

# **The Strenuous Escapade**

**Katie Fleming**

Apparently there had been some sort of a mix-up and Lara was re-directed to fly to a city in Japan. One of the men from the company had suddenly died so he wasn't there to pick her up in China. When Lara's plane reached the Okinawa Islands, she was greeted in Naha by a Japanese man. Lara walked over to him, her only luggage being her new backpack in hand. She still missed her old one, and was completely devastated when the dogs had stolen it back in Paris.

After bowing his head the man greeted her with a warm handshake. "Welcome Lara! My name is Kisho and I am here to take you to our company headquarters. These gentlemen," he said as he pointed to two other men, "will be your personal bodyguards while you are here, and will look out for you at all times."

"Bodyguards?" Lara raised an eyebrow.

"You'll see," he replied, "now please get into the limousine so we can continue on our way."

Lara did as she was instructed, but refused to give up her backpack to one of the bodyguards as she climbed in. She hoped this wasn't going to be a cushy job, at least not for all of the time.

After riding along in silence for about ten minutes Kisho turned to Lara, and asked, "How was the flight? We are sorry for having you take an extra one."

"It was fine," she replied, "I stuffed myself with fortune cookies the whole way!"

It was nearing dinner time once the group arrived at the compound. Lara was escorted through part of the building until they came to her designated room. Kisho swiped a key card

through a detector which unlocked the door. As they entered, Lara's bodyguards took up position outside.

"This is where you will eat and sleep while you are with us," Kisho said.

Lara slowly walked around the room. It wasn't very big but it would be fine, she thought, for the length of time that she'd be staying there. There was a couch, a small fridge and a couple of dressers. A small bedroom connected to the main room which was only big enough for the twin size bed. Also connecting from the main room was a small bathroom.

"I'll leave you now to rest, Lara. Tomorrow will be a long day and, you need all the sleep you can get. In the morning you'll be escorted to where you will be needed."

Lara said goodnight to Kisho and closed the door. Just as she turned around Lara remembered she hadn't eaten yet, so she pulled on the door handle – but it wouldn't open. Lara knocked on the door with one hand.

"Hello? Is anyone there?"

No answer.

"Kisho? You still there?"

Silence.

Lara sighed then shrugged her shoulders. Luckily she had planned ahead, and had packed some food in her bag. Lara went into the bedroom and emptied the contents of her backpack onto the bed. She opened the letter she had received from the company and re-read it as she munched on some snacks. The company, Naha Incorporated, wanted Lara to test some equipment in their facility. She wasn't given very much information but had decided to come anyway to see what they were all about. After she was finished eating, Lara noticed a white envelope in her bag. Written in neat handwriting was a letter from Winston.

*Dear Lara,*

*I am terribly sorry for not seeing to your departure as I had planned. I was busy working on the Quad and completely lost track of time. Luckily, a stewardess agreed to help me out and slip you this letter. I have given the quad a little extra power which I'm sure you'll be pleased about. You'll no longer have to work so hard at getting over the hedge anymore, but I am drawing the line – no racing on the roof!*

*Ah yes, I know, I'm rambling on – but I do hope you enjoy your time there. I've given you a little something which might be of use to you on your trip. It's tucked inside the right sole of your boot. I promise not to ride the quad while you're gone...at least not at top speed!*

*I eagerly await your return.*

*Yours faithfully,*

*Winston*

Lara smiled as she tucked his letter back into her bag. She really wished she could spend more time with him. *Perhaps I could take him on my next trip*, she thought. Lara reached down to take off her boots when the lights suddenly went out. Was it a power failure? Lara felt her way out of the bedroom and into the main room. The fridge was quietly humming and a small nightlight in the bathroom was on. She felt around the wall for a switch but couldn't find one.

“Forgot to pack flares once again,” she sighed. “I’ve *really* got to start making a go away list!” Just then, the lights flickered back on and there was a knock on Lara’s door. “Come in,” she called.

Kisho walked in and closed the door behind him. “We’re experiencing some minor electrical problems right now, Lara. Before the power goes out again I have some things to give you.” He sat on the couch and opened up a black duffle bag, extracting a black catsuit and boots.

“Nice!” Lara exclaimed.

Kisho smiled and reached in the bag again pulling out a pair of black biker gloves. “I hope these will do?”

Lara nodded, “One of my favourite outfits.”

“You will be required to wear this when you are helping us. The suit has been designed to withstand high electrical currents and heat. It is also waterproof and can be used as a substitute for a wetsuit.”

“You’re making mine sound old fashioned,” Lara joked.

“The remainder of the equipment will be provided tomorrow. If you need anything during the night, use the intercom beside the door.”

Lara said goodnight and Kisho left the room. She was eager to see what role the catsuit would play the next day...

It was six o’clock in the morning when someone knocked on the door. Lara was fast asleep and didn’t wake up. They opened the door and went over to the bedroom. Lara tossed in her sleep and a moment later awoke when a pair of hands started to shake her arm. She slowly opened her eyes and smiled as she saw who stood before her.

“Zip!” she exclaimed.

“Hey girl! Time to rise and shine – get that bony butt out of bed!”

Lara yawned and slowly slid out from beneath the covers.

“How ya’ been girl?”

“Fine!” she replied, “It’s been awhile since we’ve seen each other. What have you been up to?”

Zip hopped onto the couch while Lara went to the bathroom to change. “I’ve been workin’ on some new security devices and cracking some systems. Got your last letter a week ago – I just *knew* you’d stay in touch after our little adventure.”

Lara laughed and came out of the bathroom dressed in the black catsuit. “Only because I felt guilty,” she joked.

Zip rolled his eyes. “I knew you weren’t tough enough to withstand my *charming* personality.”

Lara shook her head as she grabbed an apple from the small fridge. “So what are you doing here?”

“Well Mr. Hotshot here...”

“...Kisho?”

“Yes, yes, that’s the one. *Kisho* phoned me up one morning asking if I would accompany you here. Of course I hesitated because I remembered you and your bad attitude.”

Lara shot him a dirty look.

“Hey now! Easy girl.”

“You weren’t the one running around trying to stay in one piece,” she shot back at him.

Zip grinned. “We are sure going to have some fun.”

“We’ll see” Lara replied as she pretended to fire a bullet at him.

Lara's bodyguards escorted both of them out of her room and into an elevator. After walking down several hallways they were brought to a medium sized conference room. Kisho sat at the head of an oval shaped table with many other Japanese men around the sides. The bodyguards showed Lara and Zip to their designated seats and left the room.

"So it's really quite simple," Kisho continued. "Lara does all the running around while you help her navigate, warn her of dangers and hack any security systems."

"Now you just wait a minute!" Zip exclaimed. "How come *she* gets to have all the fun?"

Lara rolled her eyes. "And I suppose you would just love to do all the timed runs and stunts while trying not to lose any limbs?"

Zip held his hands up in front of him. "Ok, ok – you win. But you had better listen carefully or I might not be such a nice guy."

Kisho laughed. "You two make quite the team. Ok, we have everything set up and ready to go. Masa here will show you a basic diagram of the first level. Good luck, I eagerly await your results." He left the room with everyone except Masa who stayed behind.

After Lara and Zip had looked over a sketch of the level, they were escorted to a room full of artillery. Lara grinned when she saw how well stocked the room was.

"Hey girl, you look like a baby in a candy store!" Zip exclaimed.

Masa handed Lara a Heckler and Koch assault rifle. "I believe this is an old favourite?"

Lara took the gun and nodded. "Its been a long time since I've held one of these. It feels great!"

Masa pulled a headset off a rack on the wall. “This will be most useful to you. It is equipped with a mini-com so you can communicate with Zip.”

“Yeah girl! We can talk each other’s ears off!” Zip exclaimed.

Lara rolled her eyes. “Is there a mute button as well so I can shut him up?” she joked.

“Maybe in the next version,” Masa grinned. Next, he handed Lara a pair of stylish sunglasses. “There are two modes that these can be switched to. Infrared to see invisible lasers, and another which I like to call green gas mode. This is used for seeing poisonous gas or substantial amounts of carbon monoxide that may be in some rooms. There is also an option for night vision too.”

“Nice,” she replied, “like the style.”

“Now, for Zip. He will be stationed in a private room where he will have a headset of his own so he can communicate with you. He will also be equipped with several monitors and a state-of-the-art tracking device system. Lara, we have placed a tracking device in your catsuit.”

“Do I get one of those fun spin chairs too?” Zip asked excitedly.

“With arm rests and a built-in foot heater,” replied Masa.

“Woo! *Now* we’re talking!”

“Ok, so you’re all set. Lara, wait here. Someone will be here shortly to escort you. Zip, follow me – we’re going to get you all set up.”

“Later girl,” Zip winked.

Lara waved goodbye then waited until one of her bodyguards came to get her. He was holding a paper bag in one hand which he slipped over her head.

“Part of company regulation. You can’t see where we’re taking you, but don’t worry, it isn’t too far.” He helped Lara climb into a small cart and drove off down the long hallway.



*Straight for about thirty feet. Turn right and enter elevator.* Lara was committing the route to memory as best as she could. It had become a habit, one that had saved her many times before. As they continued on, Lara mapped out every second.

About ten minutes later, Lara removed the paper bag from her head. She was standing before a door, Masa beside her.

“This is where you begin,” he said, “treat this as if it was real. This simulator will help us determine whether or not we need to improve our security. If you encounter any people and they spot you, they will shoot or attack. Their weapons do not have blanks in them, so defend yourself as you normally would. These people are all wearing specially designed armour which will protect them from your bullets. Depending on the range you shoot from though, you will probably be able to knock them to the ground.

“Why did you decide not to use blanks?”

“To make it as realistic as possible. If there were blanks in them you might be less careful than if you weren’t aware.”

“Makes sense,” Lara replied, “is there anything else I should know before I begin?”

“There are different check points along the way. When we feel that you’ve had enough or we want you to stop to process and analyze what you’ve already done then we will take you out of the simulation. The entire course might take you a couple days or so to get through depending on how far you get. If there’s any advice I can give you, it would be to pay close attention to detail and always watch your back.”

“Will do,” Lara replied as she flipped her shades down...

Lara stepped into a small janitor's closet and the door behind her locked. She turned on the mini-com and adjusted her holsters.

“Zip? Are you there?”

“Hey girl! Here and ready to rock-n-roll. First thing, I thought it might be fun to use code names this time. Whattya' think?”

“As long as you don't call me twinkle toes again.”

“Works for me! Alright, I'll be Vicious Cat and you be Dark Ruby. Sounds good, yeah?”

“Whatever you say, *Vicious Cat*.”

Zip pushed a couple buttons and typed some code into the computer. A small green light started flashing on a screen. “Ok, got ya' girl. The tracking system is on and ready.”

“Good. So what is the objective?”

“Manoeuvre around the building without setting off any alarms. Your destination is a vault that is hidden somewhere. All ready to go?”

Lara gave her HK a little pat and nodded. “Lets do this.”

“Enough chit chat, why aren't they going anywhere?” Kisho asked. “I've got to know if this course can be completed.”

Masa handed him a hot drink. “We've hired the absolute best to try this. Even if they can't do it, we'll still learn from what they *can* do. It's just a waiting game now.”

Lara examined the closet she was in. There was only the one door that she had just come through. Various chemicals lay on a shelf and a bucket filled with soapy water was pushed up against a wall. Lara looked up and saw a grate in the ceiling. She climbed up the side of the

shelf, wrapping a leg around the side as she pushed up on the grate. After sliding it out of the way, Lara jumped upwards and pulled herself into the crawlspace. “Always two ways of doing everything,” she said.

The space she was in had small vents which allowed just enough light in so Lara could see where she was going. As Lara crept through the vent, Zip was busy typing away trying to get a map worked out of where she was heading.

“Ok Dark Ruby, listen up. Ten feet in front of you is another grate. Your options are to continue in the vent for about 100 feet, or to go through the grate and drop down into the lobby of this place.”

“What do you suggest?”

“I *knew* my superior knowledge would be of interest to you. Of course then there’s my extraordinary wisdom in...”

“...Can we move this along a little bit?” Lara interrupted.

“Alright, alright. I say you go through the grate. The vent beyond there is in need of some serious repair and I take it you’re not in the mood for giving any surprise visits?”

“Grate it is. Over.” Lara crouched down and peered through the cracks. If she dropped through it she would be landing smack in the middle of the lobby. Problem was there was a desk right in front with a receptionist.

“Dark Ruby, come in.”

“Right here.”

“Bad news. Just found out there are three security cameras near you. You’re going to have to time this one carefully. You should be able to hear the first one from where you are now.

Wait until it's turned all the way to the right then drop. You have about five seconds until it will see you again, three seconds until camera number two spots you."

"What about the third?"

"As soon as you are out of view for the first two, you'll be ok. Plenty of time to avoid number three."

"Sounds easy."

"*But*, you have Miss Crazy typist to get by. She's unarmed but only a fingers reach from an alarm button. You follow all of that?"

"A walk in the park. Over." Lara carefully removed the grate and slid it into the vent. Her toes rested at the edge of the hole as she peered below. She could hear the camera hum as it rotated from side to side. She gripped the edge with her fingers and planted her feet firmly while concentrating on the camera's position.

Lara rolled forwards and dropped through the hole, swiftly landing in a crouched position. Without taking a single breath she rolled left behind a potted tree and ducked low to the ground. She could hear the soft clicking of keys and the movement of the second camera. Without any time to think, Lara ran out from behind the plant, crouching low towards the ground in a stealth position. The camera was an inch away from spotting Lara when she suddenly dropped to the ground, somersaulted forwards, and turned around quickly pressing her back firmly up against the desk.

The sound of typing continued to fill the room which ensured Lara that she hadn't been spotted. After a quick glance around the room Lara saw the third camera. It was mounted in the corner of the room and was stationary. Since the desk was against the left wall, her only way to exit the area was to go around the right of it, directly in the camera's view.

*There's got to be another way of doing this*, she thought. Very slowly she pulled her backpack off. There had to be something that would be of use to her. After looking in the bag for a minute, a fortune cookie was the only item she came up with. Lara was a bit puzzled as to what she could use it for when something caught her eye. At the very front of the lobby was a small fountain. A grin swept over her face as she aimed carefully then threw the cookie as hard as she could.

The cookie went sailing through the air and hit the inside of the fountain bowl. It made a loud enough *clang!* to make the receptionist stop typing. Lara held her breath and remained motionless. A moment later the typing continued and Lara sighed with relief. All of a sudden, a large splash echoed in the room.

“Oh my goodness!” the lady called out. “The fountain! It’s overflowing!”

Lara heard her pick up a phone and frantically punch in a number.

“Come quickly! The water fountain is overflowing all over!”

Lara waited patiently until she heard several footsteps running towards the room. The receptionist ran over to the fountain with a couple of men. She was waving her arms around and yelling at them to turn the water off. It was now or never. Lara stood up quickly and pushed off the ground doing a back flip over the counter. She instantly dropped to the ground and crawled on her stomach as fast as she could out of the room.

Once Lara had made it around the corner she took cover behind a couch that was in the hallway. She was hidden by potted trees that were on either side.

“Vicious Cat, come in.”

“I’m here girl. Those were some fancy moves you pulled back there. Good job with the distraction too, you’re really on the ball today!”

Lara cupped a hand over the mic and spoke quietly. "I can't stay here for long, someone might spot me. Where to next?"

"There's a set of elevators straight down this hallway. You'll be passing by a couple of rooms on your way so you'll have to make it snappy."

"I don't have time to stand around for the elevator," she replied, "I sort of stand out."

"I've got it covered. I'll open one of the doors for you, and when I say to go, you run as fast as you can into it. It'll be closing as you run towards it so don't take too long."

"I've had plenty of practice," she replied, "no need to worry."

"Ok twinkle toes, doors are open. Three, two, one, GO!"

Lara shot up and did a forwards jump over the couch. She leaned forwards as she sprinted full speed ahead.

"Go Lara! Go Lara!" Zip sang over the mini-com. "Go girl go!"

The doors were starting to close up ahead. Lara pushed on and at the last second dove forwards through the doors just as they closed behind her.

"Call me *twinkle toes* once more and I'll blow up your little footsy heater."

"No! Anything but the heater!"

"One shot," Lara warned.

"Ok! You win! No more twinkle toes for you."

Lara smiled. "That's a good boy. Now tell me which floor to go to."

"Sorry girl, this you're going to have to figure out on your own."

"I'll start at the basement then. Over."

"See you down there."

The elevator doors opened and Lara quickly shot a glance out to see if anyone was nearby. A short hallway stood in front of her, turning to the right at the end. Very slowly Lara pressed her back to the wall and inched her way along. When she reached the corner, she peered around hoping to get a good glimpse of the next area. It appeared to be some sort of a storage room as there were several crates, cardboard boxes and shelves filled with various electrical equipment.

With her HK aimed in front of her, Lara proceeded into the room. Dim lights hung from above casting an eerie glow on the crates. She pushed the talk button on the mini-com and cupped her hand over the mic to prevent her voice from travelling in the room.

“Getting any of this?” she whispered.

“Sure am. Take a peek over at the other side of the room – you’re stuck.”

Three lasers guarded the exit. Each of them rose up to the top of the double doors then straight to the ground.

“Shouldn’t be too bad,” she commented, “just have to time it right – I can jump that no problem.”

“Not so fast girl. Turn on your shades. There’s another unwanted visitor mingling with those bad boys.”

Lara turned on the infrared. Immediately, a fourth laser came into view. It was twice as thick as the other lasers which made things a little more complicated.

“Now I’d like to see you jump *that* one!” Zip laughed.

“Any idea how to turn them off?”

“Can’t tell just yet – still trying some codes here.”

“No problem, I’ll do some sightseeing in the meantime.” Lara turned the infrared off and began to scout around the room. The only sounds she could hear were the soft buzz of the lights and the hum from the lasers. She was careful not to scuff her boots on the cement as she walked about.

Nothing in the warehouse was of any interest to Lara, and a quick search confirmed she was alone. Lara pulled herself up onto a crate and from there up onto another. As she was climbing higher, something caught her eye – a vent up another crate length in the wall. Lara pulled herself up doing a handstand on the next crate. It felt good to stretch her legs and then back flipped onto the last one. She walked over to the vent and peered inside, through some metal bars.

“Nothing in there, Lara. Just an air vent that leads nowhere.”

Lara sighed and gently kicked out at the vent. One of the metal bars broke off and fell into the vent with a loud *clang!* Smiling, she picked it up and then made her way back down to the floor. When Lara had entered the room she had noticed a damaged crate. After re-locating it, she took the metal bar and used it like a crowbar to pry open the cracked wood. After it broke away, Lara peered inside and grinned. Four grappling hook launches lay in a case. After helping herself to one, Lara began to walk in the direction of the lasers, hoping to find something to turn them off.

“Hey Lara, stop right there for a second.”

“Find something?”

“One of the lasers just stopped for a second. What did you just do?”

“You mean what did *you* do? I was just walking towards them.”

“I didn’t do anything either. Better take a peek around you.”



Lara turned around and looked for any sort of sensor that might have triggered the laser to stop. Nothing caught her eye until she happened to glance down. One part of the floor was a shade lighter than everywhere else. Lara walked onto the section, but nothing happened.

“Cha-ching! You got it girl. Pressure pad – one that turns off a laser.”

Lara looked over her shoulder, and sure enough one of the lasers had been shut off.

“Think there’s more around?” Lara asked.

“We’ve got to hope so, there’s no way I can shut these off myself.”

Lara walked over to a nearby crate and began pulling it back to the pressure pad. Once it was on, she started looking for other light coloured sections on the floor.

After successfully finding two more pads, and pushing crates onto them, Lara was posed with another problem – she couldn’t find the last one.

“Are you sure there aren’t anymore?” Zip asked.

“Yes, I’ve looked twice and can’t find another.”

“Are you super sure?”

“I’ve searched everywhere.”

“Are you super duper…”

“…Zip!” Lara exclaimed, “There aren’t anymore!”

“Ok, ok! Just didn’t want you to miss anything.”

“So how do I turn the last one off?”

“No idea – in fact, I don’t think you can.”

“Way to look on the bright side,” she muttered. Lara flipped the infrared back on and watched the laser. Suddenly, all of the lights in the room went out. Lara instantly ducked down and grabbed her HK.

“Whoops! Wrong button!”

Lara shook her head and rolled her eyes. “What I have to work with.” Holstering her gun as she got up, something reddish caught her eye on the floor. It was a dim red light near the entrance. She made her way towards it, being careful not to bump into anything.

“Almost got the lights back on girl.”

“No, wait – I think I’ve found something.”

Lara was standing overtop of the red light now. Three small lasers were visible through her glasses under the floor.

“Yeah girl! Good job!”

“What?”

“The laser – it’s off!”

Lara looked up and saw the exit was now completely free of any harm. She ran across the room, heading for the doors. Just as she got to them, a bright red light flashed in front of her. The laser had turned back on, and was just inches away from her face! Lara stopped dead in her tracks and forced herself backward.

“Woah girl! You almost fried yourself!”

“Must have been on a timer?” she gasped.

“Or else you needed to put a crate on it. Go try that, and don’t you be running back there just yet!”

Lara made her way back to the mini-lasers and pushed a crate overtop. Nothing happened to the laser, though.

“What’s going on?” she asked.

“Oooh, I’ve got it. It’s heat-activated. Stand back on there for a second.”

Lara pushed the crate aside and stepped onto the spot. Instantly, the laser turned off.

“Ok good, now step off. This thing definitely has a timer on it...you’ve got ten seconds before it starts up again.”

“That’s impossible. Are you sure there isn’t a way of tricking it?”

“I’m afraid not – you’re gonna have to move fast girl! Just imagine a sixty-foot, five hundred pound monster is chasing you!”

“A picture of you in my mind will suffice.”

“Hey now, that isn’t very...”

Lara didn’t catch the rest of what he was saying. She took off in a shot and sprinted like she had never done so before. Her HK pounded against her back as she ran, her mic slightly jiggling in front of her mouth.

Two seconds. There was no way she was going to make it. One second. Lara dropped the ground, and rolled over her shoulder. She landed on her back and opened her eyes. The laser was directly above her, and was rapidly descending. Lara whipped herself over just in time before she was completely burned.

“Whew! Had me worried there for a second!”

“Like I said: impossible.” Lara lay on the ground for a moment longer while she caught her breath. Her heart was still pounding and both of her legs were tingling. A shadow was suddenly cast over Lara. Masa stood beside her.

“Excellent job, Lara!”

She slowly got to her feet and adjusted the HK on her back. “Really tests your sprinting abilities,” she laughed.

Masa smiled and nodded his head. “Just so you know, that last laser wasn’t real.” He stuck his arm out and let the laser pass right through it. “That one we just stuck in for fun. Can’t believe you made it through – *very* impressive.”

“I’ve learned my lesson before,” she replied, her mind returning to Egypt.

“This is the first checkpoint. We’re taking you out of the simulation now, so you’re finished for today.”

Lara was escorted back to her room by one of her bodyguards. Before she went back in, Masa took away all of her equipment. Lara changed into some pajamas that had been provided for her, and hopped onto the couch with some food. She couldn’t believe that the last laser had been fake. Lara was pleased though, that she was able to do it successfully.

Suddenly, a small screen began to descend from the ceiling. Lara watched closely as an image was loading on the screen. When it was finished, Kisho was looking right at Lara.

“Hello there,” he said.

“Hi Kisho, how are you doing?”

“Great. I just wanted to talk with you a bit about how you did today. Everyone was very impressed with your performance. You and Zip work exceptionally well together.”

“When he behaves,” she laughed. “Speaking of Zip, can I see him?”

Kisho’s face immediately fell into a blank expression. “Under no circumstances are you allowed visitors in your room.”

“Can I go see him then? I’d like to catch up on old times.”

“I’m afraid you can’t do that either.”

Lara frowned. Something wasn’t right here.

“There are some rules here you will have to follow. You are not permitted to leave this room unless escorted, or given permission by myself or Masa. You will work in the simulator when we tell you to, and will sleep during specific hours. No contact will be allowed with the outside world. You also are not allowed to have any contact with Zip while out of the simulator.”

Lara jumped right off the couch, letting her meal drop to the floor.

“You’d better tell me what is going on, *right* now.”

“You seem upset, what’s wrong Lara?”

Lara put her hands on her hips, and walked up to the screen. “You can’t keep me here.”

Kisho grinned. “Is that so? The last time I checked, *you* were the one on the wrong side of the locked door.”

Lara’s gaze momentarily shifted to the door. “So what exactly do you want me to do?”

“To complete the simulation. If you give us a hard time about it there will be severe penalties to pay.”

“Interesting way of treating your consultant,” she answered, suddenly getting a very sour taste in her mouth.

“One last thing before I leave you. If you are a good girl you will be rewarded, and perhaps given special privileges. So I suggest you cooperate and things might not be so bad after all.” With that said, the screen shut off and went back into the ceiling.

Lara was in shock, and wasn’t quite sure how to react. She was now being held captive in the compound without any contacts. She was locked inside her room which was secured by her so called ‘bodyguards.’ Of course she didn’t happen to have any sort of weapon on her, and saw no way to escape the room. The only way in and out was the one door. There wasn’t anything she could do just yet. As soon as she started the simulation again, Lara would have to tell Zip

what was *really* happening. Until then, she would have to stick it out. Lara went into the bedroom and lay awake all night long...

Kisho sat at the head of the table in front of the company's top employers. They were nearing the end of their meeting about Lara. Masa was currently giving his opinion on the situation.

"I hope she doesn't give us any problems. No one else would be able to do this. I am concerned, however that she might not perform as well if she isn't given any freedom."

"Nonsense," Kisho exclaimed. "She is always forced with stressful situations and pulls through everytime."

"We'll have to monitor her carefully. If she *did* start to break down we'd have to take immediate action."

Kisho didn't say anything for a minute. Finally, he stood up and began walking around the table. "I will ensure she is at her best. In the meantime I'm not taking any chances. No one is permitted to let her out of that room until the next simulation." With that said, he gathered up some loose papers and hastily left the room.

The next morning Lara awoke with a bad headache. She hadn't slept well, two hours at the most. She had been trying to figure out ways of escaping, but Lara knew none of them would work. She swung her legs over the side of the bed and stood up. A flash of pain hit her temple and she braced herself against the wall until it subdued.

After a quick shower, Lara stood in front of the mirror in her new attire. Just beside the fridge was a chute. Someone had sent a pair of black pants and a grey t-shirt along with a short note. It said that today she would be continuing the simulation, and it would begin at 10:00 AM. Lara stood a moment longer in front of the mirror looking at her eyes. Two dark brown eyes stared back, two eyes that had no idea what lay ahead...

“No fancy catsuits or guns today?” Lara asked sarcastically.

Masa threw her a pair of gloves. “First we’re gonna work up a little sweat.”

Lara grinned. “Always the *best* way to start a day.”

“I didn’t say how much,” he shot back.

Masa and Lara stood before an outside jungle gym. After accepting an ice cold drink from another worker, he took an abrupt seat in a reclining lawn chair.

“Ready to begin Lara?”

“Waiting for you.”

“Good. Now I want you to maneuver around the entire structure without touching the ground or taking long rests. Everytime you do, we’ll start over again until you do it right.”

“Don’t get too comfortable.” Lara hoisted herself up onto a ladder. Once she got to the top, she took a quick glance at the structure. The entire frame was built from metal. A series of jumps, crawls, swings and climbs lay ahead.

“Get moving!” Masa called from below.

Lara side rolled onto a small ledge beside her then forward jumped to another. She could almost do it with her eyes closed as it brought back fond memories of her assault course at home. She jumped flawlessly from one ledge to another as Masa watched closely from below.

After a short run, Lara jumped forwards, and grabbed onto a pole. She swung up and around it two times, then let go and flew forwards to another landing. Lara vaulted onto a higher ledge then jumped upwards to catch a hold of some monkey bars. She made her way across smoothly and dropped into a crouch at the end. Lara assumed the position of a commando crawl and made her way through a narrow tunnel...

Fifteen minutes later, Lara had successfully completed the course. She slowly climbed down the ladder and walked back over to Masa.

“Tired yet?”

“Not even warmed up.”

“Good, because my friend Yukio here is going to take you to your next exercise. Have fun,” he grinned.

By lunch time Lara had completed five very strenuous and demanding exercises. Her t-shirt was soaked in sweat and her pants stuck to her legs. She leaned against a wall while waiting for further instruction. Masa returned and had a quick chat with Yukio before coming near Lara.

“Had enough for now?” he asked.

“Are we finished?”

Masa glared at her then nodded. “We have decided to postpone the simulation until later this evening. You are to return to your room and rest until we are ready for you.”

“See you soon,” she smiled as she made her way back towards the compound...



Once Lara had been escorted to her room, she grabbed some food from the fridge and collapsed onto the couch. She was exhausted from the workout, and this was her first chance to sit down. Lara kicked off her boots and wiped her forehead with the back of her hand. She knew she had to rest now, especially if she wanted to survive another checkpoint in the simulation. Two minutes later, Lara's head fell onto a pillow and her long braid fell loosely over the edge.

Three and a half hours later, a loud knock on the door woke Lara from a deep sleep. She wearily opened her eyes as an unknown figure entered her room. A boy, probably only twenty years old or so pushed in a large cleaning cart. He smiled at Lara and extended his hand to her.

“Hello Ms. Croft, my name is Matthew. I'm supposed to clean your room for you.”

She shook his hand and studied his eyes for a moment. “Do you work here?”

He nodded. “Yes, Kisho ...”

“...I hired him six years ago,” Kisho interrupted as he stepped into the room.

Matthew looked down at the floor.

“Matthew will clean your room once a day. Under no circumstances is he to let you out of this room. He will come in, clean, and then leave. That is his only purpose. He isn't here to keep you company. Clear, Lara?”

“Then maybe you should let him start.”

Kisho grunted then stormed out of the room.

“You sure know how to handle him!” Matthew exclaimed.

“Can't let him push me around,” she replied.

“Don't let him, make sure you stand your ground or you'll never get out of here.”

Lara frowned. “What do you mean, exactly?”

“I’ve overheard things. They don’t *really* plan on letting you go after you’re finished here.”

“I’ve been thinking that, because they know I’d get them back for this.”

Matthew nodded then made his way over to the fridge. Lara noticed he had a slight handicap when he walked. One leg turned inwards which made him slightly bob as he walked. He opened the fridge and looked back at her.

“You’ve nearly cleaned this entire thing out! You’re lucky I snuck some extra food for you, I think they only refill this every couple of days.” He placed several packages of food in the fridge along with half a dozen water bottles.

“Thank you,” Lara said, “I appreciate that.”

“They must be working you pretty hard? I’ve heard good reports on you, though.”

“I just want to get through this.”

Matthew went into her bathroom and replaced her old towels with fresh ones. He placed a new roll of toilet paper under the sink and checked to see if she needed anything else.

“Why are you working here?” she questioned. “You don’t seem to like Kisho, so why stay and let him push *you* around?”

He looked a little surprised at her question. “It’s a job.” He quietly went into her bedroom and began to change her sheets. Meanwhile, Lara opened up a bottle of water and rubbed her foot where a blister had begun to form...

After waiting several hours in her room, Masa finally came in to get her at 10:00 PM. After Lara changed into her catsuit, he escorted her back to the simulator...

After taking off her blindfold, Lara observed her surroundings. She had been placed in the exact spot where she had left off last time. Her backpack held everything that she had before,

including the goodies that were picked up from the previous day. Lara stood up and adjusted her headset.

“Vicious Cat, come in.”

“Hey girl! I’m here. How are you doing today? Ready to move on?”

“Not too bad. Some weird things have been going on here. Can’t tell you right now, though.” Lara remembered that all their conversations were monitored, so she would have to find another way of telling him what was *really* going on.

“I’ve got the next part of this area almost mapped out. A little hacking and cracking was all it took.”

“Great, lets get started.”

Zip studied the map that was on his screen. “Ok girl. I’m sure you’ll know what to do up ahead. Turn on your shades before you even try *this* one.”

“Copy that. Over.” Lara walked down the hallway until she got to the end. A ladder was nailed to the wall in front of her. She flipped on the infrared, looked up, and found herself staring at a shaft *full* of laser beams. Some shot out from the ladder, others from the wall behind.

“What do you think, Lara?”

She placed one foot on the bottom rung and took a deep breath. “Way too easy. This one has been done *many* times before.”

“Take your time, take your time! We don’t want them to have to come and shovel you up if you get burned!”

Lara grabbed a hold of another rung and pulled herself up onto the ladder. She checked to make sure her HK was secure, then began her climb...

“Watch it girl! You’re too close!”

Lara eyed the laser which was a foot above her head. “Just checking to make sure it’s real this time.” The heat from the laser was hitting Lara’s face hard, and a small film of sweat began to coat her face. She climbed back down a couple of rungs, then after checking above and behind her, she back flipped off of the ladder, twisted in mid-air and grabbed a hold of another ladder behind her. Very carefully she inched her way up, being extremely cautious of the laser which threatened her back.

Once she had cleared the laser, another one flashed out at her from above. Using the same technique as before, she flipped from ladder to ladder until all of them had been cleared.

“Great work girl! Still haven’t lost your touch. Now you hold on a second while I see what’s up next.”

Lara peered ahead and saw that the tunnel stretched on for quite awhile. Without waiting for Zip, she crawled forwards towards a small grate in the side. Lara flicked off the infrared and peered through the grate. It was hard to see exactly what was in the room since a small flickering bulb was the room’s only light source. Lara took out her crowbar and pried the grate loose. She hung from the ledge, then dropped silently into the room.

“Cha-ching! You’ve hit the jackpot!” Zip cried out over the mini-com.

“What’s that?”

“A storage room. Check it out carefully, and don’t even bother trying the door to get out. It’s locked and there’s no way I can open it.”

Lara squinted until her eyes got accustomed to the dark. There were several shelves in the room which were filled with odds and ends. Lara hoisted herself up onto one and began rummaging through its contents.

“Nothing here, Zip.”

“Anything else to check?”

“No – this room is dead. Getting out of here. Over.” Lara jumped to grab the ledge then pulled herself back into the shaft. About twenty feet ahead lay another grate in the wall. Lara looked through it and saw a fairly large, well-lit room. It was full of computers, screens, weird-looking machines and other technical equipment.

“Check this out!” Zip exclaimed. “You’ve struck it rich! Now get in there!”

“What was it you said? Like a baby in a candy store?”

“Alright, alright. Forget what I said earlier, I take it back. I think it will be to your advantage though if you *do* check out this room.”

“What do you say?”

“Please?”

“What’s that?” Lara teased.

“*Pretty* please?”

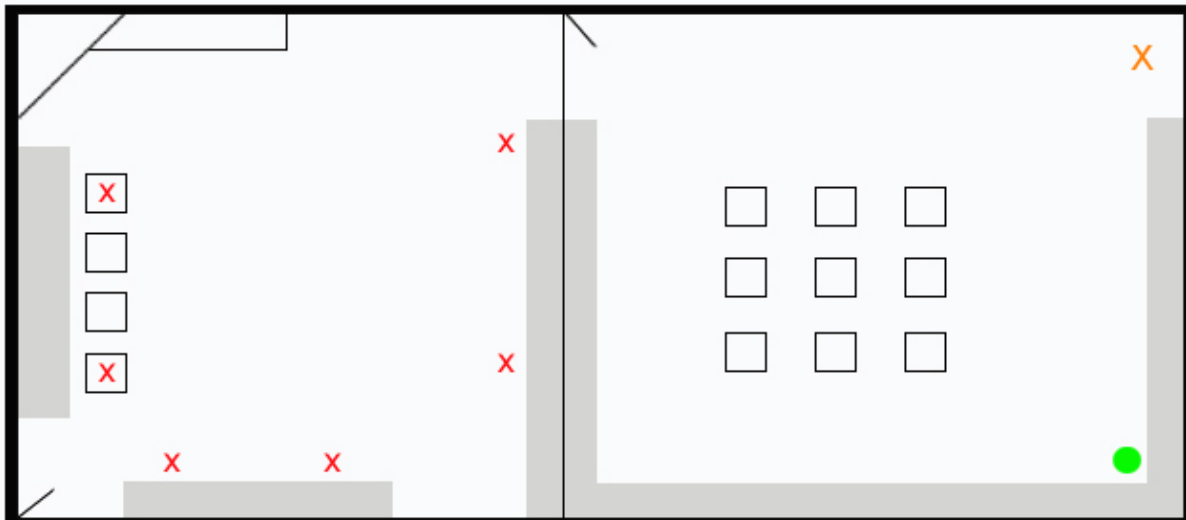
“That’s a good boy. I’m going in – over.” Lara pried the grate open and dropped into the room like before. She quickly took cover behind a machine, and peered out from behind to check if anyone was lurking around.

“Dark Ruby, come in quickly!”

“What’s up?”

“Don’t you move! You don’t *wanna* know what’s in this room. Turn your shades back on, I’m going to send you a picture of what my screen is showing me.”

Lara pressed her back against the machine and waited until the image loaded.



“I hope those red X’s are some ammo pickups,” Lara said.

“You were smart to duck down when you came in. See the green blinking dot? That’s you. The orange X is a turret that is just waiting to shower you with bullets. Luckily, you haven’t triggered it yet.”

“And the red ones?”

“Your targets.”

“Seven of them?”

“That’s right.”

“How is the turret triggered? It can’t be by movement.”

“You’re right – it’s not. Hmm...going to have to check this one out. Hang tight.”

Lara studied the picture for a few more seconds then flipped the shades off. She took out her HK, switched the mode to rapid then jumped over the machine...

Lara clenched her teeth as she sprinted into the adjoining room. One man was facing her, and went to shoot his gun at her, but she had already fired two shots into his chest. Without stopping, she plunged ahead sending a spray of bullets into three more of her targets.

The two workers who had been sitting down had assumed positions on the ground under the desk. Lara contemplated just passing them by when they started shooting at her. She quickly side rolled to the right, and while doing so, sent twice as many shots back.

Out of the corner of her eye, Lara caught a glimpse of the last man dashing out the door. She ran out after him but stopped dead in her tracks and ducked back into the room after at least twenty shots were fired at her. Apparently he had triggered the turret and it now had one goal – destroy Lara.

“Dark Ruby did you just crack your head open? I told you to wait, hold still, not to move, to delay your next move, remain where you were, but of *course* you didn’t listen! So now guess what? *You’re* gonna have to figure this one out on your own!”

“And the escapee?”

“Mush on the ground.”

Lara hoisted her gun up, resting part of it on her arm. With her back tightly pressed against the wall she inched her way to the edge. With one swift jerk, she swung around the side and shot five bullets at the turret. Lara dashed back into place just in time before it returned her gesture.

“Good job girl. Hit it three times. Keep going!”

Lara readied herself once more then performed the same stunt three more times until a large explosion echoed from the room.

“Just don’t make them the same anymore, do they Lara?”

“Guess they didn’t want me to have *too* much fun,” she laughed. Lara made her way back into the first room and covered her face with a free hand. Smoke from the damaged turret filled the room and the smell of burnt plastic and metal stung her nose. As she passed the body of the last man, she noticed something laying beside him – a small computer disc. Lara picked it up to examine: *Firearms: Room 3*. Thinking it might be useful, Lara pocketed it, then returned to the shaft.

“Problem,” Lara announced.

“I see that. The shaft is completely destroyed. If you had waited for me like a good girl you...”

“...I wouldn’t have noticed an alternate route,” she interrupted. Lara took out her grappling hook launcher and aimed it at a grate in the ceiling. “Didn’t see this way did you?” she teased.

“Well, I...um...”

Lara shook her head and pulled the trigger on her gun. After a short run and jump, she caught a hold of the rope and climbed her way to the top. Lara could just make out part of the room above her. With one hand holding onto the rope, she pushed upwards on the grate with her legs with one strong thrust. It instantly gave way and she was quick to grab the ledge with her other hand. After letting go of the rope, she grabbed onto the ledge and immediately pulled herself up.

“I’m in – rather *up*. Over.”

“Ok girl we’ve got a bit of a problem. Take a peek around while I check something out. Over.”



Lara stood up and found herself in a fairly small room. A couple of computer panels were stationed on one side, a chair and a couple cabinets on the other. The exit was what caught her eye. A cylindrical chamber was connected to the room. The keypad which opened the door to the chamber was positioned on the wall, right of the door. Lara flipped down her shades and switched the view to infrared. She peered into the chamber, but there weren't any lasers that became visible. As soon as she switched it to the gas mode, a green cloud came into view.

"Carbon monoxide?" she asked.

"Mixed with something else. They definitely don't want anyone getting through there."

"Can you turn it off?"

"No can do. I can however, open the door for you."

"How long is the chamber?"

"Fifty feet with another locked door on the end. Can't open it though, you've got to do that from your side."

"Not so bad," she replied.

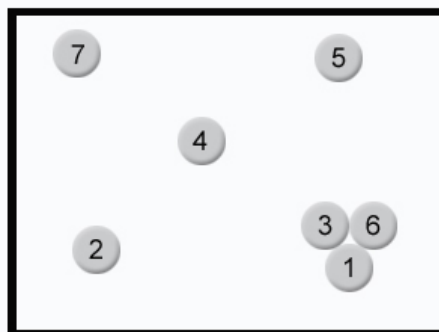
"If you can do it in one try. Once the first door is open, it won't re-open if the second door isn't open in a certain amount of time."

"Very clever - how do I unlock it?"

"There are seven hanging pins on the door. You have to insert them into the holes in a specific order, then pull the handle to get out. You've got to do this in thirty seconds or you're toast. And obviously, no breathing allowed."

"Do you happen to know the order the pins need to go in?"

"Girl, you obviously don't know my capabilities. Turn on your shades and I'll send you a little picture."



Lara studied his drawing and tried to commit it to memory.

“You got it girl?”

She closed her eyes and went over the steps again. “Got it.”

“You’ve got thirty seconds the instant I open the door, so you’re gonna have to move fast! Remember, think of the five-hundred-pound-monster scenario!”

The second that there was enough room to squeeze through, Lara took a last breath then dashed into the chamber. A few seconds later, she heard the door behind her slam shut. She pressed on, sprinting as fast as she could, as her equipment pounded at her back. The end of the chamber seemed so far away.

“Twenty seconds girl, keep going!”

Lara picked up speed, her lungs starting to indicate they wanted air. Just before she reached the end, she dropped down, doing a forwards roll and landing only a couple inches away from the door. With her mind racing, she strained to remember the order of the pins. She grabbed the first one and shoved it into its slot.

“Twelve seconds. Come on!”

Lara placed the next three in without a problem. She grabbed the fifth pin and fumbled with it to get it in.

“Six seconds!”

She grabbed the last two pins in either hand and jammed them into place.

“Two seconds!”

Lara shoved the lever down and threw herself at the door. She stumbled out of the chamber and ran ahead a couple feet to get away from the gas. The door behind her slammed shut and Lara was left to catch her breath.

“Dark Ruby come in!”

“I’m...here,” she gasped.

“Didn’t breathe any of that in, did you?”

She shook her head. “No, don’t think so.”

“Good! ‘Cause you don’t wanna *know* what else they had in there.”

After Lara caught her breath again, she surveyed the new room. There were a couple racks filled with various types of guns. Another rack held armour, and a small one contained a couple aqua lungs.

“Time to load up.” Lara grabbed two aqua lungs and put them in her backpack.

“No way girl. More like time to *unload*. You can use that disc you got earlier in one of the computers. That will open the door to *Lara Haven*.”

Lara smirked. “What’s that?”

“Get rid of all your guns and anything metal. You’ll see why in a second.”

“Even the HK?”

“Hey now, we’ve been through this once before, and I remember you being *quite* happy that you listened to me.”

Lara did as she was told then proceeded to use the disc at the computer. Two metal doors swung open and Lara entered into a narrow, brightly lit hallway. The doors closed behind her and she waited for further instruction.

“Ok girl, this next part is going to be fun.”

“I’m sorry, we’re going to have to stop this here,” Masa’s voice said over the headset.

“Lara, wait there for your escort.”

After she was removed from the simulation and brought back to her room, Lara eagerly gulped down two bottles of water. It was nearing 12:30 AM and she was exhausted. Her nap earlier had certainly helped her get through everything that night. She had a quick shower then sat down on the couch to have some food before retiring for the night...

An unknown figure entered Lara’s room, and slowly made his way towards her bed. Her eyes shot open as she jumped up, ready to defend herself.

“*Easy now! It’s Matthew!*” he whispered loudly.

“*What are you doing here?!*” she whispered back, sitting back onto the bed.

He closed her bedroom door and lit a candle in front of him. “I’m here to help you.”

Lara frowned. “It’s two thirty in the morning!” she exclaimed. “How on earth did you get in here?”

Matthew grinned as dark shadows danced across his face. “Kisho is fast asleep, and your guards are never here from one to five in the morning. I just had to sneak down here without anyone noticing. Bumped into a couple walls on the way,” he laughed.

“What do you want to help me with?”

“Getting you out of here.”

“Why would you want to do that?” she questioned.

“So I can escape with you.”

Lara was silent for a moment. “But you work here. If you don’t want to stay, why not quit?”

Matthew’s eyes fell to the bed. “Kisho is my father and he’s keeping me here captive as well. I just have more freedom than you.”

“Why is he doing that?”

He took a deep breath in and sighed before answering. “My father has been after something for a very long time. He has spent years researching and planning. He built this place for one reason: a training ground. You’re not actually testing their security here.”

“I was starting to realize that,” she answered.

Matthew nodded. “You’re helping them by showing the way.”

Lara shook her head, confused. “Showing them the way?”

“They built the entire simulator after a real one. You’ve been showing them the way to surpass it.”

Lara sighed as she processed everything. “Keep going.”

“After you complete the simulation, he and his men are going to invade the actual place to steal what he wants. He brought you here because he knows you’re the only one who could do

it. He thinks that if he follows what you've done, taking problems you've had into consideration and planning with them, he'll be able to do the real one himself."

"Not a horrible idea," she responded, "so what do you have planned?"

"You've got to finish the simulation, and they can't find out that you know what they're going to do. When *they* go to do it, you've got to stop them. That's when we escape and go after them. You've got to beat them to the end and destroy what they're trying to get."

"What *is* it that he's going after?" she inquired.

"A medallion that was created thousands of years ago. It is supposed to be a key to a temple. He can't get his hands on it, and it must be destroyed. It is said you have to throw it back into the East China Sea where it was created."

"*That* part sounds easy. How are we going to get out of here though? And what about Zip?"

Matthew smiled. "That's all been taken care of." He handed her a piece of paper and pen. "You can write Zip and tell him everything that has been going on. I don't clean his room, but I wash his laundry. I can sneak your letter into one of his towels and he'll get it. Everytime I clean your room I will leave you a message. Respond only in the bathroom or bedroom where you're not being watched. We won't be able to talk face-to-face about this anymore because it is too risky."

Lara nodded and looked him in the eye. "I'll do whatever it takes to get out of here."

It was 9:00 AM before Lara's eyes opened for the first time that morning. To her surprise, she wasn't tired at all, and felt quite refreshed. As she was making her way to the

bathroom she noticed a note with a pair of fresh clothes for the day. Apparently she had the day off to rest, so she wouldn't be doing anything in the simulation. After a quick bite she returned to her room where she began her letter to Zip.

It was nearing 12:00 PM and Lara had been keeping herself busy by reading a book. A loud knock disrupted her, and Kisho entered the room.

"Hello Lara, how are you doing?"

"Fine," she replied shortly.

"You've been doing well in the simulation. We're very pleased."

"Am I nearing the end yet?"

"Getting close."

"Then what?"

"Then you're free to go."

*Liar*, she thought. Lara smiled at him and got up from the couch. "Why are you here?"

"I wanted to see if you were interested in taking a walk outside with me? I know its been awhile since you were outside and I thought you might like to get some fresh air?"

Lara nodded and followed him out of the room. Both bodyguards came with them. Lara thought something was up and she was keeping a close eye on where they were going. They didn't blindfold her this time, so she was committing every step to memory.

Before they were even able to get out of the building, they had to pass through security. Once they were outside, Lara breathed the fresh air in deeply. The sun warmed her entire body and she closed her eyes for a moment while she felt her body come back to life. She felt a great sense of freedom, something she hadn't felt in what seemed like forever.

“If you co-operate today you’ll see more of these opportunities,” Kisho stated, seeing the enjoyment that she was getting out of the simple outing. Kisho brought Lara over to a nearby forest where Masa was waiting for them.

“Hello Lara!” he called out, “We’ve got a special treat for you today.” He motioned beside him to where two quad bikes lay. “Care to take them for a ride?”

Lara nodded and mounted one of the bikes. It was similar to the one at home, but a shade or two off of the colour. Kisho left the two and went back to the compound.

For a couple of hours, Lara rode behind Masa as they traveled through the forest, along different paths. Neither of them spoke much, just comments about the scenery now and then. She had been contemplating trying to drive off and get away from Masa but had been told at the beginning of their little outing that their entire land was fenced off. Lara was enjoying herself, none-the-less. It felt great to be outdoors, having control of the quad beneath her, and actually breathing in real air. As they passed a small pond, Lara slowed down to enjoy the view. She wasn’t sure when she’d be able to do this again...

It was nearing 5:00 PM when Lara was returned to her room. She grabbed some water from the fridge and drank it all without taking a breath. The icy water was a great refreshment to her dry throat.

Lara noticed a letter waiting for her, and scanned it quickly. Kisho wanted to continue the simulation that night, around 7:00 PM. She had a quick shower, changed into her catsuit and started eating dinner.

While she had been in the bathroom, Lara had found a note hidden in one of the towels. It was from Matthew, and he had said that he had delivered her note to Zip that morning. He also



provided Lara of a roughly sketched map which she hadn't yet examined in any detail. While she waited for seven o'clock to roll around, Lara rested quietly on the couch. She hoped she was nearing the end, but was also dreading it at the same time.

"How are you holding up girl?"

"Fine thanks," Lara replied, smiling at his highly memorable, up-beat voice.

"Ready to rock-n-roll?" Zip asked.

"Always," she grinned.

"Great, 'cause I just know we're gonna have some fun tonight."

"Not sure if I like the sounds of that, coming from you!" she teased.

"Hey now! I'm your eyes and ears so you'd better be nice!"

"Just as long as you behave I won't have to take any drastic measures."

"Ooh! Lara's in her zone now, better get started before you lose that edge!"

"What's on the agenda tonight?"

"Well I did some homework last night, and got some info that's going to be of great use."

"I'm all ears."

"Well soon you're going to have to be all eyes. Once those doors open you're going to have to be on your toes. Essentially everything in that room is out to get you, so have your gun in hand every step of the way. This room is basically a sad attempt at keeping you from getting to the second level where the security panel is. You're going to have to figure a way to get up there. Any questions?"

"Seems kind of pointless."

“Like I said: a sad attempt girl, a sad attempt.” The door in front of Lara slowly swung open and she was greeted by darkness. Lara quickly turned the night vision on, and had her gun ready in front of her.

After taking a quick peek around the room, Lara realized she was going to need a little more help. She had already spotted two targets, but the rest were invisible without having a heat sensor built in. Zip apparently was aware of this fact, because a moment later his voice chirped up on the mini-com.

“Come in Lara.”

“I’m here.”

“Looks like you’re going to need some backup here. I’ve hacked into the night cameras so I can see everything. All set?”

Lara adjusted her headset and nodded. “Lets do this.” She stepped into the room and quickly backed up against a wall in a stealth position. The room was full of various crates and shelves. She saw her first target only a dozen feet ahead.

*BANG! BANG, BANG!* She fired three shots at it and it fell to the ground.

“Didn’t think of trying to sneak our way through this?” Zip asked. “Now you’ve woken *everything* up!”

Three machines the size of Lara dashed out from behind a crate. *BANG! BANG!* She shot one down, but the others were fast approaching. They didn’t carry any weapons other than razor sharp claws for hands. *BANG! BANG!* She fired more shots at them as she sprinted towards them.

“Careful girl!” Zip cried out.

Lara forward jumped at the last second, just clearing their deadly claws as they reached up for her. In mid-air she somersaulted and landed on a crate facing them. *BANG, BANG!*

“Bulls eye,” Lara muttered as both machines crashed to the ground. *BANG, BANG!* Two shots were fired at Lara suddenly, forcing her to drop into a crouch.

“Get goin’ girl – you just triggered a turret and it doesn’t like you standing in its way!”

She shot up and did a forwards jump onto another crate just ahead and vaulted up to another level. Lara spun around and fired several shots at the turret. It continued to fire at her while she back flipped three times, achieving a new height. *BANG! BANG!* Lara waited a second until a puff of smoke convinced her that she had successfully destroyed it.

“Door up one more level,” Zip called out.

She jumped to grab a ledge and pulled herself up. She opened the door and walked into the security room.

“That was easy,” she exclaimed.

“Don’t sound too disappointed girl, it’s far worse getting *out*.”

Lara made her way over to a couple control panels. There were three different switches that she could use.

“Any idea what these do?” she asked.

“Yes mam. The one on the left turns off the two alarms you set off. The middle one turns on the lights, and the third one opens the door out of here.”

“Alarms?”

“Silent, obviously. You triggered them when you woke up turret number one, and when you came in here. No biggy.”

She quickly flicked off the first switch and then turned on the second. Several bright lights turned on in the room below her.

“Better reload girl.”

Lara did as she was told then flicked the last switch up, which opened two large metal doors below. After she made her way back to the ground level, Zip chirped up on her mini-com once again.

“Still have those aqua lungs?”

“Yes, two of them.”

“Good, ‘cause this next part is impossible without them.”

As she went through the doors, Lara found herself in front of a small swimming pool. A mini waterfall filled the pool with sparkling blue water. Lara walked down a couple steps into the lukewarm water. A tunnel was the pools only exit, and it was pitch black.

“You know girl, the next pair of boots you invest in should have a twelve pack of flares built in.”

Lara laughed and shrugged her shoulders. “Flares aren’t always the best thing anyway. If you can see your enemy, they can see you too.”

“Ok, but in this case they’re an essential item.”

“What do you suggest then?”

“I have the entire tunnel mapped out in front of me. The best way is for you to just swim as fast as you can while I instruct you.”

She didn’t like the sound of that. “There isn’t another way?”

“Come on girl, you know I won’t let you down. As long as you listen you’ll be fine. Now are you in?”

Lara sighed as she took out an aqua lung from her bag. Next time, flares were going to be the *first* thing she would pack!

After taking a few breaths, she plunged into the water and into the opening of the tunnel. She was instantly enveloped by darkness but kept swimming forwards.

“You’re doing great girl. The tunnel continues on straight here for a bit yet. When I say so, you’re going to make a left. Not a curved left, but a *sharp* left or you’re gonna swim smack into a wall. I hope you’re listening to me!”

Lara shook her head as she continued on. Leaving Zip in charge could be a very dangerous thing. She knew the turn was coming up when the tunnel narrowed slightly.

“In three seconds girl, then LEFT. Three, two, one, now!”

Lara turned sharply in the water and felt along the walls beside her. One thing she *did* like about Zip was he always had good timing.

“Right in two seconds!”

She swam to the right and continued to follow Zip’s instructions. She closed her eyes after the water began to sting them and concentrated only on breathing, swimming in a straight line, and following Zip’s every command. Several minutes later Zip told Lara to stop swimming.

“Hold it right there girl. We’ve got a bit of a problem up ahead. I hope you’re getting all of this. Someone has turned a fan on, and there isn’t, I repeat, there is NOT a cover on it. The only way out of this tunnel is to swim *towards* it then push yourself into a shaft that turns upwards. You’ve got one shot at this girl, one shot. When I say so, you’re going to have to swim up as hard as you can. You’ve got to take the first part slowly, that’s all I can say. Take a second girl before you go. This one is a biggy.”

Lara held onto the sides of the tunnel while she drew a picture in her head of what had to be done. It was next to impossible, really. If she didn't get the timing perfect on this, it would be a very messy ending for her. She had to hurry, as her aqua lung probably wouldn't be lasting much longer. She had to go now if she didn't want to use her second one.

“Ok girl, it's now or never. I'm ready when you are, just remember, take it *slow*.”

Lara took in one deep breath then pulled herself around the corner. Instantly the current grabbed a hold of her and began to pull her along swiftly.

“Slow down! You're going *way* too fast!”

Lara grabbed at the sides but there wasn't anything to grab onto. The fans weren't far ahead, and she had no control of her speed.

“Get ready Lara. Remember you're going upwards.”

She felt her throat tighten up as she waited for her cue.

“Three...two...”

One more breath in.

“...one...NOW!”

Lara kicked off the bottom of the tunnel as hard as she could. The current grabbed her and pulled hard as she struggled against it. Its force caught her off guard, and she smacked her head roughly on the side of the shaft. Pain shot through her head and for a moment she thought she was going to black out.

With all of her strength, Lara kicked furiously and pushed herself upwards as hard as she could. For one minute she struggled her way up. A light was visible up above and Lara gave her all until at last she surfaced. She pulled herself out of the water as quickly as possible and rolled

onto the floor, absolutely exhausted. Her heart pounded in her chest as she continued to breathe rapidly.

“WOW. Way to go girl! I am impressed. I’m *way* beyond impressed. How on earth did you manage to pull that one off?”

Lara pushed herself into a sitting position and ripped off her aqua lung. “One kick at a time.” She stood up and squeezed the water from her braid onto the floor. She turned around and was face to face with a metal door. A combination lock was the only thing protecting it from anyone who wanted in.

“I had this baby figured out ages ago: 14-09-02,” Zip exclaimed.

Lara fiddled with the lock and pulled it off once it opened. With both hands she pulled open the heavy door and was blinded by a bright white light. She squinted as she walked into the room and made her way to the center where a tall pedestal lay. Lara climbed up the steps and peered over the top. One small silver key lay directly in the light. She picked it up and examined it. There wasn’t anything about it which let Lara know what it was for, so she pocketed it and left the room through a newly opened door.

“Congratulations Lara,” Kisho exclaimed extending his hand to her. “You have successfully completed the simulation. That key is your key out of here. We no longer require your assistance. My workers have been able to determine which parts of our security need some revising and others which need to be totally re-done. You are free to go whenever you please.” With that, he quickly jumped into an awaiting cart and sped away.

“Lara! They’re leaving for the real one now!” Zip shouted. “We’ve got to go!”

Lara ran to the closest elevator and jabbed the ground floor button in. “Where’s Matthew?”

“Here with me. We’re waiting inside your room so no one would know where we were. We’ve got all of your stuff packed, plus a few extra goodies. Hurry!”

As soon as the doors opened, Lara shot out of the elevator and sprinted to her room. Matthew and Zip were waiting with three quads. She grinned as she hopped on and sped towards the exit.

Just as they were nearing the doors, Lara fumbled for her key, but realized that wasn’t necessary when Matthew threw three hand grenades at them, blasting a hole to the outside. They drove over the rubble and sped outside.

“There’s a helicopter waiting for us in a clearing in the forest,” Matthew yelled out. “Follow me!”

They all raced behind one another, forcing the quads to run at top speed as they flew over small jumps and skidded around tight turns. There was barely enough moonlight for them to see where they were going. The lights on the quads helped to cut away some of the darkness. Lara followed close behind, her heart racing once again. All of a sudden Matthew took a sharp turn and they fought through a thick amount of thorns and vines. They scratched at Lara’s suit but weren’t able to rip it.

“Ditch the bikes!” Matthew called out as he dismounted his quad, letting it speed into a small ditch. Lara and Zip did the same thing then literally flung themselves into the helicopter. Zip took over from here, grabbing the controls, and forcing the chopper into the air.

For several minutes neither of them said a word. After they caught their breath, Lara was the first to speak.

“I can’t believe how easy it was to get out of there.”



Matthew nodded with a smile on his face. “You’ve *very* lucky Kisho decided to let you go.”

“Any idea why?”

“Nope. Maybe he figured once he got what he was after you wouldn’t be a threat.”

“The most important thing now is to beat him to where it is. Whereabouts are we headed?”

Zip popped up a small screen and pointed to the map. “Nakaza – it shouldn’t take too long to get there.”

Lara shifted in her seat. “And I have to re-do the simulation - but this time for real, and somehow beat him and his men to the end?”

Zip nodded. “You got it girl.”

“I hope you’ve got some toys for me?”

“Oh yes,” Matthew exclaimed, “I took the honours of raiding the compound of its best firearms.”

“Lets take a look.”

He unzipped a black duffle bag and rummaged through its contents. He pulled out a new pair of shades and handed them to her.

“Almost identical to my old ones!” she exclaimed.

“This pair has night vision on them with built in heat sensors,” he answered, “thought it might come in handy this time.” Next, he pulled out a pair of magnums.

“Nice,” Lara said as she grabbed onto them, twisting her wrists to the side to get a better view.

“Of course you’re going to need some holsters,” he said as he handed her a shiny black pair. As Lara was getting geared up, Matthew filled her backpack with more items.

“Grappling hook launcher, two aqua lungs – use them wisely, four hand grenades, and a bottle of water.”

Lara grinned when he placed the water inside the bag. He handed her a new HK and strapped a simple knife to the bottom of her right calf.

“Is there anything else you require?” he questioned.

“Flares! I always forget to pack them.”

Zip chuckled from the front as he tossed a pack of them to Lara.

“Anything else?” Matthew asked.

“Perfect timing.”

Zip perked up in his seat as he continued to steer the helicopter along. “You can rely on *me* for perfect timing girl.”

Lara grimaced in the back seat. “Hope so.” She looked out the window at the night sky and stared at the full moon in silence. Her body was completely drained and she was mentally exhausted from all of the events. Lara rested her head against the window – maybe there was enough time for a quick nap...

“WAKE UP GIRL!” Zip yelled out.

Lara awoke with a start.

“WE’RE HERE!”

Lara shot a look out the window and could see the landing lights not far below. She quickly gulped down a few mouthfuls of water and pushed open the side door. It was time to put a finishing stroke on all of this mayhem.

When the chopper was only a few feet from the ground, Lara turned back once more to give Zip a wink. She landed on the pavement and quickly ran over to a nearby chute, sending several rounds of bullets from her magnums at it.

As she slid down the slide, she couldn't help but grin at the fact that her entrances would never change. She shot one bullet at the flimsy grate at the bottom and landed in a small room, knees bending to reduce some of the impact. After turning on her night vision she found herself in a bathroom. Momentarily she paused in front of a mirror to adjust her holsters then moved towards the door.

“Dark Ruby, Dark Ruby, come in. Do you read me?”

“Roger that,” she replied, “what's up?”

“There's obviously been a couple changes to this place that Kisho wasn't aware of when they built the simulator. Gonna have to do a bit of extra running around here and there.”

“Not a problem. Help me along the way.” Lara opened the door and stepped out into a pitch black hallway. She turned on the night vision and was able to see. After a quick glance in either direction, she was reassured that she was alone.

“Right girl,” Zip instructed.

Lara moved along swiftly, her guns readied by her side. An elevator was her only option so she stepped in and waited for the doors to close.

“Guess you should go to the ground floor to the reception,” Zip said.

Lara shook her head. “No need. Remember last time? I ended up taking this elevator to get *out* of there.”

“You’re right. Ok, from here you went to the basement – better go there again.”

Lara pushed the button and waited as the elevator made its way down. Once the doors opened, she jumped out and ran around the corner into the storage room. The lights were extremely dim in the room and the boxes cast dark shadows on the floor. She flipped off her night vision as she skidded to a halt and glanced around.

Something caught her eye and she spun to the right just in time to see a dark shadow dash behind a box. Lara quickly ran towards it and jumped onto a crate. She quickly hoisted herself up onto another one and crouched as low as possible. The sound of scuffing feet could be heard faintly from below. She tracked their movement until she was certain she knew where they were.

With one quick lean over the side, she fired one bullet from her magnum and watched as the figure crumpled to the ground.

“Great job, Dark Ruby,” Zip applauded. “But this place has a few more lurking around. Stay up on the crates and you’ll have a better chance of spotting them.”

Lara re-holstered her gun and pulled out her HK. With one swift jump she landed onto another crate and back flipped onto a higher one behind it. She settled into the corner, turned her night vision on, and waited...

Zip and Matthew watched the screens in front of them very carefully. Three red dots were on them, none of which were Lara. Each of them was separate from one another, covering quite a bit of space in a matter of minutes. One was approaching Lara’s line of sight quite quickly.

“One coming straight at you, any second,” Zip said.

“Two more elsewhere?”

“One north-west, the other south-east, second level of the crates,” he confirmed.

Lara zoomed in with the scope and a bright red figure appeared almost in focus. She made a mental note to keep these glasses for future use as she zoomed in even closer, aiming at her target’s head. Her hand was steady on the trigger, the other making sure the gun stayed pointed at the exact spot. She held her breath to prevent any unnecessary movement and pulled back on the trigger.

*BANG!* The head exploded and the body fell and hit the floor, just as the ring of the shot made its way to the other side of the room.

“ON YOUR TOES! ON YOUR TOES! GET OUTTA’ THERE – SOME BACKUP REINFORCEMENTS ARE COMING DOWN THAT ELEVATOR!”

Lara flung her gun onto her back and ran forwards, retrieving both magnums as she flew through the air and landed quite roughly on the hard ground. Two guards were running after her of which she took care of in a matter of seconds. Up ahead, she could see a set of threatening lasers which blocked her exit.

“No time to do the fancy puzzle solving on this one!” Zip exclaimed. “You’ve got to get out of there another way, and there’s only one way of doing it! I can hack these things and turn them off for only ONE second. Do you hear me?”

“Yes,” she replied, glancing back momentarily. The elevator doors slid open and a dozen men ran out into the room. *BANG! BANG!*

“GO!” Zip shouted.

Lara spun around and flung herself forwards into a sprint. Sweat formed quite quickly on her forehead as she got closer to the lasers. *BANG, BANG!* Shots were being fired all around her, one grazing her left arm, tearing part of her suit.

Zip's fingers were sweaty on the keys as he waited for the exact moment to shut off the lasers. He watched the green dot very closely as she made her way to the exit.

It almost seemed like they weren't going to actually shut off. Lara clenched her teeth and pushed even harder, closing her eyes for a split second as she ran through the frame.

Zip slammed down one of the keys and the lasers shut off. His eyes didn't move from the dot until he saw her run around the next corner. He breathed out heavily and wiped his hands on his pants.

Lara's heart was pounding in her chest so hard that she felt it in her throat. She had made it, and was out of sight from those who were behind her. Shots were still being fired in the room as she made her way up a ladder. After back flipping and turning in mid-air half a dozen times to avoid even more lasers than before, she climbed into a well known crawlspace.

"Any need *this* time for going into here?" she questioned.

Zip typed in a few commands and studied a couple of different maps. "If you're up for a short cut, you can get in front of Kisho."

"I'm all for it, especially if I don't have to shoot at any more turrets." She crawled quickly through the shaft then kicked in the screen to the first room. She rolled into the room and assumed a stealth position almost immediately while drawing both magnums to her side.

"In the simulation the exit door went nowhere – just put there for decoration, really. This one leads you around what you had to do before. Kind of nice."

Lara waited for him to open the door. Once he had successfully unlocked it, Lara thrust her guns forward as she turned the handle.

"No need girl," Zip chirped up. "You're going to need to have two *free* hands for this next bit."

After stepping into the room and taking a quick glance around, she put her guns away and nodded. “You’re absolutely right. How the heck am I supposed to make it to the top?” Her gaze shifted to the top of the room which seemed to be hundreds of feet away. Dozens of poles of various sizes and lengths stuck out from the walls creating quite the maze above her.

Lara walked under the lowest pole and jumped straight up, catching a hold of it with a firm grip. The next accessible one was fairly close. She kicked out at the air, forcing her body to rock forwards. After one more swing she let go and flew through the air, arms outstretched in front of her. She caught a hold of the pole and immediately kept her body swinging.

The next pole was behind and above her. Very carefully she switched her hands around, twisting to face the opposite direction. She swung forwards, flipping over the pole then flung herself into the air once again... After Lara had finally made her way to the top, she let herself hang from the last pole for a moment before flinging herself onto the ledge.

“Great job girl! You’re definitely ahead of the game, but you’ve gotta’ keep going. Be prepared for a little surprise when you leave this part.”

Lara exited the room through a door and found herself emerging out in the room just after the timed chamber run. Through the glass she could see several dead guards scattered throughout the chamber. Apparently none of them were fast enough nor clever enough to figure out the nice little puzzle. Lara kicked open the exit door and ran into the room. There wasn’t any point in taking her time because the room had half a dozen guards patrolling the area.

“OVER THERE!” one man yelled.

Lara darted to the right behind a large box and made her way to the far wall. A couple gunshots were being fired from around the room. As soon as she got to the end, she ran back out to the center of the room and shot those who were still running in the wrong direction.

*BANG!* One shot sailed right past her. Lara quickly side flipped out of the way and sent several bullets back to where the other had come from. The gunman was hit in the head and chest, and in his arm as he fell to the floor.

Lara sprinted to another set of crates, jumping onto them and then pulling herself up onto the ledge. She turned to enter the security room when she noticed she wasn't alone. The guard inside grinned at her as he pulled an alarm. Instantly, an ear piercing siren rang out from all around her. Red and blue lights flashed furiously as the alarm continued to screech away.

Lara thrust both magnums out in front of her and fired several shots at the glass. It shattered as the first bullet hit it, the second flying right by into his arm. He grabbed his wound and collapsed to the floor in shock.

There wasn't any point in Lara trying to figure out how to turn the alarm off, so she turned back around to leave. Once she had a view of the exit she immediately dropped both of her guns which fell to the floor below with a loud *clang!*

A small army emerged from the exit. There were at least thirty guards, all armed, who were coming for one purpose.

"Sorry to kill your little get-together, but you're blocking my way," Lara exclaimed. *BANG! BANG, BANG!* It seemed like a thousand shots were suddenly being fired at Lara! She instantly dropped to the floor as bullets whizzed by her. Below, the guards were starting to spread out. Before they could disperse at all, Lara pulled the pin from one of her grenades and tossed it down, at the group.

A large explosion echoed throughout the room. Blood was sprayed in all directions, body parts were flung into the air landing all over the room. A second later she sent another grenade down, instantly killing more guards.



“Hey girl, still more down there! Better go scope them out!” Zip said over the mini-com.

Lara flipped off of the ledge, onto the crates below. One gunman shot up in front of her and fired a couple shots. Lara jumped straight up tucking her legs up for a split second as the bullet sped under her. One shot to the head was all that was needed to put him out. She forward jumped off of the crates, and shot off full speed ahead towards two more guards. *BANG! BANG!* Both dead.

“This is too easy,” she exclaimed. That second, the lights shut off completely. She grinned as the blackness grabbed her tightly.

*Much better*, she thought. One flick to her shades turned the night vision on. She assumed stealth position, then quietly made her way behind another box. Lara peered around the edge and caught a glimpse of one of her targets. He was making his way in her general direction, not taking any great care of keeping himself hidden. Her fingers tightened around the HK as she waited for the exact moment. Two seconds later, he made his appearance again, and Lara made sure it was his last.

“Great job girl. Now you’ve got a baddie at eight o’clock, one thirty, three o’clock, and...”

“...An annoying voice on my headset.” Lara took one of her aqua lungs out, and whipped it as hard as she could, aiming for about the center of the room. Luckily for her, the plan worked perfectly. All of her guests arrived at that destination, and Lara was so nice as to provide the fireworks.

She ran over to the swimming pool and waved at a couple divers who were waiting for her. A couple of harpoons were fired her way, all in which she dodged perfectly. She shook her head at her assassins and tossed in her last grenade.

“Ready for this last bit?” Zip asked.

Lara took out her last aqua lung and confirmed her status. She hopped into the pool, pushing the dead body parts out of the way to clear room. Luckily there wasn't a lot of blood from the bodies in the tunnel. As she neared the last corner, Lara took in a deep breath and tried to calm herself in time for the next part.

“LARA! GET -T - T-----...”

The mini-com was making static noises and she couldn't hear what Zip was trying to say. Perhaps he was telling her to hurry. Just as she was about to turn the corner, a rough hand grabbed her from behind. She spun around and found herself face to face with Kisho!

He punched Lara hard in the stomach, and ripped her gun away from her, letting it sink to the floor. She winced in pain as she punched back at him, barely hitting him hard enough to do any damage. He pushed out at her, forcing her around the corner.

She grabbed onto him and kicked furiously at him as he tried to do the same. Lara struggled to keep him away as they were speeding through the tunnel. At the end, a razor sharp fan spun around and around, pulling them towards it faster by the second.

Lara knew what was coming up, and so did Kisho. Without warning, he let go of her, yanking her aqua lung from her mouth. Water instantly filled her mouth and she struggled not to choke on it. Lara tried desperately to ward him off, but didn't have any luck. The fan was so close that she could still feel its powerful force sucking them nearer.

Lara couldn't think of a way out of this until she realized what could be done with the one good last kick in her. She gripped him tightly then with all of her strength, kicked out at the wall, forcing her body into a spin. She kicked furiously until it was completed. It worked! Kisho's back was now facing the fan.

Lara noticed something, the fan had completely stopped spinning. She was going to have to thank Zip for that one. Right when she was directly under the shaft, she punched out at Kisho's face, pushing him into the blades. Her lungs were stinging uncontrollably as they screamed for air. Lara pushed her way upwards and gasped as soon as her head hit the surface.

She barely had enough strength to pull herself out. She collapsed on the floor and wheezed as her body tried to regain all of the oxygen it could. She couldn't give up now, though. Not when she was this close. She stumbled over to the pedestal after entering the combination on the door. She fell against the side of the pedestal. Her body just wouldn't cooperate with her. A dark shadow was suddenly cast overtop of her. KISHO looked down at her and laughed.

"I never lose." He reached out, grabbing the medallion and screamed in agony as acid ate away at his hand.

Lara's face formed into a grin as she pushed herself back up. "We'll rephrase that later when I win."

Kisho kicked out at her, but she blocked it. She sent a high kick his way, giving quite the blow to his head. He stumbled for a second, giving her enough time to retrieve the knife from her leg. Kisho charged at her, and she made sure he charged right into the small knife she now held in front of her. It punctured right through him, and Lara gave it a little twist to finish him off.

"Right, that's what I thought," she smirked. Lara studied the medallion on the ground. It had been immersed in acid to prevent anyone from just snatching it up. Funny though, how it didn't damage it at all. Lara knew how to handle this one. She took the water bottle out of her bag and poured half of its contents onto it. Using her boot, she flipped it over and did the same to the other side.

Not knowing just how concentrated the acid was, she didn't want to take any chances. She retrieved the knife from Kisho's body and cut off a section of his shirt. She wiped the knife off on it and returned it to its holster. Very carefully she picked up the medallion with the shirt and shoved it into one of her bare holsters. It fit in just snugly enough.

She wasn't getting any instructions from Zip what-so-ever. Lara ran out of the closest door and found herself emerging out of the building onto the top of a steep cliff. A hang glider lay nearby and she ran over to it, eagerly grabbing it and started to run.

A second door from the building bust open as two dozen guards came crashing through. They opened fired at Lara quite willingly and chased after her as she continued to pick up speed.

Lara's heart was racing as she neared the edge. At the last second she jumped up and soared over the edge, staring at the bright blue ocean far beneath her. She flew forwards, completely at home with the glider. Several shots rang out, just missing her everytime. All of the guards were at the cliff's edge shooting like crazy at her.

Lara balanced herself as best as she could, single handedly as she reached down into her holster. She gripped onto the medallion tightly and then tossed it towards the ocean. She watched as the shirt around it unfolded and floated above it as it plunged downwards. As soon as it hit the water, it exploded into a thousand pieces, creating a beautiful geyser.

Suddenly, one bullet ripped through the glider. Lara struggled to stay in control as she was forced into a spin. The wings wrapped themselves around her as it pulled her down. Lara fought at the material trying to free herself. She was completely tangled up in it – she couldn't get out! A moment later she plummeted right into the ocean...

Lara was sinking – fast. She had to get out. It seemed like the more she struggled the worse it got. She made herself freeze momentarily, hoping the currents would unwrap it for her...no luck.

Her lungs started to burn once again. Several convulsions shook her body as it fought for air. The salt from the ocean stung her eyes and the cuts all over her body.

Her legs stopped working first, then her arms. Her mouth slowly fell open and her eyes closed...

A sudden warmth swept over her entire body, as a familiar voice crackled over her headset. A small smile was lit up on her lips as beams of sunlight shone upon her body as it was slowly swept away...

*The Strenuous Escapade*  
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