trust her trainer. Lunch, voiding.

Another five hours of lessons and learning, movement, all directed by Drasha. Late evening feeding, voiding, cleaning. Locked in her stable to await morning, her head locked and bowed and facing the monitor below her.

Every lesson Lara endured was caught on video. The videos were then shown to her in the stable. Earplugs were fitted into her ears, whispering softly that she was a good animal when she listened, and spiking loudly whenever she was bad. In this way, even sleep was made a reward for the former Tomb Raider. The more tired she became, the more she struggled to be good so that she could sleep and not make as many mistakes the next day.

During the animal's second week of training, one of the stablehand's fingers lingered on Lara's flesh. I was surprised it had taken that long. Lara looked outraged as the man fingered her dripping cunt, massaged her breast and hips, pulled back her chin and licked her throat. Soon, all of the stablehands were touching her, spanking her firm buttocks, knuckles against her vaginal cleft. Lara kicked and spit and struggled, but Drasha would whip her for her efforts, let them play with her, and then punish her once they were done.

"You are an animal, Nine-Seven-Zero," Drasha explained to the gasping Tomb Raider. "You are to be used as your owners see fit. Perhaps I can help you with this lesson?"

Drasha had Lara locked on her knees, but had Lara's bit removed. Stripping off her own pants, she slathered herself in honey and forced the Tomb Raider's face into her crotch. Lara resisted at first, but the offering of honey was too much for the taste-deprived woman, and soon she was licking Drasha clean. Her trainer smiled, wiping her cum on Lara's lovely face.

"Leave it," she told the stablehands. "Add your own markings, then dress her. Perhaps the next time you toy with her before cleaning, she will behave herself."

Three weeks of this treatment passed before Lara submitted to the casual touchings without flinching, but her eyes, oh, her eyes were still alight with helpless fury.

James watched, entranced, as the stablehands then took it one step further. There were five of them, and every morning they would strip the former Duchess of Arlington and mount her, then decorate her with their seed. When she accepted their affections, they cleaned her and sent her to her lessons. If she showed any sign of defiance, they would send her to her lessons marked, and Drasha would punish her before her lessons began.

All of this treatment became routine, and within three months Lara had finally grown to accept it.

"It will not be much longer now," Drasha cooed, brushing the helpless girl's hair as her tongue worked its way around Drasha's core. Their eyes met, Lara unable to look away from the woman that had almost tamed her. "Very soon your training will be complete, and then the five years of your sentence will begin."

Drasha stiffened, then, as Lara brought her to orgasm.

Then, smiling, Drasha dressed herself and took the Tomb Raider out for another day of lessons.

CHAPTER TEN

FAILED STAND

It was a day like any other. The sun rose over our glorious mountain nation, and I spent the morning in the garden with my wife, my children doing their best to learn how to cook. I showed them how to cook a hearty stew, then set some of it aside and walked to my dear friend's home, knocking on the front door. He opened with bleary eyes, shaking his head to clear it as I clasped him on the back.

"James, my dear friend," I said, stepping inside his home. "It has been days since I saw you last. My wife, she worries. I tell her you are busy, but she worries all the same." I hand him the stew and he takes it, staring.

"She is right to worry," he says, smiling as he clasps me on the back. "Let me make you some coffee, my friend, and then I will make you lunch."

"Make it dinner, instead." He nods at my request and we walk to his kitchen. He sits and eats and I watch him carefully. "What has captured your attention?"

"My former fiancée," he admits. He's got his own tablet set to tracking her. We watch as she is taken for her midday lunch and voiding, her ass slapped by the man watching over her.

"It appears that Drasha's training has taken hold," I say.

"We'll see," James shrugs.

Sure enough, we catch sight of her eyes, the bauble on her clit letting us know of her deep breath and sudden spike of adrenaline. The stablehand does not see the kick coming, but Lara is already running as he doubles over – it appears that she has spent months learning how to move in her bonds simply so she might try to escape the justice that has claimed her.

James is worried but I cannot help but scoff. Where does she think to run to? Her actions will only annoy Drasha, and there are few people in Parmistan whose annoyance might be scarier.

Sure enough, we watch as Drasha sighs and finishes her meal, directing the stablehands to keep her moving. The gates Lara might use to escape they are all closed. It is only when she is done that Drasha brushes a napkin against her lips and stands, stretches, takes a sip of water and steps forward.

Her smile is crooked and cruel, she snapping her fingers and waving the stablehands back. She does not run, her pace at leisure as she moves in the direction of the Croft woman. Lara runs and Drasha follows, follows, letting Lara wear herself down. There is fear in Lara's eyes, James says, and he sounds impressed as Drasha gets closer.

"Come along, Nine-Six-Five," she coos. "That is enough of that."

Lara cannot shake her head, but her whole torso twists as she whines and stamps her foot.

“You seek freedom, Lara?” Drasha asks, her eyes narrowing. “Very well. If you can get by me-”

Lara is off like bullet from gun, running as fast as she can. Drasha moves to tackle her but Lara's knee comes up at a ninety degree angle and hits Drasha in the face and both I and James wince, though I think perhaps for different reasons.

James feels sympathy for Drasha. I am anxious for the woman who has struck Drasha.

The criminal is running again but her motions are slower, her breathing labored. Drasha stands and brushes blood from her nose, her eyes narrowing as her crooked smile widens. She stalks Lara like a predator, the formerly fearless Tomb Raider scared and running.

It is slow going, but Lara is tiring herself out. There is no place for her to run and no way for her to escape, not so long as the bindings hold. She puts on a merry chase but in the end Drasha grabs her by the hair and yanks her backwards, slaps her tits hard enough to knock Lara to the ground. She lands on her ass and Drasha presses her foot into Lara's throat, forcing her down on her back and spitting in her eyes.

“You have tried to escape,” Drasha seethes, tapping Lara's jawline with her foot. “You have thought to trick your betters, attack your betters. You will answer for these crimes.”

She calls the stablehands forward, removes her foot from Lara's collar and kicks her hip, flipping her over onto her stomach. The stablehands fit a metal bracket around Lara's neck and Drasha nails it into the ground as the former Tomb Raider thrashes.

“What are they doing to her?” James asks. I shrug – how is one to know the mind of Drasha? There are some things a sane man should not question.

Drasha has the stablehands push Lara's ankles up under her until her knees are bent ninety degrees, then she treats each knee and ankle as she has treated the criminal's neck. The end result is that Lara is locked in place with her ass in the air, her lower holes now high than her head, she exposed and helpless. Drasha pulls aside her lowest lips, pushing a knuckle against the bauble situated against her clit as she looks back at the stablehands.

“You will each fuck her three times a day,” Drasha commands. “Before breakfast, before lunch, and any time after dinner. You will not clean her – leave her for vermin, but set up some small heaters around her. Do this for me now.”

They do. The fucking it is first, they taking liberal advantage of her holes. The males take their cocks out of her and spread their seed on her back, ass, and head. The females get double-sided dildos, dribbling their pussy juice all over the helpless Tomb Raider after they cum.

Drasha sets up a chair, glaring down at Lara the whole time.

When they are finished, she stands and saunters closer to the former Duchess, kneeling down and pulling up Lara's by the hair so that she can look into Lara's eyes.

“Are you ready to behave?” Drasha asks.

Lara's whine could mean anything.

"I do not believe you," Drasha says, dropping the criminal as she stands, then turns on her heel and stalking away.

"Are they really going to leave her there?" James asks, looking up at me. I shrug.

"We will check at dinner time."

He has a shower, dresses properly and returns to the kitchen. He prepares a dinner for my family and we talk about things that are not Lara, about the coming winter and the preparations for it. We walk through a summer night tinged with the edge of an autumn chill and James smiles and laughs along with my family as we all enjoy the proof of his labor, then settle in to watch what has become of the criminal.

The space heaters are set up after Lara's evening fucking, the goo on her skin and hair caking. The heaters are not pointed at her but instead around her, a circle of warm air that wafts in her direction as evening's chill settles in around her.

"Clever," my wife notes. "She'll be able to feel slivers of heat without being able to get warm."

Twilight and then evening insects gather, biting her as she shakes and moans, unable to dislodge them. Drasha herself comes out and whips the insects away, long lines of leather slapping at the cum coated woman at her feet. She then sets up a needle and bag – intravenous feedings for the criminal, we guess, and our guesses they are confirmed by the bauble.

James sleeps in our home and we check in on Lara again at breakfast. I show him how to set up his tablet so that he receives alerts from her location, the bauble on her clit letting us know when she is fucked and fed. James watches as the blanket of cum upon her thickens, sickens until even the insects want nothing to do with her.

She cowers at every sound around her, from the footsteps of the stablehands to the buzzing of insects, her muscles straining from the horrible position that Drasha has left her in. She whimpers and she cries, shaking as the autumn's chill cuts to her marrow, the only warmth offered ejaculated onto her flesh.

Drasha comes to her every day after her midday and evening fuckings and asks her if she is ready to behave. Lara's whines weaken, but they could still mean anything. After a solid week of such treatment the aching Tomb Raider makes no sound, and it is then that things change for the criminal.

"Are you ready to behave?" Drasha asks, hands on her hips.

The stinking creature at her feet says nothing.

Drasha calls the stablehands to her, has them pry the brackets out of the earth and lead the cum-soaked woman to the cleaning bars. There, we watch the pathetic gratitude that enters Lara's eyes when Drasha sprays her with warm water, cleaning the goo from her skin.

She offers no resistance when Drasha finally replaces the dildos and locks them in place before resetting the reins and leading Lara back to her cell. She is locked in for the night, facing the video screen as Drasha sets the earbuds in.

The footage is similar to what she and James and I remember, but Drasha has spliced in footage of Lara's latest ordeal, whispers admonishing her for her behavior assaulting her exhausted mind reminding her that this could happen again if she is to misbehave.

James does not think that she will, and I agree with him.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

SIGNING PRIVILEGE

"I need you to do this for me," James told us.

He and I were eating dinner with Drasha, and she frowned over my wife's delicious cooking. Not at the food, but at his words. She reassured my wife that her cooking had nothing to do with her expression, even asked for a second helping to drive the point home. The rest of us quickly followed her lead, basking in Drasha's wisdom – I often thought that my wife's cooking was some of the greatest in all of Parmistan, a culinary sorcery that I could never hope to match.

"This is not wise," Drasha said, pausing to chew and swallow. She pointed a fork at the Earl of Faringdon. "It is a difficult time for her."

"Which is why it has to be now," James said. He looked around for something none of us could guess at, his eyes glazed by some fever. Drasha looked over at me, but I did not know my dear friend's plan, only that I had learned to trust him from one winter to the next.

"I believe you should do this thing," I said.

"You really should," James added.

Reluctantly, Drasha agreed.

And so it was that the Croft woman's routine was broken. We watched on the cameras as she was taken from her stable, but today the stablehands did not molest her, only letting her void herself before they stripped her naked and cleaned her. Her flesh was tanned from a long summer that was fading into autumn. Still, the exercise had toned her already fine muscles and she looked lovely, even if she was covered in stripes, some fading and some fresh. She did not struggle when they dressed her in the orange clothing of a British prisoner, but her head remained bowed and her shoulders stayed slumped. It was a shame; her fine elegant features were untouched by the markings that covered the rest of her.

The clothing she now wore was something James had given to me, a recent gift sent to Parmistan for this very moment. A gift, James had said, from an old friend of his and a colleague of Lara's, a woman named Steph Missing.

Lara frowned but did not resist as they led her not to the track but rather indoors, to a room she had never seen before. We could see the curve of her lips, a frown of incomprehension touching her face as she looked first down at her clothing and then the rest of the room. It was a sparse place, a ten foot cube with two chairs and one table. Something touched her then, recognition entering her eyes, somewhat of her old self coming forward through the fog of her lessons. We could see a glimmer of light enter the dull gloss her eyes had become.

She did not struggle as she was forced into a chair, her legs fastened to the floor, her hands bound by the wrists in front of her with a short chain giving her some small movement. She was then fastened to the chair by belts across her waist and along her shoulders, forced to sit straight.

After that she was left to wait. An hour passed. Two. James entered just before the third hour, when Lara was beginning to look around the room, when the expression on her face had retreated back towards dull compliance.

“What did you do, Lara?” James demanded. Lara looked up at him, shocked and about to answer, but he cut her off by slamming some official looking documents on the table. “Do you know what these are?”

Drasha looked at me. She did not know what they were.

I shrugged and folded my arms over my chest. Neither did I.

Lara tried to speak, but her voice was a rasping mess, her tongue used to licking and unused to forming words. I watched from outside the small room as James pretended not to notice.

“This was your release,” James continued. The expression on Lara's face in that moment was ecstatic – a light coming to her features, a gratitude that would have been pathetic had it not been so sincere. “Don't look so happy. You ruined everything.”

Lara blinked, staring, not understanding.

“When you attacked the guards, all these papers became null and void.” James threw them against the wall, pacing in front of the bound woman. He finally sat down in the empty chair in front of her and buried his head in his hands. “I know I'm not the man you wanted, Lara, but I needed you to trust me. I nearly had you free, and now I have to start all over again...”

Lara stared, then started to cry. He looked up at her, stood up and walked over to her, hugged her and stroked her hair... but did not undo any of her bonds.

“It's going to be okay, Lara,” he lied. “There might still be a way out of this.”

She sniffled and he cleaned her face, a small and intimate moment. Both Drasha and I looked away from them, giving my dear friend this moment of privacy.

“C-can,” Lara struggled to form the words. “C-can y-you un...” she trailed off, but pulled at her bonds. James shook his head.

“I can't,” James answered. “They'd lock me up, the same way they have you. I've done everything I can to free you from here, but there might be more I can do at home. Can you not ruffle anymore feathers until I get back?”

Lara frowned, but sighed and looked away from him and nodded her head as much as she was able. Her eyes glistened with tears. Again, my gentle friend dabbed her cheeks with a cloth, so careful in this small action.

“There's one more thing I need,” James said. He looked around the room, found what he was looking for. A folder had been mixed in with the other papers and he retrieved it, took another paper from outside of its folds.

"I'm going to be acting on your behalf back in Britain, Lara, and in order to do that I'm going to need power of attorney."

She frowned at that and so did I. What was my dear friend doing? Lara tried to ask a question, but her words melted in her mouth and dripped off her tongue, nonsense sounds that James pretended to understand.

"I need to prove to people I'm speaking on your behalf," James told her. "I've done everything I can here, but with power of attorney I can call on your resources as well as my own. I might be able to get you out of here for the spring, if I leave now and avoid getting trapped here by winter."

A half hour passed before Lara was ready to sign. James put the pen in her hand and she frowned at it. They used other papers, the two of them, until Lara's handwriting looked like her own again. Only then did James have her sign the contract. Then, for good measure, James took a thumbprint before taking both pen and paper from her.

"I'm so sorry this is happening to you, Lara," James said. She looked up at him, hope shining in her eyes. "Stay strong. I'll be back for you as soon as I'm able."

He walked out of the room, then, and down the hall to where Drasha and I were waiting.

"She responded to her own name four times," James told Drasha, his voice cold. "Go and teach her that her name does not belong to her." Drasha offered him a wicked smile before she sauntered out the door, her stablehands waiting for her, but I could only look at my dear friend and wonder what he was thinking.

"Are you truly going to try and free her?" I asked. "What were those papers?"

"Except for the contract she signed? Random things I printed off the internet," my dear friend answered. "She's a criminal, Zamir, and I intend to let her suffer the punishment that she deserves."

"You are not leaving?"

"Winter is coming, my friend," he said, clasping me on the back. "I would not abandon the country of my soul, even if my aid is a small thing in comparison to your own might."

"Then why the charade?"

"I wanted her to sign this," he said, holding up the piece of paper, the power of attorney. "I need you to sign, here and here."

I did as he requested, and he did a little jig around the room, giggling the whole time.

"Do you understand what I've done?" he asked. I shook my head. "I now have access to all her bank accounts. Her holdings and properties. You gave me her body because of the crimes she committed, my dear friend, but now I've taken everything else. All her money. Her home. Everything she was. Even if she does escape, she has nothing to go back to."

"And you have made her think that all she has to do is wait to be set free," I breathed, looking at my friend in awe. I clasped him on the back, impressed by his ingenuity. "She will stop fighting, believing that you are going to rescue her."

“Not only that,” James sniggered, “she now believes that she would be free already if she hadn't tried to escape. She's going to blame herself for everything Drasha does to her.”

Lara's screams echoed down the hallway, proof that Drasha was reminding the Croft woman that she did not own her name – and now that James had enacted his plan, she would not own anything at all.

CHAPTER TWELVE

VOICE INTERLUDE

"Please, sit."

The words were in heavily accented Japanese, but Sam understood them perfectly. Himiko was not the desiccated corpse she had been on Yamatai, not here – here she was beautiful, serene, as she must have been in life. She was kneeling before a table, dressed in a red kimono with white trim with her shining black hair hanging loose, a small smile partially concealed by the tea cup she held. Another cup of tea sat opposite her, clearly meant for Sam.

"Where are we?" Sam asked. The only thing she could see was the table, the tea, and Himiko. All else around them was darkness, an endless darkness that spread out into infinity. The light that draped down around the table had no source, the ground beneath her feet lacked all definition.

"It pleases us to be in our mind, Nishimura-chan," Himiko said. "Sit, please. Let us be civil."

"Get out of my head," Sam said, backing away. She looked around, wondering if there was some place to run – if this was a hallucination, or a dream of some kind, she might be able to control it-

"We can hear you thinking," Himiko said. Her tone was even. She set the tea cup down and folded her hands in her lap, demure and controlled. "You are clever, but your sort of cleverness is a quality we have encountered and overcome in the past."

"Why are you speaking like that?" Sam swallowed. She could feel a subtle push, her feet moving closer to the table.

"We have studied your mind at length," Himiko said, refilling her tea. "We understand the cultures and manners of your time, and have since influenced your decisions."

"Then why are we having this conversation?"

"The troubles we encountered so long ago have corrupted the ritual." Himiko paused, allowing Sam to sit. She struggled against those subtle pushes but found herself trapped. Himiko frowned. "It is not so simple as it once was."

"Meaning you can't," Sam whispered, staring at the ancient woman, the sorcerer who had thought herself a god.

"Foolish child," Himiko smiled, small and sad. "We could force the issue, but there is a chance this could corrupt the ritual further. With you, Nishimura-chan, there must be a choice. We have studied you. So long as hope exists within you, your choice will be contrary to our best interests."

"Lara knows," Sam said. "She will save me from you."

"I rather doubt that," Himiko said.

... around them, the blackness changed. The world became color around the two of them, giant projections of the times they had known – their chance meeting, the times Sam had talked Lara into leaving her dusty old books for the light and sound of the clubs, the flashing light and throbbing base – Lara's hands, warm in her own, fingers entwined and then dancing along her back, lips meeting in the rain...

"Miss Croft is experiencing certain... difficulties," Himiko said. The world around them faded back into blackness and silence, and Sam shuddered at the sudden loss of sensation, the taste of Lara Croft, the shy blush of her.

"How could you know that?" Sam spat.

"Even trapped within you, some of our power can influence the world," Himiko answered. "We can hear every living breath, focus on the whispers carried by the winds. We have used this in times past to listen to our enemies and far off empires. Your Miss Croft is an exceptional woman, and one whose voice I listen for."

Sam licked her lips. She knew that Himiko was speaking the truth.

"Where is she?"

"Croft-jukeisha is now in a country called Parmistan, in a range of mountains called the Hindu Kush," Himiko answered. "She was looking for treasure." Sam mouthed the suffix -jukeisha, trying to remember the meaning.

It came her to at once: convict.

"Yes, Croft-jukeisha will not be coming for you," Himiko said. "She has troubles of her own."

... and around them the world exploded, not in vision but in sound: Sam could hear the sentence Lara had been dealt, her her cries and screams, the crack of the whip, the orders of a sadist named Drasha and the betrayal of James Berners, the Earl of Faringdon, the trick he had used to take everything from Lara Croft...

And then, silence.

Sam had huddled over herself, weeping. A hand brushed through her hair.

"She has nothing," Himiko explained. "You have nothing. No hope, not escape. Your British royalty has abandoned her and left her to her fate, embarrassed by her excesses in their post-colonial fatigue. The days of exploration are done with, the days of raiding tombs taken from her. She will not save you, and no one else could. Sleep, child, and let me have this body. Wash away your pain with the peace of oblivion."

"No," Sam said. "No, no, no..."

"What else is there for you?" Himiko asked. Sam pushed herself back up, knocking the woman's hand away. "Trust us to do what is best..."

"You're not using the royal we, are you?" Sam said. Himiko paused, her smile growing. "You couldn't care less about British etiquette. You're speaking for us. Both of us."

"So what if I am? What difference does that make?"

"It gives you leverage, but I still have to let you out," Sam said, thinking furiously. "You have some control, but if you could have everything you would have by now."

“You see the shape of our mind,” Himiko said, nodding. “Do you know what must happen now?”

“I do,” Sam said, meeting Himiko's eyes. “And I accept your offer.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE GREAT ESCAPE

It happened while she was being cleaned.

Our dear friend James had warned us that the Croft woman was dangerous and resourceful and Drasha had noted her cleverness, but after a month of dull compliance we all thought her broken and our dear Earl of Faringdon perhaps paranoid. Drasha herself was paying her monthly tithe to the goddess Poena at the western tip of Sirgeof and so was not present when it happened.

Would things have turned out differently, had she been there? Ivo and Drasha both like to think that such mistakes would not have been made, but I had seen the woman fight on the mountains and break into the Village of the Damned and James had known the Duchess of Arlingdon back in her old life. Neither of us was so sure.

The stablehands had taken Lara out of her stable and past her morning voiding and then over to the cleaning posts. She did not fight them as they locked her harness in place, neck and shoulders connected to sturdy wood, ankles fastened to the ground. It was a lovely sunrise heading in towards midsummer, with dew becoming mist, all of glorious Parmistan painted in light, and the mostly naked woman shivered in the slight chill of dawning.

Her limbs were tied and spread carefully, pulled taut before the harness was taken off her, the bit worked loose from her tongue. Her body, tanned darkly by the summer sun, shook as the stablehands used long handled brushes to soak every part of her with suds, her jaw slack and open, her lovely body helpless as they cleaned out every crack and crevice.

This is where it happened, we found in later review.

Using the suds, Lara was able to free her ankles and wrists, using her splayed fingers to give the lines that were supposed to be holding her the illusion of doing so. After the stablehands rinsed her, leaving her sputtering but sparkling in the early sun, they came closer to rebind her harness and prepare her for her daily lessons.

This is when she struck, pulling her limbs free. Her neck was still bound, but she lashed out quickly, her leg kicking out and fracturing one man's knee, her knee connecting with that man's face as he fell. She grabbed another, swung out and slammed his face into a wooden post, then worked her neck free as the others came for her.

Once unbound, she offered them a cruel smile and then made short work of them. None of them thought or had time to sound the alarm, so she had minutes where she was left alone to flee, and her long months of being dragged through the trails of Sirgeof had given her a good understanding of the city in which she was a lawful prisoner.

Looking back, Ivo discovered that she had been testing her bonds for weeks, under the guise of the normal writhing that came about with each cleansing.

Ivo, of course, alerted me right away, sending soldiers out to catch her and bring her back. I alerted James, who came into the Temple of Justita wringing his hands with worry.

"I knew this would happen," he said, voice hoarse. "Do we know where she is?"

Ivo looked at me, grinning and shaking his head as he clasped our friend on the shoulder.

Of course we knew. The bauble told us everything, and Lara had not thought to remove it.

We had expected her to make her way back to Routard and from there to Candover, but the Tomb Raider had opted instead to head through the lesser roads, ones she did not know by person but might remember from her old and now confiscated maps. A small farming community, Karouse, lay there, and we believed that was where she would try to find refuge. The locals had been contacted and all were willing to help catch the escaped criminal, so when Lara Croft was spotted by one of the farmers, he was ready.

"Hello?" Slobodan said. He was a bulky man, slow of foot but strong of arm, a man who cultivated apples, wheat, barley, and corn. She turned in his direction, nigh-feral and easily spooked, the trauma of her experiences casting a fell shine in her eyes. "Are you lost?" His English was passable.

"Help," Lara croaked. After weeks of disuse, her smoky voice was ragged. Once so cultured, she now struggled with that single syllable. Slobodan lifted his hands and kept distant, his movements slow as he tossed her clothing. She accepted it gratefully, a pair of used pants and a shirt that did little to cover her, and her expression was conflicted as she put them on.

"It can be strange to wear human clothes after a long absence," Ivo noted, James looking mystified at her reluctance. "We see it often in criminals, once they have served their full terms."

She devoured apples off the tree, refusing Slobodan's offers of more sophisticated foods. James told us she would expect poison, but we knew Slobodan would never stoop to ruining food – no farmer would ever so denigrate his or her labor. No, it was when Lara found a stream and dipped her hand in that Slobodan acted, shoving the cattle prod into the water and activating it.

With his hands safely hidden in rubbered gloves, he was fine. Lara, however... her eyes went wide as her scream was trapped in her throat. She was flung back, where she hit a tree and twitched, her body struggling to move as Slobodan closed the distance between them, zapping her with the cattle prod – twice in each armpit, then her hips and knees, and finally the back of her neck. Her writhing became less controlled, her whimperings softer but more desperate as the electricity robbed her of control.

A good half hour passed, Slobodan making certain she was unable to move under her own power. Then, using stiff rope, he bound her arms behind her back and pulled them against her throat, then bound calf to thigh. More rope was thrown over a mighty juniper tree, the lines attached to the rope around her wrists, ankles, and neck, then hoisted up.

She was just regaining the use of her limbs when Slobodan pulled her up, fastening the ropes so that she was left suspended. He looked up, then, spotting a camera and asked for permission in our language. His accent was strong, and it was clear that James was struggling to understand. Ivo and I looked at our dear friend.

"You are her lawful owner," I explained. "Do you mind if Slobodan takes a reward?"

"Fuck her," James snarled, and I clasped his shoulder, squeezing. This was the right choice.

The clothing was cut from her shapely bottom, and she struggled as Slobodan mounted her, cried out as he thrust into her, her head sagging and sweat mixing with her tears. She did not notice when Drasha and the soldiers approached, but Slobodan did, waving at his countrymen and then slapping the criminal's ass as he pushed his manhood into it.

"You have done a great service for glorious Parmistan this day," Drasha said, smiling as she rested one hand on her hip, and used the other to grasp the mewling Tomb Raider's hair, yanking her head up. Lara cried out as she recognized her trainer, her ragged voice turning to a terrified whining that all present ignored. "Will you require a reward?"

"I would like permission to aid in this criminal's training, if it would please her owner," Slobodan gasped, pulling himself out of her and spilling his seed on her roundness. "She is tight, and pleasurable, and pleasing to the eye. I would like to do my duty to the glories of our great country."

"Granted," James spat. Ivo relayed the information.

Once Slobodan was finished, Drasha spent a few hours shocking the bound woman with the cattle prod before letting her down. Lara Croft twitched without control or conscious thought, her eyes empty as they let her fall, but she continued to whimper as she was stripped and then redressed properly.

"As for you," Drasha hissed, pulling on the criminal's cunt lips, "let's see if you remember what you are before you are punished for forgetting." Lara wailed as the cart was attached to her hips and hands, cried out as Drasha took her place on the cart and took hold of Lara's reins and lashed out with her whip, striking the Tomb Raider's ass. It quivered and bounced as she moved.

"Legs up!" Drasha roared, forcing the Duchess of Arlington to cantor properly. "Ninety degrees with each step, Four-Seven-Six!" It took Lara the better part of a day to cantor back to Sirgeof, where she was unattached from the cart and pulled to the punishment grounds at the west end of the stables. The stablehands she had assaulted were waiting for her, cruel smiles on their faces.

They were rough with her, pulling her by her breasts over to a simple wooden bracket. She was fastened to it, a standard stocks that forced her arms beside her head and her to bend over at the waist. Another wooden bracket was fitted under her hips, lifting her legs so that she rested on the tips of her toes, her ankles then bound to the earth. Her harness was removed, everything except her bit and the new bindings.

Displaying herself like this revealed the Earl of Faringdon's brand on her ass, and we all smiled to see it.

Once she was secured, each of the stablehands grabbed a whip and spent the next half-hour striking her. By the time they were done, the fine muscles of the naked woman were crossed in angry red lines, her cheeks stained with tears, her every limb quivering. It was at that moment that Drasha brought a chair and planted it in front of the sobbing woman, yanking her head up by the hair and holding her there.

“You will be punished and you will be taught,” Drasha said, spitting in Lara's face. “Every morning, I will offer you the harness of your just sentence. When I believe that you want it, you will spend another week being punished before being placed back in your harness. Do you want your harness?”

Lara nodded emphatically. Drasha smiled, shaking her head.

“I do not believe you.”

She walked away. Over the next two weeks, the stablehands would spend time whipping her, fucking her, coating her in their seed. They did not wash her and barely fed her, leaving her bound and naked and out in the sun. The other stablehands also took turns, and, after church on Sundays, Slobodan would bring his family and they would take turns thrusting into the bottom holes of the woman, savaging her.

When the youngest of Slobodan's daughters wanted to use the cum-soaked criminal, Drasha removed the bit from Lara's tongue. The whips were needed to convince Lara to lick, but lick she did. Dazed, her eyes glossy and red under all the goo that coated her, she started to take cocks into her mouth and Drasha began to use her tongue every morning after asking a single question: *Do you want your harness?*

After four weeks of such treatment, Lara's pleading was accepted by Drasha as sincere. Another week passed as promised, Lara penetrated and whipped and covered. She offered no resistance when she was unbound and brought to the cleaning station, her head bowed low in defeat as she was tied and then cleaned, every inch of her flesh save her face and hands covered in angry red lines. The writhing that accompanied her washing was now just that; all thought of escape had been driven from her by the punishment she had suffered.

In this, as in so many things, Drasha was wise.

The numbers Eight-One-Five were written on her forehead, and she nodded when she was told that was her name for the day. After that, Drasha led her out to the track on shaking legs. She offered no resistance, seemed eager to get to where she was being taken, for the exercises to begin.

We could all see that the look in her eyes as she was taken to her lessons was one of gratitude.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

RAIDED RAIDER

The long winter months passed. My dear friend stood with my family in the long cold dark and we stood together against the ice and the snow – keeping the paths clear for the young and elderly alike, running food to those that needed it, helping those who were lost or who had their homes destroyed to find shelter. The howling winds made speech impossible while outside, and the billowing sheets of snow obscured all vistas. Parmistan is a glorious land, yes, but not a loving one.

Only the statues of Bacchus and Neptune stayed free of winter's taint, though some brave souls ventured to the fountain of Aurora to make their offerings. Spring seemed so very far away, and desperation causes people to take dangerous risks.

Lara Croft was no longer so desperate. The hope my dear friend, the Earl of Faringdon, had infected her with kept her compliant, as did her certainty that she could not escape under her own power.

At night, when only a fool would venture out into the wilds, my dear friend and I watched the progress that Drasha was making with the woman who was, in every possible way, his property. A plow was attached to the Croft woman's harness and she was marched out, shivering, to clear the snows of the stable. Then and only then would her training begin.

The cameras were able to catch her trembling, the slow way her eyes glossed over as day after day Drahsa put her through her paces. The stablehands were not so eager to use her in the cold, but Lara was eager to get to her training – the heavy demands of physical activity kept her warm, and the difficulty of her training kept her focused on not being cold.

No longer did she miss the string of numbers that Drasha assigned her with every new day. There were fewer moments that the whip was necessary, the corrections Drasha offered the criminal becoming simple routine. As the winters had made my dear friend strong, so they did the same with Lara's body.

Her legs became more powerful, her abdomen tight and muscled. Where before she had been merely beautiful and graceful, now her movements were controlled, elegant and refined. The harness and the gods inside her forced her to sway her hips as she walked, the point of her shoes keeping her legs taut and toned. Her hips, already a source of strength, rounded and tightened at once, her buttocks a pleasure to watch both at motion and stillness.

As the winter toned her body, so it destroyed what was left of her mind. No longer was this the proud and haughty criminal that had broken into the Village of the Damned. My dear friend and I, we watched as her eyes and expression faded from fierce intelligence to dull compliance. He smiled as I clasped him on the back.

“Do you think she'll be ready for spring?” James asked me, licking his lips after a long day. We were both shivering over a cup of spiced steaming chocolate, having spent the day fixing Ivo's broken roof.

“We will see, my friend,” I told him. “She will need more training, I think, both to till your fields and to participate in the races.” I saw the way his eyes lit up, brightening the room, when I mentioned that last part.

And, indeed, as the winters thawed Drasha took Lara aside. The criminal offered no resistance as the chariot was fastened to her hips, her arms unbound so that her fingers could wrap around the wood that connected her to the platform that Drasha would ride. When Drasha claimed the reins, Lara snapped to attention. When Drasha's crop flashed and struck the former Tomb Raider's ass, the woman lifted her leg in the proper manner and began the long canter to Karouse.

Once in Karouse, Drasha tied Lara's reins to a hitching post and went to speak with Slobodan. His sons and daughter came out to play with the pony, stroking her hair and breasts, suckling on her. Drasha and Slobodan were discussing terms over glasses of wine when the oldest of Slobodan's sons bent the girl over and thrust into her. By the time he was finished, the two of them had spat into their hands and shaken their agreement.

Lara would help Slobodan with the planting season. Her arms were unbound from her side as a yoke was fitted around her collar so that her arms might be fastened there, hands parallel with her head but held helplessly away. So she would stay for the coming weeks, dragging a massive rake behind her to mix the topsoil on Slobodan's farmland. When he and his children were tired they would play with Lara, letting her rest on her knees, removing the bit from her mouth so they could use her tongue.

“She's getting a lot of practice,” James laughed, claspng me on the back. “Would you like to sample her when she is fully trained?”

“You would do this for me?” I asked him, choking up.

“I have no dearer friend in the world than you, Zamir Pokuopec,” he answered. I did not cry at this admission.

When the planting season was complete, Drasha took Lara back to Sirgeof and taught her proper racing. The former duchess clearly enjoyed herself here, working up a fine lather of sweat as she tore around the track. James and I made the journey from Candover to Sirgeof to watch Drasha put her through her paces.

“She is quite fast,” I said, watching her way her breasts bounced as she bounded through the track, Drasha's whip flicking out to keep her motivated when it looked like she might slow.

“Lara was always so talented at track,” James said, smiling. His eyes never left Lara, not even when Drasha finally allowed her to rest. She panted but forced herself to remain steady, her high-necked collar keeping her neck straight, the racing harness keeping her wrists bound together and behind her back. Drasha left her panting and steady to come and speak to us.

“She is ready to start serving her sentence,” Drasha said. James looked eager, but I rested a hand on his shoulder.

“You have warned me about how dangerous she is,” I reminded him. “What harm is there in letting Drasha train her for another year before you claim her? If she looks broken now, my good friend, then she will be broken and thoroughly trained this time next year.”

James nodded his head and licked his lips, not managing to tear his eyes from the shuddering form of the tanned woman that had once been his fiancée.

“There is another benefit to this,” Drasha added. I looked at her even if James did not, for I was curious as to what this benefit might be, and Drasha's wicked smile was always a pleasure. “By this time next year, her hair will have grown long enough for us to use it to make a tail.”

James and I both laughed at this.

And so another year passed. Lara complied with the demands that Drasha made of her, lifting her legs up high, keeping her back straight. After another winter and planting season she was even willing to keep her form without the harness, and so her training harness was replaced with something more pleasing to the eye.

She earned the name *Duchess*, a reference to the person she had been before becoming a convicted criminal. Even after all the training that Drasha had put her through, the name called to mind some distant memory, an identity that no longer applied, and it brought a lovely color to her cheeks whenever anyone addressed her so.

Duchess was a good animal, however. Trained into obedience. She stood still when the shears were brought to her hair, though she did sniffle somewhat – the vanity of woman was not a thing so easily lost, not even from two long years of training. She could not see that the long strands collected and then tethered to a butt plug.

“It is shaped like Poena,” I explained to James. “The one in her cunt is shaped like Bachuus.”

Lara was bent over, and though her legs twitched and she cried out, she offered no other resistance as the plug was introduced to her, forced inside of her. Her anal mouth resisted at first, the criminal whining as it was forced in, but then the lips of that cavity swallowed the plug. Her handlers pulled on the strands of hair, making certain it was steady and in place before standing away.

Her stiff collar and the blinders kept her from seeing her woven hair hanging down between her legs, but it was clear she felt the strands as they tickled her inner thighs. We could see the effect the weight and girth of her new plugs had on her, and it took another week for Lara to become accustomed to them.

This, then, was how Lara Croft was presented to us – as a trained animal, compliant. Drasha handed James the crop and explained how to direct her, how to treat and feed her.

“Her food is drugged, so you do not have to worry about period or pregnancy,” Drasha explained. James circled the crop over her breast and Lara lowered her gaze, Her head held steady as the crop traveled lower, along her hip, down into the cleft between her legs. “The drugs do not effect her mind, but they have relaxed her vocal cords and limit the times and amount of waste. Keep to this schedule, and let me know if she gives you any trouble.”

“If she does?” James asked.

“Bring her back,” Drasha said, crossing her arms over her chest. “We will suspend her sentence, then re-start it when I am certain of her training. But you'll be a good little animal, won't you, Duchess?”

Lara made a sound like a pony might. There was a pleading look in her eyes, a fading gleam as she recognized James but was too afraid of Drasha to do anything about it.

I took Drasha to one side. Ivo had an idea and I had shared it with James, and he made use of it now; later, I would hear the hurried and whispered conversation.

“Are you okay?” James whispered, leaning in close. “I couldn't get you free – your escape attempt has made things difficult – but I did get you remanded to my custody. I need to keep up appearances that you're serving your sentence, but I'll take care of you as much as I can. Do you understand?”

Lara's weak attempt at a nod was the only sign she could give.

We took her home, the two of us riding the chariot that Lara pulled. James held her reins with one hand and the crop with the other, taking her along the roads from Sirgeof to Candover. During the planting season, we had built a small stables for Lara beside James' home, and we introduced Lara to her new home, stripping her out of the harness.

“Zamir, my dear friend, I made you a promise,” James said. He bent Lara over a fence post, and when I presented my cock to her she looked at it for a long moment before opening her mouth, accepting my manhood into the warmth of her tongue. A few moments later, James removed the statue of Bacchus from her cunt thrust into her, his head tilting back as he entered her with a groan. “She's so tight!”

“I believe you will enjoy this end, too,” I said, sighing. Lara's tongue danced along my length, drawing forth my seed. She gobbled it down, spilling not a drop, then held me until softness. Her small whining sent shivers through me as James continued to use her, finally letting loose with a hissing cry.

“Five years,” James said, panting smiling.

I nodded, saying nothing.

For the rest of summer and harvest, Lara did not leave James' side. He brought her indoors, his hands pressing into her thighs, along her spine, his fingers sometimes questing inside of her. She would curl into his hand when he so cupped her, eyes closing and cheeks flushed, and there was no one in all of Candover who did not enjoy the sight of them together.

When winter came she helped clear the pathways, pulling James by sled so that he could deliver food or rescue stragglers. In the planting season, she tilled the fields of his garden, and he was kind enough to lend her to myself and my family that we might have an easier time of things. And after, always after the work was done, we would take the harness from her and thrust into her, swapping holes, using her as we saw fit.

Spring came and Ivo asked to meet with us. James came early in the morning, Lara pulling his chariot, the marks on her ass proof of his guidance. He tethered her, leaving the children to kiss her thighs with slim twigs until the two of us had suckled on cups of coffee and were ready to go. My eldest daughter had offered Lara a cube of sugar, and so she offered no resistance when my daughter suckled at her breast, her hand toying with the gods inside her.

Both James and I took note of Lara's glistening thighs as we went to meet my cousin. He smiled to greet us, an absent hand cupping Lara's cheek as she dismounted, each of clasping the other and glancing at Lara. She would be stripped later and the three of us would enjoy her, but the meeting would come first.

"Zamir, my cousin!" Ivo said, smiling. "James, my dear friend! I have new you must hear."

"What is it?" James asked.

"You will be having visitors soon," Ivo said. "Somehow, some of the nobility of your country have heard about Lara's stay and are coming to see what has befallen her for themselves."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

VISITORS ABROAD

The delightful sight of Lara Croft racing through the streets of Candover was a familiar one, but one that neither James or I or anyone else would ever tire of. The exercise did her good, keeping her in shape, and every day we would come to watch her progress through our fair village, the people kind in the way they would pat her ass to give her encouragement. And my dear friend was kinder to her than the criminal deserved. He often brought her in out of the cold during the harsh winters, for example, but I know he took a certain amount of joy in marking the lush flesh of her backside with his crop. The placement of strips on that ample supple flesh was almost a hobby, framing the brand of his ownership of her.

She had become a good and reliable animal, never trying to speak, never answering to anything other than the name James had given her. She drank and ate as instructed, and could even be washed without being bound. James often bound her anyway, given the harshness of the bristles on the soap brush. He might have gone for something softer, but all who watched her delighted in the sounds she made as he cleaned out her folds and breasts.

Nonetheless, there was some cause for concern. Lara herself was tamed and my dear friend was as much as a Parmistani native as anyone I had known. My wife considered him family, and even my children had given him the honorific *uncle*, laughing as Duchess gave them pony rides, panting as they rode her in other ways after a hard day's work.

"I am unsure about these guests," Ivo confessed, the two of us out drinking together. "James is their best, clearly, but how many more like him can there be? The societies beyond our glorious land are not so great, more full of criminals like the woman who is only now a Duchess in name."

"Our dear friend vouches for them," I said, clasping Ivo on the back. "I do not know them, but I trust him."

We spoke to James about his friends as Duchess plowed his field, all of us watching as the criminal's sweating body glistened in the sun. She was wearing a farming yoke and little else, the long strands of her tail tickling the back of her thighs and knees as she struggled with the large plow behind her.

James smiled when he saw us, waving and clasping us both on the back once we'd made our approach. He poured us each a glass of water, cropping Duchess along the back of her thigh to let her know that the break he was taking was not meant for her. She winced, whinnied, and struggled on.

"Who are these people that come to see you, these friends of yours?" Ivo asked. James waved us out of Lara's earshot, also placing us so that we could watch her panting toil.

"She doesn't know they're coming," James confided. "I haven't told her, and I want it to be a surprise."

"Does she know them from her old life?" I asked, and laughed when James nodded.

"Steph Missing went to school with her," James said. "You'll like her, Zamir. She recently married a man named Neville Stothard, who is the eldest son of Peter Stothard."

"The Editor-in-Chief at the London Times," Ivo said, nodding. "Is that going to be a problem?"

"No, no, not at all," James laughed, clapping my cousin on the back. "Neville will one day be Earl of West Fenwick, and their family has a complicated past with the Crofts. I've been in touch with Peter, and he's been delighted that Lara has finally gotten some comeuppance."

"Oh?" I asked, curious. "What do you mean?"

"She's something of an embarrassment to the gentry," James explained. "All that running around and shooting things in the colonies. Even if we hadn't left that sort of action in the past, she would be the wrong gender for it. She looks much better as she is, I think, and the gentry that know what have happened to her agree."

"There are others that know?" Ivo asked.

"Few enough," James said, sipping from his water. "Ones that know how to keep a secret."

And so, late into the thaw, we went with James to greet his friends. Lara pulled him via chariot, the bells attached to her nipples making a pleasing contrast to her heavy breathing and the quiet hisses she made when James directed or corrected her. Ivo stayed behind, but I went with my dear friend, riding my cousin's animal - an elusive hispanic woman caught stealing years ago now, and given the name Karma. She was not so fancy as the one my friend had been granted and was kind enough to share, but she was a fun beast to ride in every sense.

Steph and Neville were resting with their guide, drinking down water after the arduous climb, but they smiled and stood as James came to greet them. The three shook hands and exchanged pleasantries. The newcomers stared at the brightness of his clothing, their own drab yellows and browns a dull comparison that reminded me much of what James had worn when we'd first met. James introduced me, but the two visitors were staring at the criminals we had ridden to greet them.

"What is this?" Steph asked. Neville was blushing furiously, trying and failing to keep his eyes averted.

"Take a closer look," James advised. They did, moving closer to my pony, both of them cautious and careful not to touch, but by the time they moved onto Lara they were a little more free with their fingers. I watched carefully, noting the tension in Lara's shoulders as she was prodded, the widening of her eyes as she recognized the voices and names of the newcomers even if the blinders kept her from seeing them.

It was Neville that noticed first. He was tugging on one of the nipple bells, coming around to the criminal's front, getting into the line of her sight.

"Lara?!?" he cried, stepping back but not releasing her nipple, and the former Tomb Raider whimpered as she was stretched in such an intimate manner. Steph pushed him out of her way, Neville tumbling to one side, and I shared a look with James; this newcomer was as weak as my dear friend had been when he had first come here, before Parmistan had strengthened him. I did not think that Neville had the same fire that James possessed, but did not say so aloud.

Besides, there were things going on that demanded my attention.

"Lara," Steph said, her fingers tapping Lara's hip. "Lara Croft. It's a good look for you."

Lara shuffled in place, but did not otherwise respond; the bit in her mouth robbed her of words and she knew better than to answer any call of her old name.

"Call her Duchess," James said, smiling as he walked up beside Lara, wrapping a hand around her hips. Steph took a step back, her finger traveling up the length of Lara's tight sweaty abdomen, parting just before the soft underside of Lara's chest. Her hand brushed the bell, causing a single soft ring.

"I don't believe it," Steph said, grinning and shaking her head. She took hold of Lara's reins, wrenching the former Tomb Raider's head back and forth. Lara, her hands bound to the poles at her hips and back to the chariot, could do nothing to defend herself.

"I thought the two of you were friends," James said, kneading Lara's back when Steph gave the criminal a chance to find her footing.

"So did I," Steph said, spitting in Lara's face. "I was supposed to go to Yamatai, did you know that? I was all set and packed and then Sam told me that Lara didn't want me coming along."

"Yamatai ended badly for everyone, from what I understand," Neville said. His voice a nasal whine.

"Might have been better if I'd been there," Steph said. She groped Lara, slapped her breast and then her butt, wrenched her by the reins again. "Sam deserved better than you, *Duchess*."

Lara bowed her head, crying as Steph continued to explore the helpless criminal's body.

The new harness that James had got was an improvement on the old; the leather was softer and thinner, showing off more of the girl's deeply tanned skin, forcing her back straight while leaving the area between her abdomen and calves exposed. Steph seemed fascinated by the plugs in Lara's lower holes, tugging on both of them but not pulling them out, smiling as Lara cried out but did not kick.

"How do these stay in?" Steph asked, looking up at James. James smiled, walking closer to her and clasping her on the back, a motion that surprised her.

"They widen and narrow in places," James explained. He tugged at the one in her ass by the tail that had been woven from her hair, easier to pull for that addition. Lara shuffled in place and whimpered as the plug was pulled, revealing a long cone that got wider the further into her it was, finally leaving her with an audible pop.

"The one in her cunt tapers the same way, becoming larger inside her. Both are inflatable."

"They can also be used to reward or correct a criminal," I added. Steph looked at me, blinking, and I realized that she had forgotten I was there.

"How do you mean?" Steph asked. James held up the remote and showed her, and Steph spent the next hour playing with the dildo in Lara's cunt, making her scream, pant, whimper, and cry. The smile that lit her features did not leave during the whole of this time, nor did the anguish on Lara's. It made for an interesting juxtaposition.

Eventually, they let the air out of the buttplug so that they could reinsert it into Lara, as was proper – what sort of animal didn't have a tail? – and Steph laughed again when James told her the tail was made of Lara's own hair.

“So, how're we getting wherever it is we're going?” Steph asked. James and I grinned at one another; I took Neville and his baggage on my chariot, while James took Steph and hers on the chariot pulled by Lara. We raced back, but the outcome of that was never in doubt; Lara Croft had been a fine athlete before she'd been convicted and her punishment had only honed that physical prowess.

We took them all the way to Candover, to the embassy where James lived. He stabled Lara, took them to their rooms and showed them his garden. Steph kept looking at the small wooden building where Lara was kept, her reins tied to a post, her eyes locked on a video feed that showed her the more interesting parts of her training.

“Is,” Steph licked her lips, looking nervous. “Is it... what I mean is... would it be okay if I fucked her?”

“She's an animal and my property, and you are my friend,” James answered, grinning. “Would you like to be eaten out by her or would you like a dildo to fuck her with?”

“Both?” Steph asked. Neville nodded his head, silent, his face bright red and his eyes on the naked, stripped, and filled backside of his imprisoned countrykin.

“Can I go first?” Neville asked. “I want to fuck the arrogant bitch in her ass, and I want it nice and tight for my cock.”

“I wouldn't worry about that,” I laughed. “The way James has kept her exercises the muscles of both holes. She needs to hold those plugs in using only the muscles inside her. Imagine those muscles letting your cock in, and then squeezing down on it.”

“She is tight?” Neville asked.

“Tighter than you can imagine,” James said, laughing. “She'll keep herself loose to let you in, but once you're in our darling little Duchess will show you a good time.”

The two visitors unpacked and took a nap, were up and dressed for a delicious dinner. James served us the good food he himself had grown, and he and my eldest daughter performed magic in the kitchen, whipping up a delicious dinner. Steph and Neville filled us all in on the going-ons of the outside world, and Steph was eager to tell us that she'd gone into property law in the time that James had gone away.

“Not going to Yamatai left me with a lot of spare time,” Steph admitted, “So I finished a degree in property law. My plan had been to help seize Yamatai for what's left of the British Empire, but I think you'll find that this is a worthy substitute.”

She handed James an envelope and he opened it, grinning and showing it to me – a completely ratified and legal document that handed all of Lara's old properties and holdings over to him, as well as a death certificate for one Lara Croft.

"It made things easier to declare her dead," Steph said, shrugging at an unasked question. "Everything she had is now yours."

"Thank you," James said, toasting her.

That night, after dinner and desert, Lara was led from her stables. Her hands were tied to her elbows and she was bent down, kneeling in the dirt, looking lost as the blinders were removed from her face and the bit was removed from her mouth. She tried to speak when she was alone with Steph and Neville, but her tongue had long since forgotten how to make words, the cultured voice of years gone by lost to a drooling nonsense.

Steph grabbed Lara by the hair, forcing the criminal's face below her skirt while a flushed Neville undid his pants and forced his way into Lara. She whined between the two of them, battered back and forth, Steph's mouth spilling open as low moans escaped her throat, her fingers tightening in Lara's mane. Meanwhile, behind Lara, Neville's eyes rolled into the back of his head and he let out a cry, Lara's tightest hole sucking him dry.

I had experienced that myself, and I clasped him on the back as his eyes went glassy, a satisfied and empty smile spreading across his face.

Once Neville had removed himself from Lara, James took his place, ramming himself into Lara's other hole. He had built up some endurance, but the tightness Lara had been trained to possess could suck the cum out of even the mightiest man, and no amount of familiarity was going to make a man used to that sort of treatment. I took James' place, kissing him as I passed him, slapping Lara's ass as I entered her cunt. Steph cried out, Lara's reactions to the abuses we offered her echoing deep inside the core of the visiting woman.

"No more," whispered Steph, crawling off of Lara shortly after I finished with her.

The stablehands that James employed came to wash Lara away and put her down for the night, and we all watched as the beautiful criminal was drained, cleaned, and then locked away.

"I could get used to this," Steph said, her smile lazy, her tone laconic.

"I already have," James said.

During the days that followed, Steph and Neville helped James and Lara plant his fields, followed by afternoon races through the streets of Candover. My dear friend's prize animal was a frequent draw and even more frequent winner of these races, as people from all over glorious Parmistan came to try their animals against the one we had given James. They almost inevitably came up short, and betting became fierce.

Evenings saw Lara used by her old friends, Neville and Steph both eager to explore all her holes, they always seeming satisfied at the end of their use and she left dazed and with glassy eyes, her smoky voice capable only of animal sounds even without the bit. Steph in particular liked to ride Lara's tongue, planting her hips down on Lara's face and wrapping her hands in the criminal's hair.

"You always thought you'd go far, Lara," Steph said, taunting the former Tomb Raider with a name she could no longer respond to. "And you were riiiiiiight..." Steph's eyes rolled, her lips left open as her body tensed. It was a glorious sight, one I enjoyed all the more because I was thrusting into Lara at the time.

It was nearing the end of the season when the look in Lara's eyes faded from an echo of who she had been to an emptiness born of what she now was; an animal meant for toil and fucking, all thoughts of who she had been nothing more than fever dreams belonging to someone else, someone else that was still a person.

"You know, James," I said, looking down at my dear friend from over Lara's shoulder. He was lying down, letting Lara ride him as I fucked her ass, her mouth granting affection to first Steph and then Neville. "There is a tradition here called the Great Game, and I think you should enter Lara into the modern variant."

"Tell me more, my dear friend," he said, and I did.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THE GREAT GAME

"It is the tradition of the Great Game," Ivo explained. We were all sitting down to dinner in James' house, he hosting us with apples spiced with markhor venison made from the fruits of his and his animal's labor. The animal, of course, was stabled by the window, looking in at our feast while eating her typical meal of dry grains. Steph laughed at this, enjoying the way Lara's mouth watered whenever any of us took a bite, our lush meal a stark contrast to her bland fare, but Lara was a criminal and this, too, was part of her punishment.

"The Great Game used to be the means by which supplicants could ask favors of the Emperor," I carried on. "A three day race from Candover to Routard, then from Routard to Maraholme, then from Maraholme to the Village of the Damned and back to Candover again. The first person to make that journey could ask the Emperor for anything, but there was often no survivors, never mind a winner."

"How come?" Steph asked. James looked at the two of us and shrugged, a simple gesture that asked if he could answer. I nodded acceptance of such.

"Parmistan is a glorious land, yeah, but also a merciless one," James said, smiling as he looked at Lara. "The winters are harsh, the summers broiling, and the pathways dangerous. The race would take participants through the most dangerous parts of the country, requiring climbing sheer cliffs, swimming across rapids, and all that is before the Village of the Damned."

"What is the Village of the Damned?" Neville asked. "It sounds so dramatic."

"It is a place where the insanity of Caligula still lingers," Ivo explained, frowning. "It is the madness that our people have been set to ward against."

"Everyone there is insane and dangerous," I continued. "The way in is blocked, but opened for the purposes of the Great Game."

"Okay," Steph said, savoring a bite of markhor and smiling at the drooling Croft woman, "but you said 'used to be.' What happened?"

"When we became an allied nation to your NATO, our Emperor ended the game as it stood," Ivo said, his frown deepening. "It was a concession to our Emperor-elect, an American named Jonathan Cabot, when he married our Princess Rabali."

"She had an interesting back story," James said, leaning back in his chair and smiling. "Her mother was Indonesian. It has been a long tradition to bring outsiders into the noble lines of Parmistan, and so it has with the Great Game."

"After a few years, Emperor Cabot reworked the Great Game so that criminals could make the run," Ivo said, smiling. "Ten criminals could be put forth by order of their owners for the run, some criminals of Parmistan, others brought in by allies of our glorious nation."

"Other countries?" Steph asked.

"Enlightened individuals, mostly," James chuckled. "The Countess Nefaria, for example, or the scientist Paracelsus. Why do you think they've been so friendly to our government over the past few years? I've become quite close with several powerful people, and I've used that friendship to make England strong in a way little Lara over there never could."

"It is so," I said, laughing and claspng my friend on the back. "And so the Great Game continues, greater than it ever was, even though the pathways the criminals run are now made clear."

"Well, that doesn't sound like as much fun," Steph said, her eyes narrowing. Lara shivered, her gaze dropping groundward, and she whinnied in a most pleasing manner.

"Oh, but it is," I said. "We wouldn't want to damage someone's property, especially when we might get to use them." Lara, dazed and pretty as she was, blinked her eyes at this and looked over in our direction. There was a question there, her dumb animal eyes understanding that we were maybe talking about her.

"The bottom five placing animals of each day are made available for the use of the general public of whichever place they are in, excepting the Village of the Damned," Ivo said. "The top one is given to the highest wager made over the course of that night."

"What about the other four?" Neville asked, his eyes on Lara.

"The other four are given to members of government and the nobility for use," Ivo said, laughing and claspng Neville on the back. Even sitting, this friendly touch caused the boy to stagger. "In the morning, the top five are given a handicap to make the race more fair for the bottom five, and then they seek to get to the next location."

"Where do they stay outside of the Village of the Damned?" Steph asked.

"Most will run straight through to Candover despite their exhaustion," I said, laughing. "You will see why."

"Would you like me to put our dear Duchess in the Great Game?" James asked. We all chorused our approval, but the criminal shook in her bonds, her eyes wide and high cheeks streaking with tears.

The Great Game was a month distant when James signed her up, which gave us all time to help Lara prepare. With most of the farming done, James had her sent to Drasha for more training. Steph went down with Lara and stayed there to help in the preparations.

"Are there jockeys?" Neville asked. He stayed close to James like a child, and I had long since decided that he was simple in some way; not his fault, but not the sort of boy that would do well in our land.

"No," I answered. "We will watch from where we like. The owners of the animals can control them remotely."

We watched as Drasha demonstrated; the harness on Lara had a box that rested near the small of her back, and it was this that her reins were connected to. A mobile app allowed Drasha now, and James later, to direct Lara by the reins, as the box would tighten and pull the lines taut, tugging on her jaw, breasts, and cunt lips, rewarding her with pleasurable pulses when she was good and painful shocks when she was disobedient.

By the time the Great Game began, Lara was reacting to the box at the base of her spine as if she had been born to do that and nothing else.

The other animals on display were all gorgeous in their own way.

The Countess Nefaria, her face covered in a pretty golden lattice, presented her animal, Katie. Katie was shaved bald, her eyes downcast, and she never stopped trembling. Her fingers had been glued together, we could see, and she had been pierced in several enticing places.

A man named Derek C. Simmons brought in his animal, Scarlet, a small Asian woman with short hair and fierce eyes who bit and kicked until her punishments forced her into compliance. Ivo did not surprise anyone by entering his own animal, the criminal he had renamed Karma. She had won the race for three years running, a record in this new era of the Great Game.

“So many people wonder where in the world she is,” Ivo said, laughing as he clasped Neville on the back, “but I know. She is here with me, and will be for another two years!”

The scientist Paracelsus presented his animal, Punky, a lovely redhead with a stripe of purple near the front of her bangs. He seemed bored by the event, and quickly approached the Emperor to discuss matters of state while his animal was left to the affections of various children.

She was joined by another redhead, this one a librarian that Neville recognized from some sort of caucus as her mob boss owners, Paris Francesco and Edward Cobblepot, left her alone to discuss things with the Countess.

“Her name is Mouse now, I've heard,” James said. “You should go sample her. Paris says she has a lot of gall and needs to come to terms with her new lot in life.”

Another criminal, this one a young beauty with short blonde hair named Tangled, looked around herself with wide and frightened eyes. Her owner, a smartly dressed member of America's oligarchy, explained that she was a recent acquisition, a murderer that had recently come into his service.

“She's quite the prize, even if she is a bit of a timeshare,” Matt Murdock grinned, slipping one hand in his pocket while rolling a glass of scotch in the other. “I'm thinking of leaving her with Drasha for a year, seeing how that works out. Depends what her mom thinks.”

“Her mother?”

“The other part of the time share,” Matt laughed, shaking his head. “She decided not to be here tonight on account of jail. You know how it is.”

“America is a confusing place,” I nodded, and told him I would make sure he had a chance to meet with Drasha sometime in the next few days.

A shrill laugh caught the attention of Steph and she raced over to embrace a friend of hers – Karin Kanzuki, heir to a Japanese Empire, who was leading up a cute little girl in a sexualized Japanese school girl outfit. Her animal's attire caught the attention of all gathered, the girl flushing as children batted at her skirts; it was highly unusual for an animal to wear anything other than a harness, though there were no rules against this.

"I didn't know you were here," Karin said, smiling with delight and embracing her friend.

"Is this your little rival?" Steph asked, rustling the bound girl's hair.

"Yes, yes, she lost a bet and is mine for the next few weeks," Karin said, laughing. "We decided to spend it training, so to speak." The blonde had an impish grin, and her charge, Dearest, had a tension to her that the others lacked. I wondered how she would feel and taste, and made a mental note to try her at the earliest opportunity.

The last two were Kitkat and Trophy, the former owned by a business man named Roman Sionis who covered his face with a black mask, the latter by a quiet man who answered to the name Adrian Chase.

"Kitkat is more of a house cat these days," Roman growled, his expression unreadable behind his mask. His animal knelt at his feet, pressing the short black hair on her scalp into his kneading fingers, "but it's always good to get your pets out, let them get some exercise."

"Agreed," Adrian answered, nodding his head. He said nothing more, leaving Trophy with Mouse and Punky. When James added Duchess to their number, it brought some smiles from those assembled.

"You finally decided to race her, huh?" Matt asked.

"My friends persuaded me," James answered, clasping Matt on the back. "Have you met Neville Stothard and Steph Missing?" He walked off to introduce them.

Dinner was served, everyone catching up and then catching a night cap before going to take a look at the animals. They had all been tied to display, their collars keeping them standing straight, their hands bound behind their backs and their legs kept apart by ties to their ankles, heavy ball gags inflated in their mouths to keep them silent.

Other than their bindings, all were naked.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Karin asked Dearest, hovering over her pet with with an odd air of protection. The animal nodded, and so did Karin, hugging her. "Good luck."

Everyone wandered around the animals, touching them, toying with them, discussing their viability. Bets were laid, and then the various owners discussed the virtues of their animals for the rest of the Parmistani people on a closed video feed. More bets were made, with the race to begin in the morning.

"How do you think Duchess will do?" I asked James. He grinned at me.

"I've known Lara for her whole life," James answered. "There's fear of being handed over to the crowd to go alongside her training and her will to win. I think she's got the first two days at least."

"And then?" I asked, but he only grinned at me, shaking his head as he clasped my back.

“Then there is the Village of the Damned.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

CANDOVER TO ROUTARD

Dawn came with a surprising quickness, as it always did on the morning of the Great Game. There was good wine and conversation to be had throughout the night and into morning, quiet orgies meant to whet the appetite of the larger orgies to come. James was pleased that Lara proved to be a popular animal among both our visiting dignitaries and the locals, many of whom had sampled her over the past couple of years in one fashion or another. She did well at the betting booths, claiming a good amount of attention.

"Duchess is popular," Ivo said, clasping me on the back as he mulled over his morning wine, "but trust me, experience counts for much in the Great Game."

Scarlet, Punky, and Kitkat also received high odds and much attention from the crowds, and Trophy got a great deal of interest. Smart wagers were made on her taking an early lead and puttering out before the finish, though some thought she might make it through the Village of the Damned. Karin seemed pleased by this, she and Steph sitting and toying with Lara as they discussed the differences between the two.

"Dearest has a drive to win that rival's that of Duchess," Karin said, laughing as Steph fingered her former friend. Lara winced but offered no complaint, and the two women allowed the stablehands to lead Lara away when they came to claim and dress her.

Paraculus seemed uninterested in the Great Game, as his reasons for being here were always his own and this was the first year he'd entered his pet into the Game itself. He spent most of his time speaking with Derek about alchemical processes, the two of them speaking of formulas and theory the rest of us could not hope to understand. They both politely ignored Roman's attempts to join their conversation, preferring his two absent partners to him.

Edward and Paris' animal got the lowest rating, which only seemed to amuse them.

"I want Belle good and broken in," Edward told me, the two of us sitting with James in the early morning. "You know she still answers to the name Barbara? Disgraceful. Once we get her up to snuff, she'll answer to whatever we want her to answer to."

I nodded along with James and a wandering Ivo. We all of us understood. My own children were coming of age, and were eyeing both James' property and Ivo's with hungry eyes. I knew I would have to provide something for them soon, and I knew from their handling of Lara and Karma that they knew how to take responsibility for an animal.

All of us went down to the stables to see the animals prepared. The stablehands were gentle in the dressing and cleaning, their frustration obvious – there was to be no release for either them or the animals, nothing that might take away from the ability to perform. The Great Game was soon, and the release would come later. Still, that did not stop one stablehand from licking her way up Lara's slick thigh, and shudder that slithered across the former Tomb Raider's skin proof of how tense she had become.

The harnesses the animals were placed within were slim leather, looping up and caressing hips, breasts, and shoulders before looping down between the legs, the leather leaving holes for the animal stuffing. Each racer had been given a different color; my dear friend had chosen a dusky brown that complimented Lara's skin tone. Scarlet, Tangled, Trophy, and Karma wore various shades of red, while Katie, Mouse, and Kitkat were in daring shades of purple. Punky was in basic black, her harness cruel, but it was Dearest who stood out.

Karin had decked her animal in a short blue skirt that barely covered anything and a white sailor's shirt that barely hid the underside of her breasts, both hinting at the white harness underneath. It was a choice that caused quite a lot of comment, and I heard Ivo say that he looked forward to ripping the costume off of that particular animal.

All of the ponies had boots lacing to mid-thigh, all of their toes forced into vicious points. Some of them shuffled in place, trying to get used to a standing that was only possible because of a curving arch that kept them up. Duchess and Karma were used to this, and Kitkat clearly remembered it. The rest had only the time it took to take them from the stables to the starting line to get used to the weight, and of those two I knew that Lara was the stronger runner.

Finally, the bits kept the animal's mouths open, trapping their tongues, and all of them were drooling as they were taken to the start line. Blinders were put in place, limiting each field of vision to straight ahead, though each animal shivered as the unseen crowds around them roared approval and catcalled the flesh that might soon be theirs.

As expected, Duchess and Karma started with a hurried trot the moment a shot started the race. Trophy tried to run but her balance was off and she tumbled – it was Mouse, Scarlet, and Dearest that managed to adapt fastest, moving forward as the other struggled forward. Katie in particular had trouble, blubbing into her bit, but a quick investigation revealed that the Countess was absently playing with her controlling device.

“I don't care if Katie wins,” the Countess confessed, her lips twisted in a cruel smile. “I just like knowing that she suffers.”

The pathway between Candover and Routard was clear and mostly straight, having been prepared for the race; there would be no accidents and the peasantry of our glorious land had come out to watch the passing animals, reaching out to hold them steady when they lost balance, groping them before letting them continue.

Lara kept a steady pace, bouncing along as James directed her with his phone. We could see when the reins pulled on her, directing her with an intimacy she could not ignore. Thanks to the cameras watching her, we could see that her eyes were focused directly in front of her, her trust in her owner complete. Karma was much the same.

Beside James, Ivo focused on directing his own animal. Karin stood nearby and tittered, directing Dearest – the slim girl was gaining on Karma, her skirt kicking up to reveal the slickness that was pouring out of her, but neither of them had managed to close any distance with the dextrous Miss Croft.

Lara was slick with sweat and panting by the time she reached Routard, but reach it first she did. James went to meet her, pulling her into a tight embrace, ripping the gag from her mouth and pulling her hair back so that he could kiss her deeply. She flushed and simpered, accepting his affections, and his pleasure was obvious for he had won.

Karma and Dearest came next, mere minutes after Lara had crossed the line, and the nobility was eager to take them. Dearest, in particular, suffered the affections of dozens: she had her clothes ripped off of her by the waiting hands of our nobility, everyone eager to see what charms she thought she could hide. Karma, her eyes sullen, accepted the affections of a dozen suitors who were well versed in her use, but that did not make us desire her any less.

"She is as beautiful as she ever was," Ivo said, smiling as he watched his countrymen use his property. "More beautiful in captivity, perhaps."

I smiled and shook my head, clasping my cousin on the back.

How could one argue with what was true?

Scarlet came fourth, thirty minutes after Dearest and Karma, followed soon thereafter by Kitkat, and they were both led into the noble houses where they were unplugged and thrown into a sea of humanity, both of them left helpless as they were pulled, prodded, and fucked. James and I sat above it all, watching the orgy, both of us thrusting into Lara. Below, we watched Karin lead Steph to Dearest, and we both used Lara as a masturbation aid as Steph showed Dearest a goodly amount of affection.

The peasants collected the rest – Trophy, then Mouse, then Katie, followed an hour later by Punky and then Tangled. The waiting crowd was eager to take them, turning each into the centerpoint of an individual orgy that wove into a larger mass of writhing moaning flesh, the animals being passed around into the early hours of morning.

Once all were spent, the animals were led to the stables to be cleaned and then locked in for rest. The next part of the race would be harder on all of them, and James and I were eager to see it.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

ROUTARD TO MARAHOLME

A low whine woke me from my slumber.

“What is that?” I asked. James nuzzled in his blanket, pinned between my wife, Steph, and myself. Bleary-eyed, he frowned and shook his head, not knowing either. It was Steph's curiosity that drove us from bed, three of us wrapping ourselves in robes and going to investigate. My wife, perhaps wiser than us all, choose to stay in the warm blankets.

The source of our waking proved to be Tangled – she was huddled in a corner, trying to kick out against the stablehands. We paused to watch, had coffee brought to us as she was collared and dragged out of her corner, kicking and screaming, and then locked in place. Her wide eyes were a lovely sight in the morning, and I thought maybe I would ask Mr. Murdock if I could keep her for him; my children would like her very much, I thought, and with her long legs she would make a good conveyance.

“Let me talk to him,” my dear friend said, smiling as he clasped me on the back. “I'm sure something can be arranged.” I grinned back and nodded, and then the three of us left to find breakfast.

While we ate, a closed loop showed highlights of yesterdays festivities, both the race and what came after. Many citizens and nobles alike made comment of Dearest, both her dressage and how it had been torn off of her, but Lara's performance was a frequent topic of conversation and many members of the glorious Parmistani people came forward to congratulate James on owning such an exceptional creature.

Ivo was dipping into his cups when we found him, but his smile was wide and eyes were shining. “I am used to my animal winning, but yours is truly exquisite,” he told James. “Do you think she'll be able to maintain such a pace?”

“Probably,” James said, and shrugged. “She'll probably take today, but not tomorrow.”

“You have not warned her, then?”

“My dear friend,” James said, clasping my cousin on the back, “why would I do such a thing?”

We had all cleaned and dressed by the time the animals had been prepared, but not before the handicaps had been added to the winning criminals – a sensor that would cause their harnesses to shock them if they failed to raise their knees high enough with each stride. It seemed such a small thing but it caused such distress in those that were not prepared for it.

“Are you going to warn Duchess?” Ivo asked James. James grinned and said that he'd mention something and see if there was enough of a mind left in Lara to understand.

We were to learn that there wasn't – she stared dumbly at James when he went to speak with her, her eyes showing how much she was struggling to understand his words – but when the race began she started to sprint and fell, convulsing on the ground. Karma, long used to the races, was raising her knees and not looking back. The others had all passed Lara by the time the convulsions had died down, her cheeks flushed and eyes wide, her limbs trembling.

There was something heroic about the way she rolled onto her knees and struggled to her feet, careful to make certain her balance held as she stood. She took a moment to calm her breathing, closing her eyes and letting herself stop panting before she began to run once more.

Tangled was the first of the animals she passed; the simple girl was having difficulty adjusting to her new life and had no training, and she was writhing more than running when Lara passed her. Katie was much the same, the Countess enjoying letting her run hard enough to almost catch up before shocking her into the dust again. The other ponies had no such handicaps, and all were running to avoid the affections of the peasantry, all hoping to find a home in the arms of the nobility.

Punky and Mouse were next, and when they saw Lara gaining on them they tried to body check her off of the path. The first time they did this Lara was caught off guard and went tumbling into the dirt, managing only just to take the impact on her shoulder. Some mistake of the harness punished her for not raising her knees high enough as she went down, and she curled in on herself, the ball of her body going taut as she cried out in passion.

Once again, she lay limp in the dirt, letting her breathing calm. Katie caught up to her, then went down as the Countess punished her. Tangled was passing them both when Lara had found the strength to stand on unsteady feet. She hopped a bit in place, bringing her knees up high, and then she took off sprinting again.

She passed Tangled quickly, managed to catch up to Mouse and Punky as they were rounding a corner. The other two animals went to body check her again, but Lara dodged around them while keeping her knees raised, a moment of grace that raised a cheer from all of us watching. It was the other two that ended up in the dirt, and Lara managed to run past them and caught up to Trophy not long after that.

The two of them managed to keep pace with one another for a time, but it quickly became apparent that Trophy lacked the endurance that Lara possessed; she began to lag behind, while Lara's steady pace brought her to and past Kitkat. The purple-harnessed criminal with the green eyes and short black hair sprinted to catch up, driving her shoulder towards Lara, but the former Tomb Raider was prepared for this sort of attack after what had happened with Mouse and Punky.

Kitkat was, however, much better co-ordinated and much more aggressive than either Mouse or Punky had been. She came in low and Lara just barely spun out of her way, kept moving away from the other woman. A cheer rose from the crowd as Kitkat lunged in again, and again, then a third time – but that third attempt caught Lara, lifted her off her feet and sending her tumbling.

The crowd roared when Lara somehow managed to slip off of Kitkat's shoulder, landed on her feet, and kicked the other woman's knee out from under her. Kitkat tumbled into the dust and Lara scurried forward, not stopping to look back. She was halfway to Maraholme when she bumped into Scarlet.

Scarlet had surprised the crowd; after her poor performance yesterday, the bets surrounding the fiery Asian woman had died off, but she was managing to hold her own on this, the second day. She, Dearest, and Karma were all jockeying for first – Scarlet for speed, Karma for endurance, and Dearest out of a pure drive to win. Lara struggled forward and James himself cried out when she overtook them all, putting herself back in the rankings.

By the time the four women made it to Maraholme, Lara was just barely keeping her lead over Dearest, with Scarlet coming in third and Karma coming in fourth. It was a good showing by all four animals, and they were greeted with cheers and eager noble affection, all of them panting and flushed and too tired to give more than a pitiful resistance.

James led Lara to the stables, he and I washing her down, and he patted her on the cheek and smiled.

“Good girl,” he said, pulling her mouth to his lips. “Good Duchess.”

She simpered at his touch, at his words and praise, and I laughed – was this truly the Tomb Raider, the legendary hero that had triumphed over both the Solarii and Trinity? I shook my head.

“I will leave you two,” I said, clasping my friend on the back. “I am curious about that Dearest woman, and wish to sample her.”

“I might join,” my dear friend told me. “Rest up, Duchess. Just one more part of the race, through the Village of the Damned, and you'll have this.” She nodded, her eyes and expression slack, though when he offered her a piece of chocolate she ate it from his palm, licking the remnants afterward.

Dearest ended up being an entertaining ride, her eyes wild and hips twisting as she tried to resist our claiming of her, her tittering owner hovering around and watching her carefully. Still, there was something rewarding about spilling my seed on Dearest's back, some flicker of her eyes that spoke of her defeat, and I patted her head and pinched her nipple as I moved on and left her to another. So many wished to sample her silky skin and muscled limbs, and I left her to the crowd that had gathered around.

Surprisingly, it was the rawness of Tangled that truly emptied me and left me dry.

“I must speak with Murdock,” I gasped, the ass of Tangled suckling the cum from my cock. I pulled out, allowing another man to enter her while James still thrust his manhood into the mumbling girl's mouth.

“Tomorrow night, my friend,” James promised. “After the Village of the Damned.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

THE VILLAGE OF THE DAMNED

There were no handicaps placed on the animals before the third day's race, a thing which caught some comment from those that had never seen a race before. Those of us that knew what was coming did not want to spoil the surprise, and so said nothing. Ivo and James and I smiled at one another, Ivo making certain that the natives of the Village of the Damned had not mangled any of the audio or video recording devices. They were known to do so some of the time, but everything checked out. They were, perhaps, as eager as the rest of us.

I found James chatting with Matthew Murdock over breakfast, and he waved me over.

"Matthew, this is my good friend, Zamir Pokupec," James said, clasping me on the back. "He is in the market for a slave animal of his very own, and I know that you have business to conduct back in America and so cannot see to the training and care of Tangled."

"This is true," Matthew said, his grin manic. "And the way people are back home, hell, you'd think they'd actually bought into that whole democracy thing."

James and I exchanged a glance, and Matthew laughed.

"Oh, it's a useful enough fiction, but we're an oligarchy," Matthew said, still laughing. "A country of traitors and criminals deluding themselves into a moral high ground. You know what Tangled's crime was? Trying to be smart while being poor, and then trying to make sense of her world."

I could not help but sneer at the corruption of the west, but it was hard to argue with a system that was going to provide me with such a lovely creature.

"She's skittish, your Tangled," I said, "but I can give her a home, make sure she's trained and prepared for your arrival."

"I'm sure my better half would love that," Matthew said, grinning. "Greed and envy and pride, am I right? The very best virtues in all of us."

I did not know how to respond to this.

"Tell you what," Matthew said, shifting and looking at James, "If your animal loses, your lovely little Duchess, I'll let your pal Zamir train and hold onto my Tangled. Part of that deal, though, is that she has to lose hard. None of this *only-used-by-nobles* bullshit. I want that bitch fucked by every low born citizen of this lovely little country."

James nodded and I smiled. Neither of us thought that would be a problem.

“You guys know something I don't?” he asked, frowning. We both kept our silence. “No cheating, now. I can hear when you lie. No shocking her so she can't run, not like the Countess is doing to poor Katie. Your Duchess has got to lose fair and square.”

“Not a worry,” I said. We all shook hands, then James and I clasped one another on the back and walked away.

The animals were brought out to the starting line: the terrified and shivering Tangled and shattered broken Katie, the fierce Scarlet and experienced Karma, the determined Dearest and lovely Trophy, the pair of Punky and Mouse, the vicious Kitkat. Last, and to the roar of our crowd, was brought out the lovely Lara Croft, exposed and dripping, her eyes downcast as Steph and Neville and dozens of others called the only name that mattered to her anymore: Duchess.

When the race began, the ones we had expected to take off at a sprint did: Trophy took an early lead, but lacked the endurance to keep it. Soon, Lara and Dearest were moving past her, followed quickly by Karma, Scarlet, and Kitkat. The five of them were clear and away faster and possessed of a higher constitution than the others.

Excepting perhaps poor Katie, but with the Countess toying with her no one would ever know.

Kitkat spent much of the first hour trying to sweep the other animals in the race, kicking at their legs, and they responded by avoiding her and trying to lead her to the other animals. She was happy to attack whomever was closest, so that made for an entertaining first hour and bets were fast and furious for that whole time as to who she would knock down. Finally, Dearest spun around and kicked the violent woman in her abdomen, sent her sprawling backwards before Dearest spun on her heel and pushed her way back to the front.

Lara had taken the lead while Dearest had dealt with Gutters, with Karma bringing up a close third and Scarlet fighting to pass all of them. When they were in sight of the Village of the Damned, Scarlet finally managed to pass Karma – but then, Karma knew better than to be one of the first people to enter that sacred place. The others did not.

The gates were opened as the animals approached – Lara, Dearest, and Scarlet all entering as one. Lara knew somewhat of what to expect, some stray bit of memory surviving her incarceration, but the other two were surprised by the cobblestone roads, the broken architecture that had been built on top of Roman ruins, the thick fogs that clung to every surface.

All three of them slowed, taking stock of the strange world around them, the shadowy half-faces that they could almost see lurking around them. Unconsciously, all three of them moved closer together, though whether this was for protection or warmth I could not say. Goose-flesh rose on all of them, the three of them shivering as they ventured forth.

The first attack came when they were passing an alley – one of the madmen that called the Village of the Damned his home lurched forward, stumbled into Scarlet, and grabbed Dearest's breast. His hand quested underneath her shirt and her eyes widened, then narrowed, a small gasp brushing past her gag. When she tried to twist away his firm grip kept him locked in place. The man's other hand undid his belt and he began to masturbate furiously, Scarlet looking on in confusion, Lara watching with terror.

She had been here. She knew what these people were capable of.

Now, she could not protect herself.

Eventually, Dearest managed to stagger backward, striking the man in the knee. They watched, all three of them wary, but the man wandered off and away, pausing only to throw his ejaculate behind him before collapsing into a moaning ball. The goo struck Dearest and Scarlet mostly, but Lara caught some of it. The three of them stared at one another, their eyes full of fear born of ignorance, their mouths kept silent by their bits.

Scarlet yelped. Her owner was urging her onwards. The other two stayed close.

Through the shadowed broken city the three trembled, keeping a slow but steady pace. Lara, ever watchful, caught sight of the dog first – licking at a viscous fluid left beside some abandoned vegetables. The dog looked up at them, then went back to licking the goo, not showing any interest in them. Cautiously, slowly, they approached.

A man had been chained to a wall, manacles linking his wrists, neck, and ankles to a distant door. He was naked and as large as he had been the year before, a towering mass of muscle that bellowed something without meaning and charged, yanking on his chains, thrusting his manhood towards the cowering women that he was unable to reach.

While their eyes were locked on him, the dog pressed his snout into Scarlet's core, licking her. Scarlet jumped, looked like she might kick the dog, but the man howled and the dog responded, scampering off into the mists as the man pulled at each chain and the wall behind him shook. All three animals fled, fled deeper into the Village of the Damned.

From out of the mist and shadows they came, gnarled and old, wizened figures in black robes covered in drooping wrinkles, their weathered flesh reaching out and touching all three woman, looping into the reins that held them, leading them deeper into the city while fingers and tongues and calves wrapped around the taut young bodies of their captives.

Dearest would have none of it, lashing out with surprising kicks that brought hisses of sympathy from our distant crowd, and Ivo and I looked at one another before turning our attention to Karin.

“Who is this woman, your Dearest?” Ivo asked.

“My worthy rival,” Karin answered, smiling.

Scarlet followed Dearest's example, pulling back and driving her forehead into one of the old creatures that were leading all of them astray. We watched, all of us, wondering if Lara would dare to strike against those that were dragging her deeper into the thick mists, molesting her all the while. We watched as the glaze over her eyes thawed. She watched the other two fight, some stray thought reminding her that this was something she was capable of.

Roaring through her gag, Lara Croft ducked down and drove herself up at one of the old people holding her, knocking the holder to the ground. With that third attack, the old people whimpered and turned away from the women they had been so eager to touch before, hiding their faces and remaining perfectly still. The three animals looked at one another, each meeting the other's eyes, and though none of us could know what passed between them we knew that something had.

From out of the mist a shadow sprinted forth – Kitkat, recovered from her tumble and now running full tilt, past the place where the three other animals had made their stand. From the distance, the three of them heard what sounded like chains breaking, and a roar that echoed through the mists. They looked at one another, these three animals, and then as one they took off after Kitkat as fast their legs could carry them.

The mists of the Village made running blind foolish, or so one would think, but the three of them soon caught up with the aggressive Kitkat. The Village of the Damned did not have a layout that was easy to understand, and less so in the mists – of them, only Lara had any idea of where she was going. Gutters Kitkat ed off ahead, cut down a path that had led her in a giant circle, and the three that were chasing her arrived just in time to see what fate claimed her.

A single naked figure fell from up above, wrapping an arm around Kitkat and pulling the startled woman to the ground with him. Four more figures followed, dropping out of the fog and claiming her long legs and bound arms, tugging at her bindings and what was bound. Gutters shrieked, her wide eyes pleading, but the three women that might have helped her watched her and backed away slowly, leaving Kitkat to the unwanted affections of strangers.

The pleading whimpers of passion haunted their steps now, hunting them all like predators.

Lara managed to make it look like she knew where she was going, and the other two started to follow. James laughed and shook his head.

“Look at her,” James grinned, “such a natural leader. We'll have to see if we can whip that out of her again.”

“Believe in Drasha,” I laughed, clasped him on the back, knowing that we would do this thing together but enjoying the show of what was.

As they moved through the mist, their pointed boots click-clacking against the ancient cobblestones, a dull whispering began to pick up frequency from up above them. From where we watched the betting quickly picked up, for we all knew what must happen next.

Fearfully, the animals looked to the skies to see window shutters thrown wide, hideous faces looking down and speaking to one another with sounds that could not possibly be a language. As the speakers noticed the animals noticing them, they grew louder, yelling at one another.

The girls looked up and up, trying to make sense of the insane ramblings that hounded them from above. Shutters were thrown wide and banged against the old ruined window frames, pots and pans banged together, and the three animals looked around with wide eyes and skittish legs, bounding at every sound and call that hounded them through the streets.

Slowly, carefully, the three of them moved onwards, their eyes skybound – and so, when the windows beside them crashed open and groping fingers reached forth, all three of them were caught off guard. It was Dearest who was furthest along, and so it was Dearest those hands claimed, pulling her closer to the window frame and past it, and within moments she was gone.

Where we were, Karin screamed and expressed concern, but Ivo was there to calm her.

“The people in the Village know an offering when they see one,” he assured her. “They will not hurt your Dearest too much.”

Cries poured out of the darkened window frame, mingled passion and hurt and terror, and they did nothing to convince anyone that Ivo was speaking the truth.

As the animals stared into the darkness after their friend, they failed to notice the slithering sound of chains rattling around the ground behind them. They both turned just in time to see the chained man, now free, wrap his limbs around Scarlet. Howling, he slammed her into a wall until she went limp, then grinned at Lara before hauling away his prize.

“Well,” Derek sighed, frowning as he cleaned his glasses, “It's not like she hasn't dealt with things like that before.”

Lara gave chase, but the chained man was larger and faster and vanished quickly into the mist and swirling spiraling streets. Still Lara ran until she was hopelessly lost. Above her, the shutters clattered and the whispers began, a cruel howling wafting through the streets and haunting her every step.

“Heloo. Dyou spake English?”

And, with those words, all else around the scared animal fell silent.

Sounds still echoed around her, but they were distant things – the screams of Kitkat and Scarlet, the muffled moans of Dearest, the cries of the other animals as they entered the Village of the Damned – but this singular voice cut through the madness of the village, silenced and calmed the world around it.

Lara, still skittish, danced in place and turned to face the speaker – a somber looking man in a long gray robe with a black rope belt looped around his hips, the line of it trailing down to his knees. His thick black mane and beard cared for with fastidious detail. He held up his hands and motioned towards her, a rosary wrapped around the fingers of one hand.

“Dyo nyet be scared,” the priest said. His voice was deep but his words were stilted and stiff, yet still he spoke in a baritone meant for the oldest chants. “I myen you nyet arm. I ken of the Great Game, yand lyam ere to lead you to safety.”

He approached her slowly. I looked at Ivo, who shook his head. Transfixed, we watched as the man slowly approached Lara, his eyes radiating concern. She looked around, looked like she might try to run, but he got closer to her and wrapped a hand around her bare hips.

“Easee, easee,” he whispered, his hand reaching around to the small of her back. “Iyam gong free you.” Her eyes widened as he said the word free, recognizing what that might mean. James reached for his phone but the priest did something to the box and James yelled.

“What the fuck is going on?” James demanded, looking at the two of us.

“I do not know,” Ivo said, his eyes narrowing, “but we will find out soon.”

“Iyam gong to remave your bit,” he said, his hands moving with agonizing slowness towards her face. “Nod ifn you unnersand.” She nodded, her eyes wide and terrified as his fingers explored the mechanism that held her tongue and freed her of it. When he offered her water, she drank eagerly.

“...” she said, trying and failing to form words. The old priest nodded in sympathy.

“Words they ill came beck to ye,” he said. “Follow. My order can gyet the reyst of the byndings off you yand get you to safety. The people outside the village cannot see you now.”

She nodded, accepting the lie, and James seemed mollified but Ivo and I shared a glance – was the priest lying or wrong? Why did his accent come and go? Ivo shook his head, admitting ignorance, and we turned to watch whatever truth might yet unfold. Lara followed the man into his church, a tall ruin in the heart of the Village of the Damned, near the place where she had once stolen the relics of a long dead Emperor.

“Dyou memory ow to spake?” the priest asked. Lara nodded.

“I,” she stumbled over the single word, crying as she spoke it. “I.” She said that single word like it meant everything. The old priest nodded.

“Tyake a moment,” he said. “Then follow.”

He led her deeper into the church, towards a place where other members of his order had gathered. They were gathered in a circle around a statue of Bachuus, all of their heads bowed as they chanted a prayer in some tongue humanity must have abandoned long ago. Lara was comforted by the sound until she got closer, until she saw that none of the robes the priests wore covered their backs - their shoulder blades and asses were exposed, all of them naked, only the black belts holding the half-garments in place.

As one, their eyes turned to her, focusing on her, and their lips split into wide grins as they studied her. She tried to run, but the priest that had brought her to this fell sanctity held her in place by the reins still connecting her breasts and lowest lips. She whimpered, trying to pull away as the priests approached her, shaking her head and crying out as they encircled her.

“We nyame you defiler of arr temple,” the priest who had brought her here whispered, as hands reached out and pulled the lines from her, tearing the harness from her naked body and the small box from the small of her back. Rough hands encircled her neck and held her, pulling the boots off her feet, leaving her naked as she wept and writhed, trying in vain to free herself. “*Bachuus demands his own justice.*”

This last sentence was spoken perfectly, with an accent that mirrored the one that Lara had once possessed. Her eyes were wide when she met his narrowing ones, her cries growing louder as he approached her. She was free now, all her limbs released from the bondage that had held them for so long, but her arms were useless from their long incarceration and she could not fully close her jaw after having it forced open for years. Her efforts to fight off the order of priests was pathetic as they let the robes fall from their thin but muscled bodies, the long scars carved into them proof of their suffering.

When the speaking priest grabbed her by the throat and pulled her lips to his, there was nothing she could do. Her slapping hands were grabbed, her silky fingers wrapped around naked cocks. Her legs were pulled apart and off the ground so that the things that filled her could be pulled out and replaced by flesh, the priest kissing her then using her hair to guide her drooling mouth to his cock.

There was something wonderful about watching the acceptance in her face as her lips parted further, allowing the massive organ to slide across her tongue and down her throat. The priest growled as she suckled on him, pulling him in right to the root as every last part of her was defiled. The first coating of cum was little more than a sheen of white sweat that clung to her skin, but the priests kept her there, kept her there, taking turns with her, thrusting into her and against her in ways that even Ivo and myself had never considered, in ways that left James gaping.

Steph looked on, taking notes.

It was morning when they finally let the twitching woman fall to the ground. She had to blink past the strands of sperm that coated her pretty features, her mouth spilling the seed of the men that had used her for the whole night. Not a bit of her was not so covered, not so leaking.

“Your debt is paid,” the priest said, his accent and voice an echo of that which she had lost. “Until noon this day, no one will touch you. After that, Lara Croft, we will hunt for you and bring you back here. If we catch you we will never let you leave.”

It took time for her to find the strength to roll onto her side, hugging herself and twitching. The priests stood stock still around her, chanting in their strange language. Lara, shattered in mind and body from the orgy that had claimed her, crawled out of the church and into the streets. There, all the villagers had gathered, their silent faces passive as they lined the cobblestones, all of them silent as they watched her struggle to her feet.

None of them spoke. Other than their eyes, none of them moved. Lara looked at the sun, maybe trying to figure out the time, maybe startled by its brightness – but, freed of her bondage, she was able to move freely for the first time in more than four long years. She ran, keeping her head down and her eyes forward. She ran in the only direction she could – toward Candover, toward the harsh trails that would lead her away from Parmistan and back to the world.

“She's probably thinking that even the nothing I've left her with has got to be better than this,” James whispered, staring.

“She's right,” Steph murmured, her hand touching his.

A panting Lara managed to stumble past the gates of the Village of the Damned by ten o'clock. It was a long way from there to Candover, but she made it all by herself, alone. A crowd was waiting for her, staring at the cum-coated woman as she crossed the border and entered the capital of our glorious land. We all went to greet her, even James coming to check on her, and she looked up at him with a pathetic gratitude.

"Lara," he said, and she looked up at him through cum-soaked eyes, her hair matted to her head. "That's twice you've responded to your old name."

Her eyes widened and she screamed, screamed, screamed as the crowd fell on her.

"You came in last," James shouted after her, but I do not think she heard. The crowd dunked the poor animal in a barrel of water, then washed her down before they grabbed her anew. They were fresh from use of Dearest, Kitkat, Scarlet, and Trophy the night before, and inspired by what they had watched the priesthood inflict upon her.

"The first five to enter the Village of the Damned are inevitably the last to leave it," James called. A sputtering Lara was dragged into the town square, erect cocks and dripping cunts surrounding her, and so I think she did not hear him. "Enjoy your time with the common people, Lara. I've already booked you some remedial classes with Drasha."

We left Lara, then, and Matthew walked up to myself and James with a smile on his face.

"Got to say, you know how to run an entertaining event," he said. I clasped him on the back and he smiled.

"Tell you what, you train up my little Gwen like your little Lara, and you can join the timeshare I've got going. Sound like a deal?"

"Yes," I said, for how could I say anything less? My children would be delighted to play with the animal that had placed fourth in her first race. Mouse and Punky had kept their lead over Tangled, but I was sure with the proper training that Tangled would beat them next year.

"I still can't figure out why Karma stopped running, though," Matthew said, frowning as he looked to where Ivo was walking with his pet.

"It's not her first race," I answered, shrugging. "Karma was elusive in her last life, and retains some small skill in this one."

"What is this, the third or second race she's won? The fourth?" James asked. I shrugged. It seemed immaterial at that moment.

"Good for her," Matthew nodded, and we all turned our eyes to where Lara had given up, her body pounded and prodded, her open mouth filled.

"I don't envy that one," he said, shuddering. "Pretty, though. I don't suppose I could take a turn once everything is all said and done?" I looked towards my dear friend, wondering if he would help keep this man's good will intact, but I needn't have worried.

"Mr. Murdock," James said, smiling, "it would be her pleasure."

CHAPTER TWENTY

TENDER CARE

A few days after the Great Game, my dear friend and I made our way to Drasha's stables in Sirgeof. Drasha is waiting with her gleaming eyes and crooked smile, a crop held in one hand and pressed against her hip. We have had Duchess pull our chariot from Candover to here, and the sweat-covered former Tomb Raider is panting and shaking when we finally allow her to stop.

Drasha she is not alone in her waiting. With her Steph Missing, the English girl having spent time with our glorious nation's premier pony trainer.

"She's hoping to continue training Lara in the days to come," James tells me, grinning as he passes a bottle of vodka to where I am standing. I take a long draught and clasp my friend on the back. "Today, Drasha will judge her and see if she is ready."

Our countrwoman taps Steph with her crop, sending her forward. Steph yelps in a pleasing way but walks forward, checking the clasps that bind Lara to our cart. She carefully undoes them, her fingers resting on Lara's midriff and trailing down to her hip as she sets Lara's reins free from our conveyance.

The former Tomb Raider shivers as Steph stands and takes her away, we watching as their asses sway. Drasha steps closer to us, kissing us in greeting and standing with her hands in front of her thighs. She is judging Steph, I am sure, but I am unsure how the English girl is being judged.

"Your Steph she is a quick study," Drasha tells us. "Let us see what she has learned."

Her back is to Steph as she speaks with us. James' friend has spent time learning how to bridle, saddle, and bit the ponies learning what is expected of them. We watch as she tugs at Lara's reins, as the former Tomb Raider whines with slumped shoulders, her gait wounded and tired.

Steph, I think, cares less about Lara than Drasha does.

"You tell me if she is acting in proper fashion," Drasha says. "I will check video later, but it is important for your Steph to think she is acting on her own."

We watch and report as Steph checks the harness, the bindings, and the bit. We watch as she tugs at all of Lara's reins individually, as Lara winces and shuffles her feet as she is pulled and pushed one way and then the other. It pleases James and Steph, I think, to see that Lara still feels shamed at being directed in such an intimate manner.

"A lifetime's training of manners is hard to crumble," Drasha admits when we mention this to her, "but I like to think it is one of the only things left of the woman that was."

Drasha has told us that the bindings the stablehands prepare are tightened so that the animal is aware of her bondage but not harmed by it. Because of our stance, we see Steph tighten Lara's bindings a little more than what they were, watch as Lara whimpers and mention nothing of that to Drasha. James likes to watch Lara suffer, I know. Her mewling makes him happy, and like all good men I enjoy when my friends are happy.

I know that there are numbers on the harness, designed to make it easy for grooms and stablehands to keep track of how tight those bindings are. The smaller a number is, the tighter the bindings – James has told me that Lara is typically a six.

Quiet, I wonder how much Steph has tightened the harness. The way it has settled now makes Lara stiffen, her hips and breasts pushed out in a way that is enticing for us and painful for her. Her eyes are pleading as she looks at James and myself for aid, but our only alliance is with her tormentor.

“All done,” Steph calls, and Drasha directs us to benches where we can watch the afternoon to come in relative comfort. We go as directed, James setting the bottle of vodka between us.

Drasha then goes and checks on the Croft woman, looking in at her harness. She curses softly and James uses his tablet to get a closer look, commandeering one of the fly-drones closest to the three women. He chuckles to himself, sharing the view with me as Drasha studies the harness and loosens the tightness from four to five.

“You must be careful of this,” Drasha cautions, waving Steph closer. “The idiot stablehands in Candover made her harness too tight, which can cause nerve damage and harm the animal permanently. Remember, what is our motto?”

“They do not suffer except what we will them to,” Steph says. She sounds like she is quoting.

“Very good,” Drasha answers, flashing Steph a crooked smile and offering her a long whip. “Now, show me how you put an animal through her paces.”

Steph takes the reins and cracks them like the whip she has taken in her other hand. Lara's head jerks and she covers as her body's most intimate parts are pulled and jerked, sending her stumbling. Steph yells an order and cracks her whip, the long cord wrapping around Lara's ass and hip, urging her onward.

“That's a skill,” I note.

“What is?” James asks, leaning back with a leering grin as Lara raises her knee to a ninety-degree angle and lets her calf dangle, the motion more aesthetic than practical. “Getting her to walk?”

“No,” I say, licking my lips. “Whipping her without getting tangled in the reins.”

Steph has Lara canter around the stables for a full half hour, a long winding circuit that. It amuses me to think that such a willful explorer might be reduced to such a simple track, and I am sure Lara would be offended by such thoughts if there were anything left of her mind. As it is, the criminal manages to keep her paces until Steph strikes her again with the whip and barks out another command.

Now Lara trots, her thighs lifting into a small hop that makes her movement faster. This is training for the second day of the Great Game, I think, and Steph keeps her moving, always moving, circling around the stables one way and then the other. Steph is as hypnotized by the way Lara's ass moves as James and myself are, and none of us are really paying attention when Drasha calls for a halt.

"Your technique it is good," Drasha says while Lara pants, her eyes downcast. "Now, look at her and tell me what you see."

"An animal."

"A tired and dehydrated animal," Drasha corrects. "You must allow her rest and water."

"What would you recommend?" Steph asks, as Drasha offers another one of her crooked smiles. She sends Steph to collect a water bottle and takes Lara's reins, coming to sit near us and bringing Duchess with her. Drasha pulls down her pants and sits, spreading her legs as Steph returns with the water, pulling Lara down to her knees.

Lara looks confused as Drasha pulled her closer and wraps the Tomb Raider's reins around her thighs, Lara's face inches from Drasha's exposed womanhood. Drasha claims the bottle, twists off the top, tilts the bottle so that water trickles across her womanhood. She grabs Lara's hair, commanding her with a single word.

"Drink."

And Lara does, lips lashing in and out of Drasha's folds, getting a taste of her trainer along with the water from the bottle. Drasha's smile widens, her cheeks flushed as she spills more water and Lara struggles to catch it, a hard thing when her tongue is trapped – she is forced to use her lips, suckling hard at the liquid she has been gifted with.

When Drasha cums she pulls Lara's face tight into her and we watch Lara struggle with breathlessness, weeping and panting when Drasha finally lets her go. Her chin and jaw are marred by Drasha's excitement, at Drasha takes the time to scoop up that offering and wipe it all off in Lara's mouth.

"Swallow," Drasha says, and Lara does. A thoroughly satisfied Drasha looks up at Steph and offers her back the reins. "Now, show me how you make her sprint."

Lara is pulled back to her feet, Steph whipping her ass to make her go faster. Though Lara no longer has to lift her thighs so high, there is still a languid grace to her – an echo, perhaps, of the woman she once was. Steph has her run at her fastest and then whips her to run faster still, having her sprint in five minute spurts before giving her a chance to catch her breath before doing it all over again.

It is dark when Steph allows her to stop, walking closer to where James and I are sitting and pulling the panting shaking criminal after her. She looks at James and I, flushing as she undoes her pants and slips them down off her hips, her thighs, past her calves and ankles. She pulls Lara closer to her, forces the animal down on her knees and looks up at Drasha for approval.

The trainer twists off the lid and hands her a water bottle.

“Drink,” Steph demands, tilting the water bottle, and Lara does as she has been ordered.

“You know,” Steph purrs, running the whip along Lara's back as she enjoys the feel of the animal's lips, “Sam was my friend first. My *lover* first. And then this bitch, this Lara Croft person, stole Sam from me and had her kick me off the expedition to Yamatai.

“And then, and then, this bitch went and got Sam broken. Sam is still in an asylum somewhere because of something this Lara Croft bitch did to her. I wanted to *kill* her. I wanted to make her suffer and I wanted her to die, but this... this is so much... ah, right there, yes...

“This is so much better than I ever could have imagined.”

Steph screamed her orgasm, raising her legs and pulling Lara in tight, finally releasing her former rival and letting her fall into the dust and dirt. She kicked at Lara, sending the woman sprawled on her back, her heaving breasts and belly exposed as she grabbed Lara by the collar and hauled her up so she could spit in her face.

“I would have kept Sam safe,” Steph hissed. “You could have remained a quiet little nothing, but now Sam is broken and you're just a whore.”

“No,” Drasha says, coming to sit beside Steph and clasping her on the back. “A whore fucks people for money. Duchess fucks people because we tell her to.”

Steph turned to Drasha then, the hate in her eyes softening as she let Lara fall back to earth, as she wrapped her arms around Drasha's shoulders with a long sob. The trainer looked at us and both James and I nodded our understanding. We stood, leaving the vodka behind, leaving Lara in the muck at their feet.

“At least,” Steph sniffled, her words carried to us as we left them women to their moment, “At least the bitch now knows her place.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

CROFT STABLES

“Father, when can Tangled come home with us?” my eldest daughter asked me. I smiled at her, clasping her on the back, amused by her excitement. We were at the breakfast table, all of the family, enjoying this meal together as the late summer sun pushed through the window. That light touched our table and beyond, brushing past the sole bag I had prepared at my dear friend's request.

“Are you sure you are ready for such a responsibility?” I teased. She laughed and shook her head, looking at her siblings – already, Tangled's training was coming along, she taking to the task much quicker than Lara had. She lacked the fire that James' property possessed, or had until the Great Game. Now, Lara was docile and passive. The wildness in Tangled was born of shock instead of dignity, as we had been assured that the Gwen Stacy person she had been did not possess that virtue.

“Father,” my daughter drawled, and several of the other children looked at her and laughed. I met my wife's eyes and smiled when she gave a slight nod.

“Ah,” I smiled, and shook my head. “Drasha says she can stable here until winter, but Tangled has never seen a winter like ours before and must be back in Sirgeof for that season. She will be dropping your pet off sometime today.”

The children looked at their mother for confirmation, and she smiled at their excited faces when they knew my words.

“It's true,” she confirmed. “You will get Tangled to help with the harvest in your father's absence.”

It was a ploy my wife and I had devised, one to take the sting away from the journey I was about to make. Following the Great Game, James had escorted Steph back to Britian and been gone for a full month before returning. He had asked me to go with him to his homeland, where he planned to stable Duchess for the winter. Given all that he had done for me, how could I deny him this small favor?

And so my wife and I kissed one another good-bye, and I hugged my children as Tangled arrived. Her eyes had lost some of their wide terror, a dull compliance seeping into them. The angry red welts along her ass and thighs most likely had much to do with that.

“Take good care of my family,” I told her, pulling on her reins. She nodded her head as I cupped one breast, tweaking the nipple to drive home the point. She stamped one of her feet, her eyes downcast and cheeks a delicious shade of pink. I knew my eldest son had taken a liking to her, and doubted the two of them would ever be far apart. Her eyes flickered to him, her arousal leaking down her thighs, and I smiled and waved both my eldest children over.

"She had been a drug addict, drop-out, and drummer of a band back in her former life," Drasha told me, "but we have freed her from her former addictions."

"We will be a good influence on her," my daughter agreed, taking Tangled's reins and leading the animal off to my family's affections. I nodded, watching the sway of her hips, wondering if she understood that this life would be better than the one she had wasted? My family and I hugged once more when James arrived, and I stepped onto the back of his chariot and allowed him to guide us from Candover and to the paths that would take us down into the rest of the world.

"You're sure your comfortable with this?" James asked me, frowning as we looked down at the road we must take. "You know better than I, we won't be able to return until spring."

"I am sure, my dear friend," I said, clasping him on the back. In my heart I was less certain, and I gave my homeland a lingering look before the two of us turned to the task of preparing Lara for travel.

She could not keep her animal dressage on the way down – the treacherous paths would have ended her life, and though she was a criminal she had not been sentenced to death. We stripped her and she allowed this to be done, keeping her eyes downcast and her tongue still until she was naked in the morning light. We took in the sight, the two of us, and used her quickly one last time before our descent, for luck.

Though she would be kept mostly undressed, she was granted a comfortable pair of boots, ones that had once belonged to her in her old life, and a pair of gloves. She kept her collar, a length of rope used to keep her between James and myself. He had some misgivings about this, but Drasha had assured us that the former Tomb Raider was nothing but a dull echo of who she had once been.

And, indeed, though the climb down was perilous, she did not try to escape. She was docile, submissive, broken. Drasha's work was always the best, and when we reached the bottom I looked up towards my glorious homeland and thanked her for her good works, offering a prayer to Neptune, Justita, and Poena.

"Keep my family safe," I whispered, thinking of the fountains so far above us.

"They'll be fine," James answered, clasping me on the back with an easy grin. We got Lara to suck us off while waiting for the caravan he had arranged to take us to his home. They arrived a short time after Lara had suckled us both dry, twice each, and James was magnanimous enough to allow our guides each a turn. They were surprised by her tightness and compliance, smiling at one another as they thrust deep into her throat, her arms limp by her sides as she sputtered and choked upon their seed.

"Don't waste any," James said. Weary, Lara nodded and bent down, licking up whatever goo had dripped down onto the ground. By the time she had taken it all in we all of us were hard again, and she moved to the task she was meant for without complaint.

After we were all done with her, her boots were taken and she was forced to kneel in a steel shelled box. The inside wrought with foam that had been fitted for the smuggling of women, and Lara whimpered a little as two plugs filled her kneeling form as she settled in. She was fastened inside, two thick bands over her thighs before she forced to bend over, another phallus pushing past her lips and settling in the back of her throat as another band forced her to stay in this position. James stroked her hair as I studied the box, curious as the upper shell was brought over and fastened into place. Once this was done, Lara's small whimperings vanished along with the rest of her.

"The lower ones handle waste and keep her entertained," one of my guides explained. "The one in her mouth forces gruel down her throat, enough to keep her alive, and lets air in and out."

"It is healthy?" I asked. "The gruel?"

"She will have some vitamin deficiencies," the guide answered, then shrugged. "Nothing you won't be able to fix when you get where you're going."

The caravan took us to an airport in Dushanbe, where we boarded a private airplane and took off for the British Isles. I had never flown before, and the rattling of take off had me worried. James soothed me, explaining what we would find when we arrived at his country, and I was pleased with the meal and entertainment we were provided as we flew from one part of the world to another.

Steph greeted us when we landed, and we took a limousine from the airport to James' new residence, the former Croft Manor. The experience of being in an automobile was also a new one for me, and the easy luxury of it was strongly appealing. I stared out the window, watching the landscape flow by – from cityscape to pastoral, both larger than I would have thought possible.

"I've renamed it the Berners Estate," James said, smiling as the gates to his home opened. "Croft Manor, I mean. What do you think?"

"It is lovely," I answered, though in truth I had little knowledge of what it had looked like before James had claimed it.

The Berners Estate was a large patch of land, perhaps a quarter the size of Sirgeof all on its own. It was gated with ancient walls, the stonework fastidiously kept, and the manor itself was a large two story building that was almost as large as the airport had been. When the limousine came to a halt I exited and stared up at the solitary structure, it large in the way of a holy temple. James laughed at my expression.

"The Crofts knew how to live it up," he said, clasping me on the back. "Come, I'll show you your room."

The interior was as splendid as the exterior, tastefully decorated with relics of the ancient world, a large internal courtyard with floor to ceiling windows of stained glass allowing sunlight to trickle through. My room was as large as the estate we had given James back in Parmistan, and I was surprised by this. He laughed again.

"Come on," he said, gesturing for me to follow, "let me show you where we're setting up the former Miss Croft."

We went to collect her on the way, removing her from her shell. She winced as she was pulled out of the case, cried as her tight holes were pulled off of the gods that had been her sole company on this long journey. A viscous line trailed her first faltering steps, breaking as she stepped free and blinked in the light of her homeland and former home. She offered no resistance and looked around with dumb incomprehension as we quickly dressed her – harness and bit, tail and boots.

By the time we were done there was a flicker of light in her eyes, she craning her head to look pleadingly at the home that had once been hers. She whinnied, pawing at the ground with one of her hooves, looking at James with a question in her eyes.

“Oh, there's enough of you left to recognize your old home, bitch?” James taunted. He wrapped a hand around her hip, pulling her close to him, laughing as he fingered her and she wilted. “You probably don't remember signing over your home to me, do you?”

A grinning Steph walked over to Lara and pulled at her nipples, hardening them so that she could place the latticework of reins on the animal we had caught.

“We had you declared dead in absentia, Lara,” Steph said, forcing the criminal to look at her. “That paperwork you signed was a living will, and it gave most of your worldly belongings to James, here. It was witnessed by a couple of other lords you offended by being such a bitch.” Steph spat in Lara's face as she finished.

The criminal shook her head, bowing her features, shaking and crying while we looked on. Steph finished attaching the reins to the Tomb Raider, tugging on her bit, her nipples, her vaginal lips in turn to make certain they were fastened on tightly. The distraught Croft woman shuddered and shook, sobbing in a way that made me hard.

“She just responded to her old name,” I said. James spanked her and looked at me, smiling.

“Silly little bitch,” he said. “She should know better by now.”

The three of us led her to her new home – a stable that James had retrofitted to look like one of the stables back in glorious Parmistan. He slapped her ass again, tying her in for the night, forcing her eyes to watch recordings of her debasement while the phalluses in her lower holes throbbed.

“I've hired some people to care for you, same as the stablehands back in Parmistan,” James whispered in her ear, his hands tracing the line of her hip and then cupping her breasts, pulling on them as she whimpered. “They're orphans, fathers killed by some bitch adventurer. The house staff is mostly their mothers. I imagine everyone is going to take good care of you.”

James looked over at some of his staff, showing the teens how to pull the tail from her ass, and then we took turns fucking her before replacing the tail. While we slept on 2000-count linen sheets, Lara half-slept standing only four dozen steps from her former home. The maids all took turns spitting and pissing in Lara's food before feeding it to her, and the stablehands enjoyed cleaning her, fucking her, and cleaning her again.

Life settled into a routine similar to the one Lara had enjoyed in Parmistan, but that was not enough.

“There was a Great Game back in Parmistan,” James said, and let me explain to them how it worked. When I was done, he continued. “She came close to winning, but I think she could use some training. I want her to win next year, and I think that all of us together can make that happen.”

“What do you have in mind?” Steph asked. She was panting, having spent most of the day putting Lara through her paces and making sure to keep her hydrated, only stopping now for lunch. She was a frequent guest, and enjoyed tormenting Lara almost as much as the staff did.

“Karma, the winner, does this thing where she stops outside the Village of the Damned,” James said. “That's how she wins. Lara's faster than her and stronger than her, but that's, I think, where she loses. I don't want her to stop, though, not like Karma does. That just seems like cheating.”

“So, what do you have in mind?” Steph repeated, rolling her eyes and sending a half-smile my way. I smiled back. The two of us had been known to enjoy one another's company, and she had been showing me around London over the past number of weeks as the weather worsened and turned from scant sun to heavy rains.

James smiled.

Over the next week, a track was laid out for Lara to run through. Steph, James, and myself took turns directing the criminal from the comfort of a chariot while one of us held up an umbrella. James had laid out various stations where the staff would wait for her under small enclosures, where they could stay dry while waiting for the animal to come to them. When Lara reached a staff member she would be directed to that member, and be forced to use one of her holes to bring that staff member to orgasm.

She was timed, of course, with James setting goals for her to reach and having her whipped for every second she wasted. She became adept at milking cocks with her cunt, her hips bucking until a boy's eyes rolled into the back of his head and he staggered back, a line of sperm connecting Lara to the man that had so recently filled her.

The women, of course, enjoyed the services of Lara's clever tongue, removing her bit and grasping her hair, roughly shoving her face into the core of them. One after another Lara devoured them, driving them to ecstasy, all of them marking Lara with their ejaculate and piss.

Lara was never given a chance to recover from being used in this way – doing so would mar her time – but we all watched as she cried in her sleep, the images of her servicing so many permeating her damaged subconscious, projected on the screen she was forced to watch every night. Headphones had been added, white noise and soft whispers combined to let her know that this was a treatment that she enjoyed.

“Hey, I have an idea,” Steph said, smiling a cruel smile one morning.

James listened to it and laughed.

After her exercises an evening later, Lara was brought to dine with us towards the back patio of her former home. We were safe from the rain, under a large umbrella that kept us dry. Lara shivered out in the rain, the drops beating on her flesh and making her shiver as she watched us. We ate in front of her, watching old interviews with her on a brand new projector that James and Steph had set up outside. It was fascinating to watch her trying to recognize the woman she had been, some dull flicker of comprehension tickling her conscious mind.

“You know who that is, Duchess?” James asked, cutting a fine piece of rare venison and placing it in his mouth, savoring it as Lara ate her dry oats. The criminal shook her head weakly, her eyes dull from the humiliations that her crimes had brought her, and James smiled.

The lightning bolt struck him from his chair, pushing him past the patio and out into the fields behind the estate. Minutes passes and nobody moved, searing ozone warring with the scent of burning flesh to fill our nostrils. I watched, the hair on my arms standing on end as James twitched, once, the blackening flesh going limp as steaming blood erupted from his body.

A small Asian woman walked towards us, her eyes crackling with the fury of a thousand storms. When she opened her mouth her breathing was like thunder, the fury that radiated off of her painting the world into shades that lacked all color.

Her voice echoed, rumbled across the whole of the estate, but her words were a whisper that could not be escaped.

“That’s Lara Croft.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

ASCENDANT STORM

Duchess slowly came back to consciousness.

Something soft and light was pushing against her skin. She shrugged her shoulder, whining, and realized her arms were free. She blinked open her eyes, looking around, and realized she was inside a room. *That she was lying down.* That was strange – she could not remember the last time she had been inside a room, the last time she had been left unbound, the last time she had been permitted to lie down when one of the owners was not using her..

And she was unbound. Her eyes widened, surprise flooding her. She brought up her hands and looked at them, stretching her fingers. There was no harness around her torso, no boots holding her feet, nothing filling her. She sat up, looking around, the softness below her supportive and comfortable. *Mattress.* The word was foreign in her mind, her palms touching it, fingers curling in the fabric. Her face hurt for a moment, moving in a way that she was not familiar with.

It took her a moment to realize that she was smiling.

She cried for a while, holding herself.

Duchess felt curiously empty. Her fingers reached downwards and found that there was nothing plugging her. She gasped, mouth opening, and her hands flew to her face – where was the bit? She threw aside the soft lightness – *blankets* – that had covered her, standing up and breathing heavy, feeling strange and alien and wondering what was happening.

There was a sound that came from a panel of the wall. *Door.* She frowned, staring at the panel. It repeated. *Knock.* The sound was a knock. She opened her mouth, some distant memory telling her that this was the correct thing to do, but no sound would leave her throat.

The panel shifted and she skittered back, raising her arms. A small girl entered the room, her expression grave. Duchess took more steps backwards, looking for some place she might flee to, but there was nowhere for her to go. Reluctant, scared, she looked at the newcomer. Something about the girl that tickled some far distant memory. She knew this girl. Loved her. Something bad had happened between them and then...

Lightning flashed in the girl's eyes and Duchess jumped backwards, skittish, putting the thing with the soft – *bed* – that she had been lying on before between them. The girl watched her, eyes gentle, her hands spread by her sides.

“Lara?” the girl said. Duchess shook her head. That was not her name. That name was a trick, an invitation to suffering, and she would not acknowledge it. “Lara, it's Sam. Do you remember me?”

There is a haze in her mind. The words forged themselves out of the static in the air. Duchess looked around for their source, found nothing. She crouched down behind the bed, looking at the still open panel. She could run. No one could catch her, not even the people in the Village of the Damned, not now.

“Lara, it's okay now,” the woman named Sam said. Duchess tried to hide, wondering where her owner was, wondering what new game this was. She would not fall for it. “Lara, do you remember Yamatai?”

Duchess frowned. That name was familiar. Who was this girl that called lightning from the skies? Something there tickled a memory.

There, the static voice said.

Electricity danced around her.

Lara screamed.

When the pain stopped she was curled on the ground and Sam was holding her, rocking her back and forth and whispering comforting lies to her. She tried to speak but words were still beyond her.

“Lara, it's okay,” Sam said, and Lara wanted to believe this, wanted to believe it so bad she started crying. Sam cried with her, the two of them holding one another.

Later, the two of them went downstairs. Lara was naked – it felt strange to wear clothing and she knew she would have to get used to it again, but Sam said that was okay. She could take what time she needed to recover.

“H-home?” Lara said. Her voice cracked at the word, her tongue stumbling over the sound as she sadly looked at where they were – Croft Manor, the home she had lost. Sam nodded understanding, reaching for Lara but not touching her, cautious.

“Croft Manor is yours again,” Sam said. “I had some physicians come to examine you while you were out. It's been a month, Lara. We've been providing you home care, but you're alive, your will was contested and everything that was yours, is yours.”

“...?”

She wants to know who I am.

Lara shuddered. That voice was a remnant of nightmares that now seemed pleasant compared to the last four and a half years of her life. *Himiko*. The name was a word, one she whispered with fear and trembling. Sam nodded, pulling her hand away. Lara stared at it, wanting the touch, not wanting the touch. She frowned, hugging herself, confused.

“The Empress and I have come to an agreement,” Sam said. “We're working together now. She needs my help to find an heir, someone she can inhabit once I'm dead. We're going to find a coma patient, eventually, and perform the ritual.”

Such things did not exist in my time, Himiko hissed. *With your resources we will fake an identity for me. For now, this is enough.*

"Thanks," Sam said, a smile flickering across her features. The hissing around them sounded smug.

In the meantime, I need to learn about this world and have agents in it, Himiko said, her voice a static hiss that leaked out of every outlet, along every copper wire. *Before I was merely the storm. Now, I am electricity and wind and water. This world should be mine.*

"I've seen the Empress' soul," Sam said, leading Lara into the kitchens. "Not all of the stories were false. She was fair, if harsh, but that was what her times made her."

This is a new world, Himiko said. *I will master my part of it, cultivate a new kingdom. You will serve me.*

Lara froze at that, shuddering.

"It's okay, Lara," Sam said. She held open her palm and Lara reached for it, tentatively rested her own hand against Sam's. The touch was warm, soft, undemanding – so unlike all the touches she had known for such a long time. Sam didn't pull Lara anywhere, was careful about touching her – every hesitation a request. "Look, Croft Manor is yours again. Your things have been returned to you. People know you're alive and that you were hurt, so some people may come to check up on you, but we're controlling access as best we can."

"O-wn... owner." Lara struggled with the word.

"Do you mean James?" Sam asked. Lara nodded. "I wouldn't worry about him."

"W." Lara swallowed. "W-what?"

I have had a thousand years to contemplate fates worse than death.

Lara stared at nothing, remembering the dried and withered bones of the Empress.

I boiled his blood and made his muscles explode, but I protected his brain and other organs, Himiko hissed, and there was satisfaction in her tone. *Not his eyes. I boiled them in the sockets. Not his tongue. I seared the buds away. He can hear. Perhaps smell. His nervous system will feed him pain unending.*

Lara shuddered, bowing her head so that neither Sam or Himiko would see her smile.

"That bitch Steph and the foreign guy dragged what was left of him away," Sam said. "He'll never recover from what we did to him."

It was a punishment well dealt. Himiko sounded smug. *You are both mine and mine alone, my agents in this world. Anyone that harms one of my servants will suffer the consequences.*

Lara was not sure how to respond to that. She followed Sam into the kitchen, allowed Sam to cook for her. The taste of real food after so long without made her cry, driving her to the ground, the sensation overwhelming her. When she sat there, dumbstruck and shuddering, Sam offered a hand. Lara clung onto her, sobbing heavily.

"You're free, Lara," Sam repeated, stroking her hair.

"Oth... o... others," sobbed Lara.

"We know," Sam whispered.

This world is wrong, Himiko added. I can sense it in ways you cannot. We will fix this world, the three of us. We will find who is responsible for this and we will boil the blood in their veins. The fate your betrayer suffers will seem a pleasant dream compared to what we three will inflict upon that enemy.

Lara remembered that Himiko had good reason to despise traitors. She nodded. This, she could understand.

“We need you to do it, Lara,” Sam added. “We need the Tomb Raider.”

Lara sat back and hugged herself and shook her head. She wasn't sure she had that in her anymore.

You survived Yamatai, Himiko said, and Lara could feel electricity dance along her skin. You found my home and defeated me in my lair. You are a warrior, Duchess Croft. Your rank means 'Warlord,' and you will be my Warlord, my sword in this world. You will find my enemies. We will have our revenge.

“She needs time to recover, Empress,” Sam said, “if she agrees to do it.”

“I,” Lara said, swallowing, looking around the room. “Do.”

Take Parmistan into your soul the way you did Yamatai, the way you did Syria and Russia, Himiko said. Use what you have survived to make you stronger. You have beat back horror in the past. You will do so again. You are not alone.

“Need,” Lara said, standing and struggling with the word, the concept. Her muscles screamed at her as she moved, aching from disuse. She shook her head, hissing, forcing herself to stand tall. “Run.”

“Run?” Sam asked.

She needs to be exercised the way the Parmistani people exercised her, Himiko said. She is in the best shape of her life. We will keep her physically like this while rebuilding her mind.

“We will not do that to her,” Sam spat.

It will be different, Himiko hissed. The Parmistani people acted from the sickness they were set to protect the world from. There is another like myself there, but his influence is weak this far from his home. This will be our temple, and your motivation will help Lara heal while playing into something that she is familiar with.

“My motivation?” Sam asked, looking at Lara. Lara met her eyes. “What is my motivation?”

“Love.” The word was wet and warm on Lara's lips. Sam stared at her, and when she offered a hand Lara took it.

Around them, Himiko hissed approvingly.

THE END

Thank you for your support :)

Linda and Ben

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