

# **Sweat, Strength, and Determination**

**Katie Fleming**

**R**ed pen in hand, Lara Croft flipped through the newspaper, searching for the perfect ad. Summer was fast approaching and she was looking for something fun to keep her active until her vacation.

“Any luck, Lara?” Winston, her butler, asked. She shook her head and continued to scan the pages. They were sitting outside on the edge of her large water fountain. A warm breeze carried on it the sweet smells of flowers and freshly cut grass.

“Winston, look!” Lara pointed to a small ad at the bottom of a page.

Intensive training: do you have speed, determination, and strength? We want YOU! One selected male or female will be chosen at the end...to go on the world’s deadliest mission. Think you’re tough enough? Prove it. Send a video of your abilities before May 7. One hundred people will be chosen, and the training will begin! Can you do it?

Winston finished reading and glanced at Lara. “Can you be ready soon?” he asked.

Grinning, Lara nodded.

Two hours later, music blasted through the ten-foot speakers on Lara’s roof. Spotlights shone down, increasing the air temperature by 10°. Fog machines were turned on full blast, and the music’s volume increased. The bass pounded into Lara’s heart, her adrenaline level high. Cameras on? Check. Equipment ready? Check. Enemies loose? Check.

“A figure steps through a dark door, barely visible from the thickness of the fog. Her face wears a frown. Her arms and legs glisten with sweat. Holsters strapped to her

legs, magnum pistols snuggled in.” Winston’s deep voice was perfect for the narration. He zoomed in the camera on Lara’s face. *Take it away!* he thought.

Lara’s brown eyes moved quickly to the left and then straight ahead. She clenched her fists tighter and stretched her legs. Suddenly running forward, she moved swiftly to the hard-core music. Lara jumped over a gap and then upward to grip a set of monkey bars. She grabbed rung after rung, her upper body strength making it seem effortless. Halfway across, a huge blast shook the air. Lara pulled her body into a chin-up position and held without shaking. Again, a pounding blast sounded. Lara let go of the rung and grabbed hold of a rope. With only her legs holding on, she slid down the rope, her body turned on a 90° angle, arms stretched out in front as she shot her pistols. She landed on the hard pavement and sprinted forward, flipping in the air, shooting several targets. Suddenly, Lara stopped.

“A huge shadow rises up in front of her. What is it? The fog is too thick! Is this the end?” (Laughter) “Yeah, right!” Winston boomed. Lara placed her hands on her hips, her foot impatiently tapping the ground. Two ear-splitting blasts sounded. Lara’s heart pounded harder and sweat beaded on her forehead. Suddenly, a large face appeared through the fog and looked at Lara. She grinned at it and with her right hand she pushed its face away hard.

“You’re it,” she said. Lara ran past it, her arms and legs pumping. She pushed a button on her watch and her eye camera turned on. She could see the massive machine racing toward her. Grinning, she continued to sprint forward. Lara ran to the huge wall that surrounded her house, turned around, and held onto a rope that was in front of the

wall. Beads of sweat fell from her face, some hitting the small mic that was attached to her headset.

She watched the machine stomp toward her, its pace slowing. Just as it arrived in front of Lara she tugged on the rope.

“You’re too slow for me,” Lara said to the machine just as she was jerked upward and onto the top of the wall.

“Is this it?” Winston’s voice blasted through the speakers. “Oh no. There’s more.” Lara climbed onto her motorcycle, conveniently parked in front of her. She drove ahead toward her racetrack where there weren’t any spotlights to light up the track. Lara hopped the bike down onto the centre of the track and waited patiently.

“Dead zone?” Winston asked.

“No,” she spoke into her headset. Right on cue, five headlights turned on, illuminating Lara’s face. She could hear the riders cranking their throttles. Her eyebrows arched in a challenge, Lara motioned them to come. The five motorcycles sped forward, all aiming for her. Lara watched with a steady gaze.

“It’s the end!” Winston yelled, trying not to laugh. He could hardly wait to show the movie to Lara. At the last second before Lara became new dirt for her track, she jumped upward and grabbed hold of a bar. The motorcycles rushed underneath her as she flipped around the bar several times before landing back on the ground. The riders turned their motorcycles around. They were going to try again! Lara reached into her backpack and took out a flame-thrower. She turned it on full blast and made an impressive wall of fire in front of her. Fog suddenly dropped into the race track area and Lara lost vision of

the motorcycles. A moment later the air cleared and Lara looked with satisfaction at the grotesque scene before her.

“And this is just the beginning,” Winston’s voice echoed through the air. Lara looked at the camera and fired her flame-thrower at it with a smirk.

“That was perfect, Lara!” Winston called down from the roof. Lara grinned. The stunt men got up from the ground.

“Great job, guys!” she said. They bowed and began cleaning up the gory mess.

The next day, Lara shipped out her video first thing that morning. She hoped she would be accepted. Lara turned on the TV and was soon lost in the show.

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Two days later, the phone rang. Lara dashed to answer it.

“Hello?”

“May I speak with Ms. Lara Croft, please?” the voice asked.

“Speaking.”

“Ah! Ms. Croft, I am calling you to tell you that we received your video. It was marvellous! We would be delighted if you are still interested in the training?”

“Of course!” Lara happily responded.

“Excellent. I’ll put you on the phone with Carl. He will give you the rest of the details.”

Lara hung up the phone and smiled at Winston. “They’ve accepted me!”

“That’s great, Lara!” Winston replied.

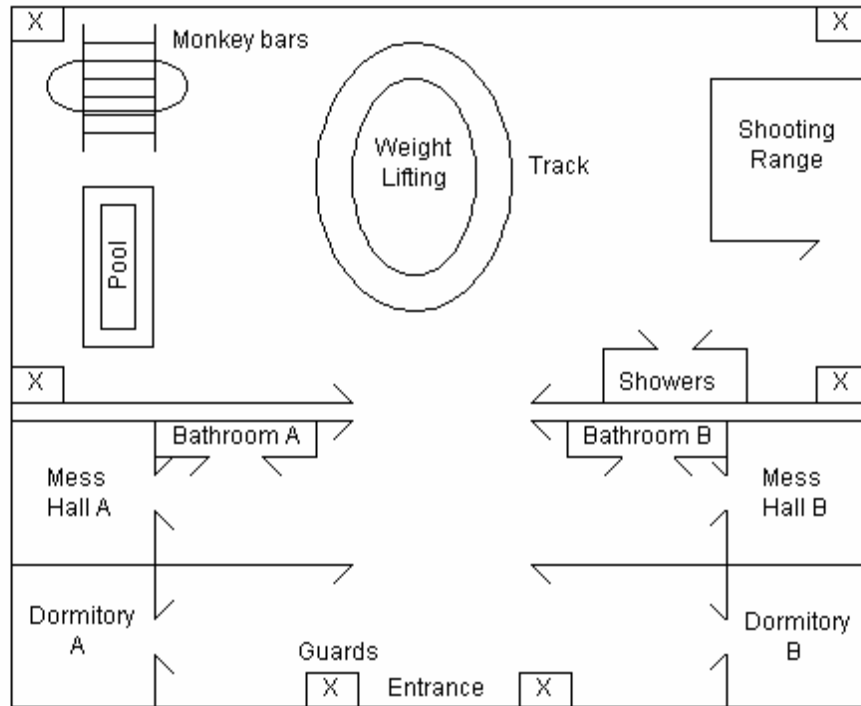
“I have to fly down to Nevada, and from there they’ll take me to the camp. It’s somewhere in the middle of the Nevada Desert.”

Not long after packing clothes, her headset, pistols (which she hid in her boots, and which a scanner could not detect), and a canteen, Lara stood outside by her car.

“Have fun, and good luck!” Winston said. Lara said goodbye and drove to the airport.

Eight hours later, the jeep jerked and jumped as Lara was driven to the camp. There were four jeeps ahead that Lara could count, and five behind. Fifteen minutes later, they arrived at the camp. Lara curiously surveyed her surroundings and saw that the building was huge. A fence surrounded the outside, topped with barbed wire. Two security guards greeted each jeep, pointing to where the passengers were to get out.

Lara and forty-nine others sat on their beds in Dormitory B. Across the large open hallway was Dormitory A, which also held fifty people. Cross-legged on her bed, which was at the far corner of the room touching the wall, Lara opened the small booklet of information about the camp that the security guards had given them. The first page held a map. The next page contained the layout of the building they were in: two dormitories, two mess halls, two bathrooms, one set of showers, one Olympic-size pool, one set of 20’ monkey bars above a hot sand pit, one shooting range, and one running track with weight lifting stations and thirteen guard/security stations.



Lara flipped to the next page and found herself looking at an itinerary.

<i>~Itinerary~</i>	
› Get up	6:00 AM
› Breakfast	6:30
› Training part I	7-10:00
› Break I	10-11:00
› Clean up	11-12 PM
› Lunch	12-12:45
› Training part II	12:45-3:00
› Break II	3-4:00
› Supper	4-5:00
› Testing	5-8:00
› Showers	8-9:30
› Bed	9:30-6:00

She nodded her head, thinking the itinerary was just fine. She glanced at her watch. 3:57 pm. In three minutes they would be called for supper. Lara looked around the room. The camp had separated the males from the females, exactly fifty of each gender. She saw a variety of ages. Two girls on the other side of the room were twins. Another girl sat three beds down from Lara, a makeup kit on her lap. She was applying green eye shadow. The girl next to Lara raised an eyebrow.

“Looks like we’ve got a pile of wimps if you ask me,” she said.

Lara shook her head. “You can’t judge by appearances!”

“I know, but look at that one over there,” the girl commented, pointing across the room at a blonde who was shakily removing things from her oversized suitcase. One of her shirts appeared to be caught and she was tugging roughly on it. Suddenly, the shirt ripped out and so did everything else in her suitcase. The poor girl frantically ran around, clumsily picking up the pieces of scattered clothing.

“*Ooof!*” she grunted as she tripped over another suitcase and fell to the ground. Several girls laughed and pointed at her.

“I wonder how *her* video was chosen!” The girl beside Lara laughed loudly.

“Hey, what’s your name?”

“Lara.”

“I’m Steph.” Lara shook her hand, thinking that Steph reminded her of someone she had disliked back in grade school. A second later a loud alarm rang. “Dinner time!” Steph yelled.

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Lara finished slurping down the warm broccoli soup. She wiped her mouth on her hand and leaned back in her chair, happily satisfied with the meal. Lara glanced over at Steph, who had only taken a few mouthfuls.

“Yuck! This stuff is gross!” she complained, shoving her bowl aside. Lara licked her lips and replaced her empty bowl with Steph’s. A minute later she finished the soup and patted her full stomach.

Someone loudly cleared his throat and everyone looked up from their bowls. A security guard stood at the front of the room. “It is five o’clock now. Usually you would all go for your testing, but since it is your first day we’re going to do things a little differently. Ten guards will be going to both dormitories to interview each of you. This will take about an hour or so. Then, you can have free time to do as you wish, but you *must* stay in your dormitory. All right, single file in two lines. *Everybody out!*”

Back in her dorm Lara sat on her bed. A man approached her. “Lara Croft?”

“Yes.”

“Hi, I’m Carl. I believed we talked on the phone?” Lara nodded. “Well, okay. Let’s get started on this interview.” He shuffled through the papers on his clipboard and took the cap off his pen. “Have you ever done any serious training before?”

“Yes, by myself.” Carl scribbled on his paper.

“Why did you audition to come here? Is it for the reward at the end, being chosen as the best?”

“I auditioned for this because it’s an adventure. I *love* adventures! It’s definitely *not* business, it’s pleasure. I will travel anywhere in the world to see extraordinary things

that most people would never have the chance to.” Again Carl scribbled on his paper, taking a bit longer than before.

“Energy level. What do you consider a warm-up?”

Lara laughed. “This is a trick question, isn’t it? Well, I like to start on my tumbling mat. I do several front flips, back flips, and side rolls. Then I run, jump, sprint, climb, hang out on the monkey bars for a while, and then go for a swim.” Carl nodded, smiling.

“Last question. Do you know how to use a gun?”

“I’ll give you a *short* list. Magnum pistol, Uzi, MP5, M16, laser gun, shot—”

“Whoa! That’s good, Lara. Thanks for the information. I look forward to seeing you tomorrow at training.” Carl winked at her and moved on to the next person. Lara smiled, then opened her canteen and took a few mouthfuls of water. She looked at the small booklet they had received and studied the training area. It was huge! The shooting range and the monkey bars caught Lara’s attention. *Just like home!* she thought.

The next morning, Lara finished her breakfast fifteen minutes before everyone else. Again she watched as Steph shoved her bowl away, complaining that she didn’t like lumpy oatmeal. Lara shook her head and waited patiently for the alarm to end breakfast. She looked at her itinerary, which she kept in the back pocket of her khaki shorts. They had their first training session next. She could hardly wait.

Twenty minutes later, Lara and her competitors sat on the dusty ground of the enormous training grounds, listening to a sergeant yell at them. Lara found it quite amusing and had to control her snickers.

“...*And if you stop, you’re out!*” the sergeant barked. “*You said you were strong, so let’s see it!*” His fists were now raised in the air, and the blood level in his head had increased. “You!” he shouted, pointing at Steph, “weights, now!” Steph scrambled to her feet and hurried over to the track. “And you, you too, and you!” He pointed at several more people, but not at Lara. He glanced at the clipboard he was holding and began reading off names. “Jeff, Carley, Sue. Shooting range! Come on! *Faster!*” He ordered off fifty more people, his anger rising to a somewhat startling level. Suddenly, he glared over at Lara and then down at his clipboard. Lara saw a vein bulging by his right temple. She stared at it for a moment, fascinated. “Lara Croft?” he barked.

“Yes, sir!” she replied smartly, nodding her head. He snickered, motioned for her to stand, and then shook her hand. “My name is Sergeant Reineld. Carl told me about you last night after the interviews. I’m impressed so far about what I’ve heard. I’ll be keeping an eye on you.”

Lara nodded.

“All right. You, on the monkey bars right now.”

“Okay,” Lara replied and ran off. Sergeant Reineld watched her with a strange look on his face and scribbled something down on his clipboard.

“I thought you were *tough!* Come on! Keep going! *Faster!*” A man Lara had never seen before was yelling at the clumsy girl who had made a fool of herself the other night. Her shirt was drenched in sweat and her face was bright red. It looked as though her head was going to explode! She had managed to get almost a quarter of the way across, but Lara could see that she wasn’t going to make it. Her hands began to slip, and a moment later she fell into the hot sandpit. The man laughed and then looked at Lara.

“You haven’t gone yet! *What are you waiting for?!*”

Lara raised an eyebrow. “For her to move. You wouldn’t want me to land on her if I fell, would you?” The man breathed in deeply and shook his head. Lara stood under the first rung, not bothering to use the raised block to get up. With one swift jump she was holding onto the first rung. Each person had to hang there until he told them they could go.

“*Go!*” Lara’s body swung from side to side as she crossed over the bars. Her arms moved gracefully from rung to rung without any hesitation. Three-quarters of the way across, she was still swinging without any problem. When she got to the last rung, she dropped safely to the ground. Lara looked around at the astonished faces. Even the man looked impressed. He scribbled something down on his clipboard, then nodded for the next person to go.

*11:45 am: Bathroom B.* After all the toilets and sinks had been thoroughly cleaned, Lara and six other girls threw their sponges into a large yellow bucket filled with dirty water. They each took a seat on a long bench that stood beside a wall. Sitting next to Lara, Steph tapped her arm.

“How were the monkey bars? I heard you blew everyone away!”

Lara laughed. “They were fine. How did the shooting go?”

“Well,” Steph sighed, “considering I can’t even *name* one type of gun let alone *shoot* one, it went awful!”

Lara nodded. “If we get to train together I’ll give you some pointers. It’s actually pretty easy.”

“Thanks!” Everyone stood up when the alarm went for lunch. Lara was starving.

*1:00 pm: Track.* Lara began to pick up speed as she started her third time around the track. She was far ahead of everyone, at least two laps in the lead. She opened the lid of her canteen, filled her dry mouth, then spat on the ground. After she finished her fourth lap she slowed her pace, stopped and stretched, and then sat down. Her turn was over for the day. The coach came over to Lara and sat down beside her.

“You’re a very good runner,” she said.

Lara smiled. “Thanks.”

“Most people can’t even make it half way on the first lap!” Lara nodded her head. “Well, keep up the good work!” Lara smiled and returned her attention to the other runners. A minute later another person finished their set number of laps. He came over and sat down beside Lara. The front of his shirt was sweaty, and he guzzled water from his water bottle.

Soon the alarm went off to indicate that the second break had started. Lara jumped up and found herself walking to the mess hall with the clumsy girl. Lara smiled at her and the girl outstretched her hand.

“Hi, my name is Paige. Who are you?”

“Lara.” They shook hands and Lara motioned to a nearby table. “So,” Lara began, “how’s everything going here with you?”

“Awful! On the first day here, as you probably saw, my suitcase exploded! And I’ve been messing up a lot of things. I’ve been watching you, though. You’re amazing! I would give anything to do what you can do!”

Lara laughed. “It just takes practice, that’s all.” Paige nodded and fell silent for a few moments.

“Hey, Lara?”

“Yes?”

“I was wondering...you don't have to, but umm...would you consider giving me a few pointers when we do our training again? I completely understand if you don't want to...”

“Of course I'll help you!”

“Great! Thanks, Lara!” Paige jumped up, whacking her leg on the table. Lara grimaced and shook her head.

Later, for supper, they were served mashed potatoes, a piece of ham, and corn. This time Steph hungrily ate everything. Lara smiled at her.

“Worked up an appetite, have we?”

Steph nodded. “Need all the energy I can get. I heard the testing is going to get rough.”

“Can I have your attention please?” a voice called. Lara looked up at a sergeant. “For testing, all of you have already been put into groups. Please check the back of your booklets for a letter. That letter is for the order, and the place you will be going to.” He read off the times corresponding with the letters. Lara was going to be tested at 5:10 pm at the shooting range. Twenty minutes later they were dismissed from supper.

*5:05 pm: Shooting range.* Lara and four other people were each handed a small pistol. Sergeant Reineld stood before them, a frown on his tired face.

“*Load your guns!*” he roared. Lara did so and waited while the others fumbled with theirs. A minute later they were all loaded. “See those targets?” the sergeant boomed. “You will go one at a time. Shoot the closest target and then move to the other

ones. Think of this as a competition. The person who misses more than the others will be out!” He nodded at the first person to go. The man raised his arm and unsteadily tried to aim. *BANG!* Missed. *BANG! BANG!* He shot at the five targets, successfully hitting only one, at the edge. Paige was up next.

“Hold it steady,” Lara said. Paige nodded and took in a deep breath. This obviously meant a great deal to her. Paige shot, widely missing the first target. “It’s okay,” Lara encouraged her. “Try aiming at the target before you hit it.” Paige wiped her sweaty hands on her shorts and held up the gun again. Lara could see her eye focusing on the target. She watched as Paige slowly squeezed the trigger. *BANG!* She hit the target. “Way to go, Paige!” Lara cheered. The poor girl was practically crying because she was so happy. The bullet had hit the target along the edge, but at least she had hit it! Paige’s last three shots missed the targets, but that one “lucky” shot left her face shining.

Lara was up next. She held the gun straight in front of her with one hand, and fired. Bull’s eye! Quickly, she fired at the next target, not even bothering to aim, and again the bullet hit dead centre. Paige jumped up and down.

“Go Lara!” she yelled. Lara grinned and just for show tilted her gun on an angle and rapidly shot the last three targets. Sergeant Reineld nodded at Lara, pleased. He scribbled on his clipboard and then told the next person to go.

Later, Lara stepped under the warm shower and closed her eyes as the water rushed over her. She thought about her day and found herself wondering about a few things. How long would it take for them to pick the best person? What *was* this “world’s deadliest mission” they were all trying out for? She remembered how happy Paige had been when she had shot the target, and smiled.

9:58 pm: *Dormitory B.* Lara's eyes closed. A second later she was fast asleep, snuggled in her warm blankets.

*A shadow stepped over Lara's bed, a syringe in hand. It reached over and carefully inserted the sharp needle into her right arm. The light blue liquid was forced into her bloodstream...*

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Steph came and sat down beside Lara. She smiled and tilted her plate for Lara to see. "Eggs and toast this morning. Sorry, Lara, all mine!"

Lara laughed. "That's okay, I snuck some extra eggs."

"I heard they're going to cut fifty people today."

"*Fifty?! Are they running out of food?*" Lara joked. Steph chuckled and shrugged her shoulders.

At 8:00 on the training grounds, Carl, Sergeant Reineld, and a few security guards stood before the one hundred entrants, each holding a clipboard, as usual, and flipping through the pages. Carl raised his arm for attention.

"Today, as you've probably heard, we will be cutting fifty people." Lara heard a few people suck in their breath. "We would like to thank you for coming out, and we would encourage many of you to try again in the future." For the next five minutes, Carl read off the names of the people who would have to leave immediately. Lara's name was not called. Steph's was. She gave Lara a nonchalant smile and waved goodbye as she exited the training grounds with the others.

It wasn't time for lunch, not for another half hour. Lara was on cleanup duty in the mess hall with Paige and two others.



“Too bad for Steph,” Paige said, “I thought she was doing great!”

Lara nodded her head. “So did I, but I guess they’re looking for someone different.”

“Yeah...but why would they keep *me*? I’m doing horrible!” Paige wailed. Lara shook her head.

“I can see that you’ve been improving. Just hang in there, okay?”

“Okay.”

Lara began to mop the floor again. A few minutes later Carl came into the room and called to her. Lara ran over and they left the room.

“What’s up?” Lara asked.

“Looks like you’re working pretty hard in there, so I wanted to give you a cold drink. Here.” He handed Lara a tall glass filled with sparkling ice-cold water. Surprised, Lara thanked him and drank it all at once.

*1:00 pm: Pool.* For just over ten minutes, Lara had been swimming laps in the Olympic-size swimming pool. Her powerful legs propelled her body through the refreshing water. After completing a set number of laps, everyone had to dive for the coloured rings. By the end of training, Lara was starving. She ran to the mess hall.

Again Lara had extra food on her plate, but this time she wasn’t the one who had added more. While in line, Sergeant Reineld had given Lara a plate with food. The salad dressing tasted a little odd but everything else was great. Lara took a seat beside Paige and another girl with whom she had never spoken.

“There are going to be more cuts tomorrow,” Lara told Paige.

“Yeah, forty-five more. That means there’s only going to be five people left!”

Paige shook her head and leaned her chin against her hand.

“They must have a good idea who they want by now,” Lara explained. Paige nodded.

*8:05 pm: Training Grounds.* The testing had finished and Lara was quite satisfied with how she had done. She had beaten everyone at sprinting, weight lifting, and shooting. Paige also had done well but was still her clumsy self. Carl informed everyone that the next day, instead of training, they would announce the five people who would be left.

*1:22 am: Dormitory B.* A shadow stepped over Lara’s bed, a syringe in hand. It reached over and carefully inserted the sharp needle into her right arm. The light blue liquid was forced into her bloodstream...

*“Do you think she knows anything?” a muffled voice asked.*

*“No, it’s still too early,” a second voice replied.*

*“How many more?”*

*“Just one.” They nodded at each other, then quietly left the room.*

*6:10 am: Dormitory B.* Lara had awoken ten minutes earlier. She already had her bed neatly made and was dressed and ready for breakfast. She glanced at the empty bed beside her, then at her arm, which was slightly red and itchy. On her forearm was a slight rash.

*7:00 am: Training Grounds.* The remaining fifty people sat on the dusty ground. Some looked weary, others quite calm. Everyone sat patiently, not making a sound. They were all anxious to hear who would be staying.

“All right, people, listen up!” Sergeant Reineld bellowed. “The following people will be asked to stay: Lara Croft, Carley H, Paige D, Zac S., and Jack K.! Everyone else, please gather your belongings ASAP. Thank you for trying out!” Lara smiled. She was still in!

“*Yeah! Woohoo!*” Lara looked over to her right and saw Paige jumping up and down, screaming her head off. Five minutes later, those who did not make it were gone. Carl walked over to Lara and grinned.

“Congratulations, Lara!”

“Thanks!” she replied.

“It’s tough competition from here. Are you up for it?”

“I can take on anything.” Carl nodded his head and left.

*5:02 pm: Training Grounds.* It was time for testing. Carl and two security guards were attaching long ropes to the ceiling from above the shooting range to the far side, over the pool. The place reminded Lara of what the jungle looked like. There were about thirty ropes, Lara counted, all the perfect gripping size.

“All right, everyone!” Sergeant Reineld boomed. “We’ve set up a little obstacle for you. Starting above the shooting range, you must swing across to the other side and land in the pool.” As he gave the instructions, four security guards attached a huge safety net below the ends of the ropes.

“*Paige!*” the sergeant bellowed, a bulging vein popping out of his head. “You’re first! Then Jack, Lara...” he called out the rest of their names and then focused on Paige, who was now hanging from the first rope.

A minute passed. Paige didn’t move. She hung frozen in place.

“Come on, Paige, you can do it!” Lara called. Paige shook her head and shakily slid down the rope and onto the safety net. Jack quickly replaced her and confidently started across.

“What happened up there?” Lara questioned.

“I froze! I didn’t know how to do it! I couldn’t move!” Lara gave her a reassuring pat on the back.

Jack was about a quarter of the way across, but he was tangled between the ropes. Suddenly he just gave up and fell down onto the net. He jumped off, shrugged his shoulders, and sat down.

Lara grinned to herself as she hung from the first rope. She looked down at Sergeant Reineld and he nodded for her to go. Lara thrust her body forward, grabbing rope after rope. She glided easily through the maze without getting tangled. Lara let go of the rope with her legs and continued to travel across, her powerful arms holding her up. Soon she was hanging over the pool. She swung back and forth, then forward jumped into a perfect dive into the pool.

Lara could hear applause as she surfaced. She climbed out of the pool and walked over to the group. Carley went next, and Lara watched another team member get tangled between the ropes.

*8:45 pm: Showers. While Lara showered in one of the stalls, a dark shadow entered the room. Very gracefully it moved over to the bench where a few of Lara’s belongings sat. The shadow pulled out a small vile that contained light blue liquid and carefully poured the liquid into her canteen. Then it slipped quietly out the door. Lara never heard a thing.*

Since the training camp had dismissed forty-five more people, the few men who were left relocated to the girls' mess hall. Everyone sat around one table eating scrambled eggs and toast. As usual, Carl greeted them.

“Today we are making the final cut. Instead of our regular itinerary, we are going to test you all day. Please go to the training grounds in ten minutes.”

Each person had been assigned to a certain area for their testing. Eventually they would get back to their original location after rotating through each station.

Lara had been assigned to the weights. For twenty minutes each person was tested at his or her station. Lara's powerful arms didn't have any trouble. The sergeant, who was evaluating her, smiled slightly.

Lara was up next for the monkey bars. She jumped up and grasped the first rung. She grinned and then, as fast as she could, Lara travelled across, doing a set of ten rounds back and forth. When she arrived back at the first rung, she swung up, flipped around in the air, and caught hold of it again, but facing backward. She watched Sergeant Reineld's face as she grabbed rung after rung *backward!* When her time was up, she noticed that Sergeant Reineld was smiling. Lara frowned. She wanted to see his bulging right temple again!

*10:00 pm: Dormitory B.* Lara fell asleep easily. Extensive testing all day had really worn them out. Paige hadn't done very well that day: her clumsiness had overpowered her. Lara had scored very high in all areas of testing. Tomorrow at breakfast they would find out who was going on the world's deadliest mission.

*A shadow stepped over Lara's bed, a large syringe in hand. It reached over and carefully inserted the sharp needle into her right arm. The light blue liquid was forced*

*into her bloodstream. The shadow swabbed the puncture with alcohol and silently left the room...*

6:32 am: *Mess Hall B.* Lara gobbled down her sugared cereal and toast. Everyone sat in silence, eagerly waiting for the results. Paige nudged Lara.

“Are you nervous?” she asked.

Lara shook her head. “Are you?”

“Yeah, kinda,” Paige replied. Lara smiled at her and then looked up at Carl, Sergeant Reineld, and a few guards.

“We would like to thank you for coming,” Carl said. “You all showed your strength, and we had fun working with everyone. As you know, only one person can go on from here. And that person is...*Lara Croft!*” Lara jumped up, grinning. Loud applause erupted around her. Sergeant Reineld came over and slapped her back.

“Great job, Lara!” he bellowed.

A little after noon, Lara stood at the entrance waving goodbye to the jeeps as they each took one of the four people away. Carl came up behind Lara and waved as well.

“Okay, Lara, now there’s no time to waste. I have to tell you about this mission you will be going on.” Lara nodded and followed him to the mess hall.

“This mission has been attempted seven times before. Each person failed. You will be going to Antarctica, travelling several hundred feet below the surface. You see, there are tunnels underneath that have been dug out.”

“By whom?” Lara asked.

Carl hesitated slightly. “By the *Beast*. He’s somewhere down there...guarding the treasure.”

“What kind of treasure?”

“A four-pound, solid *diamond* statue.” Lara raised an eyebrow and Carl nodded. “But it takes someone who isn’t afraid of getting a little sweaty, someone with strength, and, most important of all, determination. You will have to go down by yourself and we’ll pick you up after you make it back out. We’re one hundred percent sure you can do it.”

Lara frowned. “You said I’ll be several hundred feet below? I’ll freeze!” Carl shook his head. “Don’t worry, it’s already been taken care of.”

“Great. When do we go?”

Carl looked at his watch. “Now. You can sleep on the way, and we’ll get there early morning.”

Lara smiled. “Let’s go!”

Five hours later and after a few hours of rest, Lara awoke refreshed. She picked up the guidebook on the floor beside her and began to flip through the pages.

*...Within the last 50 years, two volcanoes, Big Ben and Deception Island, have erupted.*

*The largest land animal can fit on a penny. This life form is called a midge. One might think that penguins are land animals, but they are not. Penguins are in fact seabirds. There are about 7 different species of penguins on Antarctica, which include: Adélie, Chinstrap, Emperor, Gentoo, King, Macaronk, and Rockhoppers. Penguins can dive more than 244 metres deep into Antarctica’s chilly waters. Research has shown that they cannot swim in warm water for very long because they will overheat.*

*On the surface of Antarctica, winds blow 80 km/h. During the summer, the average temperature is -32°C.*

*Millions of years ago Antarctica was connected to Africa and South America. This means that there was once a forest that grew on Antarctica. The most interesting discovery, though, is that there are valuable resources hundreds of feet below the surface today. Examples of these include: zinc, copper, lead, gold, and silver.*

*Scientists have discovered various fossils of creatures that once roamed the surface. Another great find was an Antarctic fish called the Notothenioid. Research has been conducted on these fish, and it was found that their blood is colder than 0°C. Antifreeze molecules in their bodies keep their blood and body fluids from forming ice crystals, which would rupture their cells.*

*The most fascinating and interesting aspect of Antarctica is Lake Vostok, the world's largest freshwater lake. It is 510 metres deep, which is hidden under 4 kilometres of ice covering 14,000 square kilometres. Scientists have yet to drill into the lake because they don't want to alter any life form or oxygen that hasn't been touched for over a few million years.*

Lara closed the guidebook and leaned back against her seat, perplexed by what she had read.

The next day they arrived in Antarctica. A cold gust of wind hit Lara's face as she jumped out of the helicopter. "Good luck, Lara!" Sergeant Reineld shouted.



“Thank you!” He had given her a shotgun with eight shells, which he said were for emergency purposes only. He also gave Lara a backpack with a small flame-thrower and a note.

She waved goodbye as they took off. They had let her off at the entrance to the main tunnel. She dropped through the hole and landed five feet below. Lara walked through the uneven tunnel, feeling her way along the icy walls. Five minutes later, she found herself at the top of a huge ice slide. A wild smile formed on her face. She took out the shotgun and fired four shells into one of the walls, leaving a large square in the centre.

Lara turned on the flame-thrower and outlined the square with the fire deep enough so she could pull out a good-sized block. She put the shotgun away and placed the ice block on the ground. She bent down and pushed a small button on her right boot. Sharp spikes rose out from the bottom of her boots. Lara stomped onto the block, turned the flame-thrower on again, and hopped forward.

Lara surfed down the huge ice slide, the flame-thrower raised beside her body. Picking up speed, she executed a few fancy moves on her ice block as she descended, enjoying the thrill of the ride. The freezing air only felt cool to her. When she reached the bottom, Lara turned the flame-thrower down to a minimum and pressed the button on her boot to make the spikes retract.

Lara surveyed the area and saw several more tunnels heading off into other directions and reconnecting with other ones. The walls amazed her. They glowed a soft white and their light reflected off the icy floors. Lara left the ice block where she was

standing so she would know if she was walking around in circles. She chose the closest tunnel to her right to explore first.

As she ventured deeper into the tunnel, the light faded and she noticed she was descending farther underground. Lara turned up the flame-thrower and held it in front of her. She gasped as she turned a corner. The next part of the tunnel glowed white, just as where she had begun. Lara stared at what she saw before her...dead bodies, frozen in the ice.

The first corpse's right side of its head looked as though it had been torn open, and part of the brain was visible. It too had been torn and a rather large chunk was missing from it. The corpse's lips were white and slightly parted. Its eyes had rolled upward and were frozen in place.

The next body was in worse shape than the first. Its head had been decapitated. Blood was splattered within the ice.

The last body's stomach looked like it had been slit down the middle. Several organs were missing, and some hung outside the body. Gritting her teeth and determined that this place wasn't going to end up her permanent home, Lara continued down the twisting tunnel with extreme caution, her eyes and ears tuned for any sign of danger.

Ten minutes later, Lara found herself staring down at the ice block she had left there before. At least she wasn't lost! She proceeded toward the only tunnel left for her to explore. Many smaller alcoves branched off from the tunnel. Lara investigated all of them and found one room fascinating, containing a small pool of water that was a slight green colour. Lara wondered how any sort of liquid could *not* be frozen down there. She

sat down on the ice and took off her backpack, pulled out her canteen, and took a sip. She also removed the note from Carl that the sergeant had given her and began reading.

*Hello, Lara, hope you're doing just fine down there. Not too cold I hope? I know that the outfit we gave you to wear was warm, but if you really stop and think you will realize that it is almost impossible for anyone to survive down there. Anyone who is where you are could not survive for more than ten minutes (maybe). But don't panic!*

*Every night when you were sleeping one of us slipped into your dormitory and gave you a needle in your right arm. We injected you with a light blue liquid that is a high-energy compound. Remember the fish you read about? Notothenioids? We had a dozen of them shipped up to us about a month ago. We paid a few scientists to remove their antifreeze molecules. They are only activated when/if your body core temperature drops to 35.5°C. So if you get cold enough the compounds will be activated, keeping you warm enough to survive.*

*These compounds eventually will be metabolized by your body should your temperature never drop to 35.5°C. In other words, they are not harmful to your body. Good luck, Lara, we know you'll do just fine!*

Lara put the note into her backpack. She had been injected with fish molecules! That's what the rash had been on her arm. Lara wasn't angry with them, although she thought she could have survived without them, as she had done before. Anyway, it didn't

matter anymore, now that it had already been done. All would be well, just as long as she didn't start to grow scales...

Lara moved to the strange green pool. She bent down and stuck her finger into it. It felt like rubber, and when Lara took her finger out, it wasn't wet!

"Weird!" With both hands, Lara scooped up the rubber liquid. Surprisingly, it all lifted up off the ground! She wiggled it around, playing with it for a few minutes. Then she tried to pull it apart but was unsuccessful as it simply stretched. She emptied the rest of her water from the canteen and dropped the rubber liquid into it. She wanted a nice souvenir from Antarctica!

After another half hour of wandering around the maze of tunnels, Lara found herself in front of a dead end. Without hesitation she took out the shotgun and fired the last four shots into the wall, making a large square. As before, she took the flame-thrower and outlined the square. Lara back-flipped five times, then suddenly shot forward, sprinting at full speed. She dive-rolled at the last second into the wall and forced the square inward. Standing, she pushed in the block as far as it would go. She climbed through the newly made entrance and found herself in a room she had never seen before.

Lara looked around in amazement. She was in a diamond-shaped room with many icicles that hung in different sizes and shapes from the high ceiling. In the centre of the room, slightly lower than ground level, a small pool of white water sparkled. The water moved and Lara watched as several penguins climbed out of it. They were very large and heavy looking. Lara watched for a moment as the penguins waddled around the room. Suddenly, she had an idea. Slowly, she walked over to the water and sat down beside the

hole, her legs in the water. One of the larger penguins in the room looked over at her and waddled toward her.

“Hey, you!” Lara called. “I need your help.” The penguin tilted its head and blinked. Lara motioned for it to keep coming. It obeyed and then slid into the water. Lara pushed herself into the icy pool, beside the penguin.

“Ready?” she asked. She wrapped her arms around its body and took in a deep breath as it plunged down into Lake Vostok, the world’s largest freshwater lake.

After they were about 100 metres from the surface, Lara lit a flare and tugged on the penguin when she wanted it to change directions. When they were 230 metres from the surface, Lara pulled on the penguin to stop it from continuing down. She moved the flare in front of her, not sure in what direction to go. Suddenly, the penguin shot forward through the water. Lara held on tightly. *He probably needs air soon...just like me!* she thought. Her lungs had begun to tingle; her air supply was running out.

Five seconds later, Lara found herself being pulled out of the water and up under an enormous ice block. She let go of the penguin and sucked in a deep breath.

Air!

Under the lake?

In a chunk of ice!

Who would have thought an ice chunk could preserve clean, fresh air under the water for a few million years? Lara patted the penguin on its head, and lit a new flare. She raised her eyebrows as she looked around. It was an identical room to the one where she had discovered the water. And there, in the centre, raised on a small pedestal, was the solid diamond statue of a penguin! It sparkled brightly. Lara smiled and walked over to it.

She circled the pedestal once and carefully grasped the statue with both of her hands. She held it in her outstretched arms, admiring its beauty.

A sudden rumble made Lara spin around. Without warning, she stood face to face with the world's deadliest beast! Instantly, Lara turned and threw herself forward into the water once again. Clutching the statue, she kicked her legs and arms, furiously propelling herself upward. She felt a sudden rush of water behind her as the Beast plunged in after her. She imagined it biting into her leg and ripping it away, whipping it around in the water like a dog playing tug of war. Frantically, she pushed on, swimming for all she was worth.

Lara felt another rush of water underneath her and flinched when she felt something rubbery under her. It was the penguin, and it was pushing her upward! Lara raised her hands and the statue above her head into a dive position so she was able to glide through the water more easily. A moment later the penguin burst out of the water. Lara jumped off in mid-air and ran toward the exit, yelling her thanks to the penguin. She ran like she had never done before. Lara sprinted out of the room into a tunnel, not knowing where she was going. The Beast was gaining on her, and Lara still hadn't found the ice block she had left behind. Swiftly, she turned a sharp corner and continued to run as fast as she could. Up ahead she could see several sharp-looking pieces of ice jutting out partway into the tunnel. Still running, Lara twisted her backpack around, threw in the statue and grabbed her canteen. She poured the rubber liquid onto her hands. She sprinted even faster now, her teeth clenched, her face determined. She jabbed one end of the rubber liquid over the corner of the icicles, and stretched the other end over to the other side.

She dove into a small alcove and watched as the huge, ugly Beast ran into the blockage that Lara created. For a split second the creature was stopped. Suddenly, like a stretched elastic band being released, the rubber liquid forced the Beast backward at an incredible force and speed. It smashed into the wall at the end of the tunnel and was instantly buried by a pile of snow and ice.

Lara frantically looked around. The place was starting to cave in! She grabbed the rubber liquid (she wasn't leaving it behind!) and ran through another connecting tunnel. Finally, she glimpsed the ice block she had used earlier. Lara quickly bent down and pushed the button to release the spikes in her boots. Hastily, she ran up the large ice slide she had come down before. Her legs started to burn as she continued to push forward, but she had never been the type to give up. Determined, she clenched her teeth, and with all the power in her body, she safely made it up the ice slide.

At the top, Lara pushed the button on her boot to retract the spikes, ran forward, jumped up, and pulled herself out of the hole. Using the last bit of fuel from the flame-thrower, she signalled the approaching helicopter to stay level a few feet above the ground.

“You made it!” Carl yelled. Lara nodded and held up the statue. Carl grinned. “Throw it up to me first and we'll put the ladder down for you!”

Lara frowned. What was wrong with her going up with the statue?

“No, I'll come up at the same time!” Lara called back.

Carl shook his head. “We don't want it to get broken now, do we?” he snapped back. Lara couldn't believe it. Suddenly, everything made sense. They had wanted her to risk her life to get the statue for them. They weren't going to give the ladder to her

afterward at all. They were going to leave her stranded. That blue liquid they had injected her with had been to help her, but in the end help *them*.

“Forget it!” Lara called back emphatically. Suddenly, Sergeant Reineld appeared at the doorway. He was holding a gun, and it was pointed at Lara.

“Give it to me now, or I’ll shoot you!” he boomed. Lara’s face relaxed.

“Fine!” she yelled back. Lara bent down with the statue, getting in position to throw it up. But when her arms heaved it up, she was also holding the pistol that had been stored in her boot! Sergeant Reineld’s face turned red.

“That’s it, Lara,” he shouted down, “no more warnings!” *BANG! BANG!* He fired twice at Lara, but missed. Having exceptional skill and experience, Lara jumped sideways, out of his line of fire. Two more people appeared at the doorway behind Sergeant Reineld. *BANG!* Quickly, Lara shot one of them in the arm. He grasped his wound and fell from the helicopter to the ground. Suddenly, the door of the helicopter was shut. Lara waited, the statue still undamaged under her arm. The helicopter flew upward. Lara shot at it. After it was about fifteen feet higher, it swung around and began to nose dive right for her!

Lara laughed as she sprinted away from it: she loved playing life-threatening tag. The helicopter flew down just a few feet above the ground, trailing right behind her. At the last second, right before she could be hit, Lara flipped out of the way.

When the helicopter turned back around, she could see Sergeant Reineld hanging halfway out of the doorway holding a shotgun. The next few moments seemed to go by in slow motion. Sergeant Reineld shot at her a dozen times as the helicopter chased her over the icy ground.



Lara sprinted forward, shooting her pistol behind her. They were gaining, and she knew she couldn't run forever. She put her pistol away as she side-flipped furiously, holding tightly to the statue. She took out the rubber liquid and stopped running. As her pursuers whizzed overhead, she dropped to the ground, then jumped up and ran toward the helicopter, heaving the rubber liquid at the tail. Luckily, it wrapped around nicely. Lara held onto the other end of it, watching it stretch.

Just as the helicopter was about to turn back around, Lara executed a running jump into the air. She held on with both hands as the rubber liquid snapped her forward like an elastic band. The helicopter flew higher, swinging Lara through the air behind them. Sergeant Reineld appeared at the doorway with another man. Lara quickly let go of the rubber liquid with one hand and grabbed her pistol. *BANG! BANG!*

“Argh!” Sergeant Reineld howled in pain as he was fatally hit. He fell out the door and splattered on the ground below, smashing open his head. Blood poured onto the ground beside him. His body was twisted in an odd way.

Instantly, the other man shot at Lara. She swung side to side, dodging each bullet that flew toward her.

“You're being very stubborn, Lara!” he yelled. “Why don't you just give up?”

Lara laughed. “I *never* give up! And don't you ever forget that. I *always* win.” *BANG!* Lara shot him right between the eyes and watched as he plunged to the icy ground. She put her pistol away and held onto the rubber liquid with two hands once again. Then she kicked up her feet behind her and swung forward at an incredible speed. She landed in the doorway of the helicopter. Lara pulled hard on the rubber liquid to free

it from the tail of the helicopter. The she stuffed it in her backpack and with her pistol held in front of her she walked up to the pilot.

“Do you work with them?” she asked. The man nodded slowly. “Not anymore,” Lara remarked and pushed him out the door. She grabbed the controls. Taking in a deep breath, Lara smiled and flew away.

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The solid diamond statue was placed in Lara’s treasure room in a glass case slightly taller than her other ones. It sparkled with radiant colours that lit up the once darker room. Lara proudly smiled in appreciation and went outside.

“Hey!” Lara called at Winston.

“What?”

“It’s my turn! Get off there!” she called back. Winston looked over at Lara and shook his head with a grin on his face. There was no way he was getting off their new rubber liquid trampoline just yet!

*Sweat, Strength, and Determination*  
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