

Perilous Paradise

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It was late afternoon and Lara was sitting outside on the edge of her water fountain with Winston. The soft sound of trickling water relaxed them as a warm breeze blew, weaving in and out of each blade of perfectly kept grass. A small silver tray lay on the edge of the fountain, holding two teacups and a white cloth. Lara had been eagerly describing to Winston her next venture.

“All that way and it might not even exist?”

Lara smiled and took a sip of her tea. “I’m sure it exists, and I’m going there to prove it. A bit risky, but I wouldn’t want it any other way.”

“Oh, I know that,” Winston laughed, his aged voice full of warmth and admiration. “Where exactly is it again?”

“Babylon, the capital city of Babylonia. But today it’s close to Al-Hillah, Iraq.”

“The Hanging Gardens...such a captivating idea.”

Lara nodded. “They have an extraordinary history as well. Two thousand, five hundred years ago they were built. King Nebuchadnezzar had been ruling there for forty-three years and built the Gardens for his wife, Amyitis.”

“I’ve heard it was quite the sight,” Winston said.

“Nebuchadnezzar built an artificial mountain complete with rooftop gardens to cheer Amyitis up. She missed the mountainous landscape of her Persian homeland, so he built them to try and make her feel at home.”

“And this is one of the Seven Wonders of the World?”

Lara nodded. “It’s on the list of wonders because of the size of the Gardens. They were four hundred feet wide by four hundred feet long and were more than eighty feet tall.”

Winston frowned. “Surely there would be some proof if they existed.”

Lara grabbed her backpack and stood. “I’m going to find the Gardens,” she declared with certainty, “and I’m going to find out everything about them!”

Winston rose beside her, lifting the tray with him. He removed the cloth, revealing a small magnifying glass.

“For me?” Lara asked.

Winston grinned, smile lines around his eyes crinkling. “Thought this might be of use, somewhere along the way.”

Lara accepted the token and put it in her bag. “So far everything you’ve given me has been,” she said, smiling, her mind returning to the aqualung that had once saved her life. “Well, I’m off again, Winston. Wish me luck!”

“Best of luck on your endeavour and I look forward, as always, to your safe return.”

Lara beamed and gave him a wink before exiting through the front gates and stepping into an awaiting taxi.

“Where to, Ms. Croft?”

“The airport please,” she responded as she watched her mansion slowly fade away behind them. This trip wasn’t going to be easy, especially getting there. She’d have to do a little meandering along the way...

Heat waves rippled throughout the hot, humid air as Lara’s plane touched down on the runway. The wheels bounced off the ground several times, disturbing a layer of dust, which whirled around in every direction. Lara was in Syria, and this was the closest

she could get to Al-Hillah for now. She would have to find her own way to the Euphrates River, which she could then follow to what was once the city of Babylon. Lara left the airport on foot, her only luggage her backpack and a load of valour. Unfortunately for her, she was leading herself to the Triangle of Death.

Sweat gleamed on the back of Lara's neck as she reached into her backpack, withdrew a canteen, and splashed a few handfuls of water on her face. She had been walking for several hours through the desert, and her body burned from the hot sun. There were a couple trees up ahead that seemed to be out of place, but that at the same time were a welcomed sight. Lara made her way over to them, and sat down in the shade the branches provided. She swung off her backpack and set it on her lap. Lara leaned against the tree as she unfolded the map she had brought. It was quite a hike to the river, but it was far safer for her to make her way stealthily because she was entering dangerous territory. After studying the map a moment longer, she estimated that she was approximately two hours from the river; hopefully, she would make it there before dark. Lara stood up and wiped the sand from her clothes, then strapped on her backpack and continued in the direction of her objective.

Nightfall neared as Lara arrived at the river. A cool breeze wafted about, a welcomed break from the earlier weather. She leaned against a small tree for balance as she retied one of her boots.

“!اي”

Lara jerked up her head to find herself face to face with an Uzi. Slowly, she looked up. An Arabic man scowled at her, and shoved the gun roughly at her neck.

“من أنت؟ ماذا تفعلون هنا؟”

Lara frowned as she moved her head away from the weapon. Cautiously, she pushed herself away from the tree and raised her hands beside her head. “Do you speak English?”

A low growl formed in his throat, and released through his mouth as he flashed Lara with his rotten teeth.

“Guess not,” she answered herself as she turned her head away from his malodorous breath.

“Get down on your knees!” he roared.

“Oh! You can speak English. I thought so.”

“Now!”

Despite the warning of the barrel shoved against her neck, and of the aggressive man, Lara remained obstinate. Sometimes it was an aid, buying a few precious seconds.

The man shoved the gun even harder as he reached for the walkie-talkie strapped to his belt. Just as he was about to make a call for help, Lara front-kicked him in the gut as hard as she could, ducking to the side to remove herself from the gun’s path. Her aggressor pulled the trigger and several bullets burst from the barrel. Lara backflipped, instantly pulling both pistols from her holsters, and fired back. She landed with her knees bent and slowly stood up to take a look at his condition. The man’s body was sprawled in the sand. She re-holstered her pistols and went to him. Lara bent down to unzip a pocket on his shirt. She reached inside and retrieved a small key, and also took the Uzi, then rolled the body over, checking for spare ammo. She reloaded the Uzi with a fresh clip and added it to the other items in her backpack. She turned to look at the river.

Using her binoculars, Lara quickly scanned the area with the built-in night vision. No other people were visible, so she tucked the binoculars away and proceeded to the water's edge where a small boat bobbed in the water. A pistol ready in one hand, Lara waded into the turbid water. She got alongside the boat and pointed the gun forward, ready to shoot at anything that moved.

Grasping hold of a small rope ladder, Lara made her way up and into the boat. She whipped the pistol back in front, extra attentive. She didn't want to risk lighting a flare, because if anyone was on board, they'd be sure to see her first.

Lara crept along the perimeter of the wooden boat, first checking to ensure that the outside was safe. She moved toward the boat's only door and pressed her ear to it. A loud creaking sound erupted from behind it. She hopped back and kicked the door with her boot. It flew open and she fired several shots into the cabin, watching as a silhouette of a body crumpled to the floor. Lara grabbed a flare from her backpack, striking it to life and tossing it inside. It landed on top of the corpse, illuminating the face of a man. His eyes had rolled to the back of his head, and a thin line of fresh blood trickled out of the corner of his mouth. Blood seeped from his chest where he had been wounded.

Lara stepped inside and was glad to see she didn't have anymore company. She dragged the body onto the deck and heaved it overboard. It made a loud splash in the water, and began to drift away, with the moon's soft glow illuminating him on his final journey.

After shutting the door, Lara picked up her flare to take a better look around. She pushed a small curtain to the side, revealing a window that she could see out of while steering the boat. A small lantern hung from the ceiling, and with a box of matches that

lay on a table, she was able to light it just as her flare extinguished. She tossed the spent flare behind her, and looked to see if anything else would be useful. A couple of empty cans littered the floor, as well as some crumpled pieces of paper. Lara powered up the boat using the key that she had retrieved, and then used a lever to pull up the anchor. The boat began to glide through the murky water, into the darkness of the Triangle of Death.

The only sound that pierced the night was the soft pattering from the boat's motor. Lara kept a watchful eye as she made her way southeast on the river. She peered out of the window at the thousands of stars that lit up the cloudless sky as she continued along through the humid night. She was eager to get to Al-Hillah to begin her search. She steered the boat straight ahead, her eyes gleaming from the flickering light of the lantern.

A ping rang through the air, and a second later an explosion erupted only a few feet in front of the boat. Water splashed onboard, sending a fine mist through the window. Lara dropped to the floor and grabbed her pistols. She moved stealthily to the back of the boat, pressing her back to the boards. She assumed a crouch position and held her pistols up in front of her.

“اقروزلای ع رانل ا قالطا”

A bullet burst through the boat at the front. Lara tensed and flexed her fingers on her guns. A second bullet crossed in front. Lara eyed the door as a third bullet ripped through the side of the boat, hitting the lantern square on. She shielded her eyes as the lantern exploded into a ball of fire, sending a million tiny pieces of glass in all directions. Lara shot up and gazed at the front of the boat, which was completely engulfed in flames

that were spreading up the sides of the window. In an instant, a spray of bullets came from both sides of the boat, making their way from front to back.

Bursts of light flashed in front of Lara as the swarm of bullets sped toward her. She forced herself forward, running into the immediate line of fire. She rolled forward just making it under the bullets, then sprang back up, ran forward, and dove through the flames out the window. Everything seemed to happen in slow motion. Lara was briefly engulfed in flames as she cleared through the window. She forced herself to the side and fired several shots before crashing into the water.

The moon's soft glow reflected off of each ripple and wave in the water. One of the gunmen threw a grenade at the boat, and it exploded on impact. The boat erupted into a brilliant ball of fire as pieces of wood burst everywhere. A moment later, all that was left were bits of ash falling from the sky onto the last few chunks of burning wood.

Lara tilted her head to the surface, sucking in a mouthful of air before slowly sinking back into the dark water. The last piece of wood crackled and hissed softly as the water bathed the flames, consuming the last of the fire's life.

Lara swam slowly along the bottom of the river. Every once in awhile she surfaced for air, always making sure that her mouth was the only part of her that surfaced each time. She pulled herself back down to the bottom with the help of thick weeds that lived in the darkness of the river. Lara had no idea how much farther she had, but she continued to persevere. Along the shoreline, a camel spider ran almost in sync with Lara, as if watching over her.

It was nearing sunrise when Lara surfaced for the final time. With extreme caution, she slowly climbed out of the water and onto the shore. She stood for a moment, thousands of tiny water droplets falling from her body, then picked off a couple of weeds from herself and tossed them to the ground. She took a quick glance around, but no one was in sight. Lara began walking along the river as a ray of light poured over the horizon, softly illuminating her left side. She continued, enthralled with the flawless landscape situated around her.

After a couple more hours of walking along the river, she came across a small hut made out of clay bricks. A small bundle of twigs propped upward acted as the door. Lara moved in closer, listening for any sounds.

“Hello? Is anyone around?” She waited outside the door while she called out a again.

Suddenly, a hand pushed through the twigs and moved the door aside. A middle-aged woman appeared, holding a baby in her arms, a small child clinging to her side.

“Who are you?” the woman whispered as she assumed a tighter grip on the baby.

“My name is Lara Croft. I need your help with directions.”

The woman eyed Lara, showing most concern with the pistols strapped to Lara’s legs.

“I won’t hurt you,” Lara assured the woman as she unholstered the guns and put them in her backpack. “I just need to know how much farther I have to go.”

“You aren’t from around here,” the woman noted.

Lara shook her head. “I’m far from home, and I’m trying to get to Al-Hillah.”

The woman shook her head in fright. “I can’t help you, I’m sorry.”

Lara frowned and took a step closer. “Why not?”

Fear in her eyes, the woman took a quick glance around. “The Triangle of Death.”

Lara crossed her arms in front and waited for her to continue.

“You are just asking to be killed. If I were you, I would head back to where you came from. You will have to pass by Baghdad to get to Al-Hillah, but it is not safe! The amount of blood that has been shed there will never be washed away from the sand. It is impossible to get through there without being slain.”

Lara smiled and uncrossed her arms. “You don’t understand why I have to go there. I appreciate your concern, but regardless of what you tell me, I’m going.” She swung off her backpack and reached inside, withdrawing a pack of flares. She handed them to the woman, and turned around to continue on her way.

“Wait!”

Lara turned halfway around and raised an eyebrow.

“I will help you, but you’ve been warned,” the woman replied.

Lara stepped inside the hut and put the door back in place. She withdrew the map from her backpack and began writing down instructions from the woman. When she was finished, Lara graciously accepted a refill for her canteen, then left the hut in search of Baghdad.

Just as the woman had foretold, Lara arrived at her destination at dusk. She was closing in on a camp and kept as silent as she could. If she was spotted, she would be shot on sight. Lara crouched behind a pile of rubble and retrieved her binoculars. Very carefully, she pushed herself up, giving herself just enough room to look over the dirt

with the night vision. It was difficult to make out how many soldiers were up ahead; the camp had several walls built up around the site. She studied the movement of the bodies before tucking the binoculars away and re-holstering her pistols. With one quick breath, Lara pushed herself out from behind the rubble and began to make her way toward the camp.

Lara manoeuvred around piles of rubble and over sand and stones. She was so quiet that very little sound emitted from her soles as they raced along the rough terrain, sliding among obstacles along the way. All of a sudden, a large spotlight burst to life, creating a bright and burning blind spot for anyone in its path.

Lara skidded to a halt and dove behind a pile of rocks. The spotlight trailed across a section of the land, passing by directly in front of her. She breathed slowly, watching dust particles dance wildly about in the luminescence. A moment later, the spotlight was shut off, and Lara slowly peeked around the stones. Using her binoculars once again, she made sure it was safe before moving another inch.

Lara's boots moved quickly, upsetting a thin layer of dust beneath them. Her body bent, she backed up to the wall and pressed her back firmly against the clay. She retrieved both pistols and pushed her arms out to either side of her body. With her guns readied, Lara shifted her weight along the wall, her knees bent to support her careful movements. Reaching the end of the wall, she paused to listen for a moment. She casually rolled her head around the corner, taking a quick peek ahead. One man leaned against the wall with his back to Lara. A semi-automatic weapon was propped on the wall just in front of him.

Lara re-holstered her guns and stealthily moved toward the man, crossing her feet one over the other as she inched closer and closer. She went to put him in a headlock when a shot rang out, and the bullet grazed the clay wall just inches from Lara.

The man in front jerked around but Lara caught him off guard, instantly grabbing him and forcing herself behind him. Several shots pierced through the man's upper body. Lara ducked, then forward-rolled over her shoulder, grabbing her pistols as she stood up. The man crumpled to the ground in front of her, revealing three men ahead, all with AK-47s.

Lara instantly side-flipped to the left, forcing her arms in front of her, and fired several shots. One man plunged to the ground with a bullet in his head; the other two advanced with double the gunfire than before. Lara darted toward them, jumping and flipping to avoid the deadly bullets. She fired ten more shots, finally sending the men to the ground. She held her guns up beside her, and ran back along the wall, the heat from her weapons penetrating her skin.

Just as she neared the end of the wall, a huge explosion broke through beside her. An army truck crashed through the wall, sending large chunks of brick everywhere. Lara shielded her face and took a few steps back from the chaos. A cloud of dust and debris separated her from the truck and six men. Lara shoved her pistols back into the holsters and whipped the Uzi out of her backpack. One man sent a spray of bullets toward her, but she dropped to the ground, letting them continue over her. She rolled away from the wall several times as bullets hit the rubble beside her.

Just as one of the bullets was about to strike the ground in the direction she was rolling, Lara forced her body up and rolled forward. She ran toward the truck, firing the

Uzi at the men. With the first shot she took out the passenger, sending him toppling out of the window and onto the sharp pieces of wreckage below. The driver cranked the steering wheel hard to the right, intending to run over her. Then, half a dozen men jumped out from the back of the truck.

“ارنل!” one of them roared.

Lara had no idea what he had yelled, but she was sure it wasn't any welcome. She reloaded the Uzi and began firing rapidly at the mob. Several men were forced off balance as numerous bullets penetrated deep into their bodies. Unexpectedly, a grenade came sailing through the air toward Lara. Without a second to waste, she darted forward, clenched the Uzi between her teeth and jumped, catching the grenade in both hands. Gravity instantly took its course, pulling Lara back to the ground. She landed with her knees bent, then cast the grenade back as hard as she could.

The weapon exploded violently in the middle of the crowd, dispatching limbs and body parts in all directions. Lara ran to the aperture in the wall and quickly jumped over the wreckage. On the far side of the camp, at least twenty men were gearing up, grabbing boxes of ammunition, guns, grenades, and vests. With a quick glance in either direction, Lara spotted two motorcycles. A sly grin overtook her face as she made her way to the bikes. She tucked the Uzi in her backpack and carefully slid onto one of the seats. Just as she tapped up the kickstand, a soldier shouted, pointing at Lara.

Immediately, Lara started the engine, then cranked the throttle and sped away from the rapid gunfire. She ducked as she raced through the hole in the wall and out past the truck. Hundreds of bullets sped through the hole, chasing after her. She rocked side to side on the bike as the bullets whizzed past. She took a hard left and gunned the bike to

its maximum speed. Recklessly, Lara rode over rocks and skidded across the terrain as the sound of gunfire slowly began to fade behind her. She took one look back over her shoulder as she continued on her way to Al-Hillah.

Lara rode through the night as she crossed the unfamiliar landscape. She was fairly confident that she was following her map correctly, but made sure to check it once in awhile. Above, the moon cast a comforting glow over the land, illuminating her on her way. The cool air whipped through her hair as she sped along. She was getting closer and closer by the second, and couldn't wait to get to her final destination.

A few hours later, Lara arrived at a set of train tracks. She skidded to a halt, turning the bike at the last second, stopping parallel to the tracks. She retrieved the map from her backpack and nodded to herself as she confirmed her location. Al-Hillah was very close now, only a matter of hours.

Suddenly, a light spilled over the horizon from behind. "Right on time," Lara noted, as she cranked the throttle on the bike and sped ahead. She drove beside the tracks as the train caught up to her. Just as it entered a narrow passageway in the terrain, she darted off to the right and drove even faster, racing up a small hill. Over her shoulder, Lara could see the train exiting the tunnel. It picked up speed as it descended a hill. She let it gain a little distance on her, then jerked the bike forward, skidding and sliding on the sand and rocks. She crouched down as the bike reached its maximum speed. At the last second, Lara forced the bike forward and flew over the edge of the hill.

Lara sailed through the air, completely airborne as she held fast to the handles. The train raced beneath her as she flew toward it. As she began to fall, she braced herself

for impact. The bike landed hard on top one of the cars. It bounced, almost sending Lara flying. When it hit again, she jumped off, landing solidly. The bike flew off the side, crashing onto the ground below. Lara turned her head and watched as a small explosion finished the bike for good. She turned back around and sat down, smiling as the sun began to make yet another long journey across the horizon.

When the train pulled into the next station, Lara quickly lowered herself to the side of the car and dropped to the ground. She turned and absorbed her new surroundings. Several homes and buildings dotted the dry land. They were made from bricks that had been taken from the ruins of Babylon back in 1101 when the city was built. Several people bustled through the streets, busy with their daily activities. Al-Hillah was known as one of the main cereal markets on the Euphrates River.

Lara tucked her pistols discreetly into her backpack and began to walk around the small market. Vendors lined the sandy streets, selling fresh fruit out of their wagons. Lara smiled at them as she walked by, noticing strange looks from several locals. She turned down another street, looking for someone who would be able to help her. As she walked by a couple more homes, a woman flung open her door and waved at Lara.

“Hello!” she said.

“Hi there.”

“My name is Haneefa, true believer,” the woman introduced herself as she reached for Lara’s hand.

“Lara.” They shook hands.

“Let me guess: Hanging Gardens?”

“That obvious?” Lara laughed.

“We don’t get too many tourists around here anymore, but when we do, I love telling the history of them!”

Lara smiled, thinking she didn’t want to get sucked into the little tourist trap, but she thought she’d visit the Azami woman anyway to hear more about the Gardens.

“Well? Do you want to come in? I’ll give you a special rate since you’re travelling alone.”

Lara nodded and followed her into the house. Like the others, the small home was made entirely of bricks and clay. Sections of the walls had been carved and moulded to make hooks for clothing and cubbyholes for belongings. Haneefa seemed to have everything she needed to live, but certainly didn’t live a lavish lifestyle. Lara sat down at a table across from her and accepted a small drink.

“So what really brings you to Al-Hillah by yourself?” she inquired.

Lara took off her backpack and set it on the table. “As you guessed earlier, I’m here to see the Hanging Gardens of Babylon.”

The woman laughed. “Surely you’ve heard they don’t exist?”

Lara nodded as a slight frown creased into her forehead. “I have, but I believe they did exist, and I’ve come here to find them for myself.”

“Everyone here has been to the site. All that’s there are ruins. There isn’t any evidence to prove that they actually were there, but I’m with you on this one. I believe at one time they stood tall above this desert land.”

“What can you tell me about them?” Lara questioned. She took a sip of her drink.

Haneefa's eyes twinkled and she sat up straight in her chair. "They have a fascinating history, Lara."

"I understand that King Nebuchadnezzar built them for his wife to cheer her up?"

"Yes!" Haneefa replied excitedly. "His wife originally lived in Persia, which as you know was essentially an exact inverse of Babylon. What fascinates me most is that Babylon was just sand and stone before his creation. The Gardens were said to be four hundred feet wide by four hundred feet long and over eighty feet high. Of course, this information might be false. Other sources have claimed they were three hundred feet tall. Just to construct the frame of the Gardens would have taken an eternity."

"The buildings here were made in the same way as the Gardens, right?"

Haneefa nodded. "The bricks were made of clay, which was kneaded by hand, and then left out in the sun to harden. Can you imagine how many billions of bricks it would have taken? I heard from a fellow believer that the Gardens were made from enough bricks to connect the earth to the moon, or to wrap around the world fifteen times!"

"Amazing," Lara replied. "No wonder it's one of the Wonders of the World. They're almost up there with the pyramids."

"They're a spectacular fantasy, especially being constructed in this burning terrain."

"Which is what is even more alluring about them: having the Gardens themselves thriving in this environment."

“Exactly! In fact, sixty-seven varieties of plants have been documented to have been planted there. Nebuchadnezzar went to extremes in getting so many types of foliage and flowers from around the world.”

“And this brings us to the next mystery: how he kept it all alive,” Lara stated.

Haneefa shook her head in disbelief. “The process of irrigating the Gardens is incredible to imagine. They used the Euphrates River as its water source. There have been many stories of how they got the water into the Gardens. Some say pumps, or wells, but no one knows for sure.”

“Completely surreal,” Lara commented, leaning back in her chair. “Have you ever gone looking for them?”

Haneefa laughed, rattling the cups on the table. “Lara, I’ve been there so many times some people around here think I live there!”

“What’s left there?”

“Not much, unfortunately. A pile of sand and rock. Nothing to prove the Gardens were there, but I’m like you: determined to prove otherwise. Whenever people pass through looking to visit them I offer my knowledge. That way the Gardens are always alive inside of me; makes them seem even more real.”

Lara smiled and sat forward in her chair. “I’d still like to go to the site and look around. Can you take me there?”

“Of course! But you’re on your own once there, I’m afraid. I’ve got to take care of some friends for awhile, outside of Al-Hillah. I’ll make arrangements and we’ll set off first thing tomorrow. How does that sound?”

“Perfect, I can’t wait.”

Haneefa showed Lara to a tiny room in the house where she could sleep for the night. Lara thanked her again for her help, and got into bed. Within minutes she was asleep, dreaming about exotic gardens full of fresh flowers and lush scenery.

It was early morning when Haneefa woke Lara, telling her it was time to go. Lara dressed quickly and ate breakfast. She reached into her backpack, retrieved some money, and set it on the table.

“Lara, that’s too much,” Haneefa gasped, staring wide-eyed at the bills.

“Not at all. Treat yourself to something nice.”

After they finished eating, the women left the house and walked through the market to an awaiting jeep. They hopped in, and Haneefa spoke to the driver in Arabic. Just as he started the engine, a cluster of locals swarmed to the sides of the jeep, laughing and pointing at them.

Haneefa sighed and rolled her eyes. “There are a lot of people who find me quite amusing, taking people to search for the Gardens.”

Lara sat back and watched the people. A small boy ran along side the jeep as they drove by. “Good luck!” he called out, his thick accent making him slightly difficult to understand.

Lara grinned and winked at him. She opened her backpack and checked to make sure all of her gear was ready. She took a small drink of water from her canteen, then draped her arm over the side of the jeep as they exited the market.

When they arrived at the site, the sun was just beginning to spread its brilliant rays across the land. Heat waves were visible upon the horizon, a clear indication of the weather to come. Lara climbed out of the jeep and looked around. The land in front of her showed sand, dust, and ruins. She frowned as she continued her scan. The area looked like anywhere else in the desert.

“Just sand and stone,” Haneefa impugned, mimicking the locals. “A bit disappointing, isn’t it?”

Lara turned her gaze back to Haneefa dubiously.

“Well, take your time Lara. When I come out here I like to imagine the Gardens. I know they existed at some point, I just wish that I was around when they did.”

Lara nodded as her gaze shifted back to the site.

“Well, I’ve got to get going. It’s a long ride to where I’m needed. Will you be okay getting back on your own?”

“Of course,” Lara assured her. “Thank you again for your help and hospitality.”

Haneefa waved goodbye as she rode off in the jeep.

Lara swung off her backpack and sat down on a rock as she took a drink of water from her canteen. She shielded her eyes from the sun as she looked around. The rubble certainly didn’t prove the Gardens’ existence, but she was steadfast in her opinion of the Wonder.

She got back up and began walking among the ruins. Every once in awhile she bent down to study the ruins, hoping to find some sort of clue. In the late 1980s some restoration had been done, but vandals had long destroyed the progress. Lara had read

that the project was abandoned in 1991, and since then little interest had been shown in the site.

She came across a pile of small rocks and bent down to examine them. Most of them crumbled instantly into a cloud of dust. For the next couple of hours she searched the area through the sand, using her new magnifying glass to study various pieces of the ruins. *Thank you, Winston!* she thought.

After a long and detailed search, Lara rested again while drinking more from her canteen. Was she overlooking something, or was there in fact nothing to look at? Finally, she hopped back up, and continued to scrutinize every piece of clay and rock she came across. Suddenly, one particular piece of clay caught her attention. She picked it up and studied it carefully. It looked as though someone had used a knife to etch various lines into its surface. They originated from the centre as one, then split into seven lines, made to look like an uncompleted star.

Lara carefully ran her fingers over the lines, noticing that they were carved into the clay at different depths. Each subsequent line was deeper than the one before it. She wasn't sure if it had been done on purpose, or what the piece was for, but she decided to hang onto it. After searching around for a bit longer, Lara made her way to the Euphrates River. She knelt down, washed her hands in the warm water, and looked behind her again at the ruins. The Hanging Gardens were almost an *idée fixe* now, especially since she had finally arrived at the site. She retrieved the small piece of clay from her backpack and studied it again.

Lara scooped some water onto it, noticing that it ran over the lines one at a time. She turned the piece of clay upside down to empty the water, then took another handful

of water and poured it into the first crevice. Immediately it filled the gap, and the remaining water flooded into the next six spaces. When the water had settled, Lara noticed that all of the lines were empty except for the seventh, holding all of the water, and a moment later all the water was gone. Lara turned the piece over and noticed a tiny hole in the bottom, directly under the last line.

She tucked the piece away again and returned to the spot where she had left off. Still searching the sand, she suddenly stubbed her boot on something. Lara bent down and used her hand to swipe away the sand, revealing a small piece of clay in the shape of a tube. She set her backpack on the ground beside her and used both hands to scoop and push away the sand around the piece.

After digging down about one foot, her hand scraped against something hard. She grabbed a nearby rock and used it to chip away the hardened sand from its surface. When she had finished, Lara found herself looking at what she knew was an incredible discovery at the site. The clay tube protruded out of a base fixed in the sand. She noticed small etches on the base and used her magnifying glass to have a closer look. The base was an imitation of the piece she had discovered earlier! The etchings she had examined previously decorated the entire box, drawn almost as a way to tile its surface completely. She held the first piece she'd found next to the base and compared the two. They were definitely alike, but what was she supposed to do with them?

She turned her first piece over and scraped away a layer of hardened sand, instantly revealing small etches in the clay. Lara blew off the remaining sand and looked through the magnifying glass. Someone had carved pictures into the bottom. The first picture consisted of three small waves, one on top of one the other. The second was a

small vertical line, followed by several dots. The last drawing looked like a sun that had many wild heat waves jutting out from the centre.

Lara tapped her finger on the first picture. “Water.” She moved to the second and paused. “Twig? Straight? Height of something?” She moved on for the time being, stopping at the next one. “Dirt, or water droplets? Specs of something, perhaps.” She looked at the sun picture and mentally went over the other ones in her head. Lara chewed on her bottom lip, trying to figure out what the entire thing meant.

“Water, dirt, the sun...basically the formula for plant life.” She bent down again and studied the small fixture in the sand. She ran her hand along the tube, accidentally wiping off a thin layer of sand. She noticed a small scratch in the clay tube, got down on her hands, and leaned in for a closer look. There were symbols identical to the ones on the clay piece. Beside the picture of the water were two small lines. Next to the vertical etch was one small line, followed by three ticks adjacent to the dots.

“These must be the amounts,” Lara whispered to herself. She shot up and dashed to the river. She scooped up a handful of water and filled the first two lines in the clay piece she’d found first. She carefully made her way back and gently poured the water into the tube, some of it trickling down the side. Then, all of a sudden, the water was forced back up, and sprayed out of the top.

“A little temperamental, are we?” Lara said, cocking her head. She returned to the river and poured another handful of water onto the small clay piece. She watched as the water travelled in and out of the lines until it all had arrived at the final one. She pressed her finger firmly underneath to prevent the water from draining, then rushed back to the tube. She positioned the clay piece in the centre of the tube, then released her finger to

allow it to drain. As soon as it was empty she sped back to the river and completed the same procedure as before.

When she had emptied the second amount of water Lara sat back and watched. A moment passed and nothing happened. She waited another couple of seconds and was relieved when none of the water had come back up. She checked the sand picture again and wondered about the amount that it was exhibiting. She grabbed a handful of the hot sand and released it into the first line. Without a second to waste, a soft breeze blew the sand around on the clay surface. When it had settled, every last piece of sand lay in the seventh line. Lara held it over the tube as the sand was dispensed. She did this two more times, then waited again for any changes. She glanced at the second picture and frowned. What was it? Currently, she had all the right ingredients to sustain some sort of plant life.

Lara froze for a second as her eyes slowly moved to look at the river. Then, grinning, she sprinted toward the river, splashing through the warm water. She shoved her arms into the water and waved them. Her hand brushed up against a weed and she yanked it out of the bottom. Lara returned to the tube and dropped the weed into it. She backed up and stared at it in anticipation. Nothing happened. Then she remembered the picture of the sun.

“The heat waves were quite pronounced,” Lara murmured to herself. “It needs heat, something really hot.” She grabbed her backpack and took out a flare. She lit it and then aimed very carefully before dropping it into the tube. A large spark burst out of it, instantly awaking Lara’s reflexes. Successive to the first alarm, a small thin line of smoke suddenly wafted out of the tube. Lara reached for her backpack and quickly strapped it on. The line of smoke continued to rise into the air, twisting, weaving back and forth,

almost identical to the movements of a serpent controlled by a snake charmer. Lara's gaze held fast, and she was slowly mesmerized by the uncanny smoke.

Unbeknownst to Lara, who was still in a slight trance, the opening of the tube constricted very slowly until it had been completely sealed off. The line of smoke suddenly swelled, becoming larger and larger by the second until it had expanded throughout the entire site, settling into a light haze. A small gust of wind blew on Lara's face, as if its purpose were to awaken her. She blinked a few times as she regained full awareness. As her eyes surveyed the newness of the landscape, they found what had just occurred inscrutable. Lara was temporarily nonplussed as she stood with her arms hanging loosely at her sides. Then, without any warning, the haze began to ascend. Lara's eyes instantly froze in place, her head slowly tilted upward, and her mouth widened in awe as little by little a new and incredible sight was unveiled before her.

A prodigious mountain appeared before her, and all she was able to do was stare at the Wonder; what she had believed to be true was now confirmed, right before her eyes. The artificial mountain stood tall and proud in the parched landscape, bearing a colourful exterior that was very out of place. Magnificent gates marked an entrance. From a distance, the mountain looked like a pyramid covered in dense foliage; hundreds of trees lined the mountainous terrain, some towering to an extreme height of about fifty feet.

Lara gazed at the exotic setting, completely taken aback by its beauty. As she made her way to the front gates, she was able to pick up on smaller details. There were as many as thirty ascending terraces. Lush trees and vines overhung each terrace, thus

giving the Hanging Gardens their name. As Lara neared the entrance, pure white pillars became visible, each one aiding in supporting the terraces. She peered through the gates, pausing as a wave of euphoria passed through her. She grasped hold of the gateposts and pulled herself up on her toes to get a quick glimpse inside. She couldn't fathom how exactly she was standing at the entrance to the Gardens. After hundreds of years of speculations and disbelief, the Hanging Gardens of Babylon were real. They had been here all along, somehow preserved beneath the desert landscape. Ready to explore every inch, Lara pushed open the gate, and walked into the hidden existence.

A soft breeze greeted her on the other side of the gate, carrying with it a fresh fragrance. Only a few feet in front of her stood a statue that instantly caught her attention. Lara made her way over to it, perplexed by the strange object. The body had been sculpted into a dragon, with an enormous amount of detail done to create intricate tiny scales. Its head, peculiar enough, was shaped into a horned viper, its devilish eyes issuing a warning. It possessed a lion's front legs and a bird of prey's hind legs. The statue was an impressive six feet long, and had been coated with a glaze. A small plaque lay propped up against its stomach.

"Marduk: Creator of the Universe and Chief God of Babylon." Lara reached out to feel the unusual object when a sudden rush of energy hit her hard from the side. She stumbled sideways, instantly unholstering her pistols and whipping them up beside her. Her legs moved quickly to regain balance, and instantly Lara bent her knees into a vigilant stance. As her eyes darted around in search of the source, time began to decelerate at an impressive speed, until it had frozen the present completely.

Lara felt an unusual sensation take over her as everything except her mind held still. Rooted to the spot, she watched the Gardens begin quickly metamorphosing. All of the leaves on the trees began to shrivel up and fall to the ground. All of the flowers wilted and drooped, followed by all of the statues taking a hard weathering to their once perfect surface. Then, in a split second, the pause was lifted and time for her resumed. Lara frowned as she looked around in disbelief. She turned full circle to view the change. Everything was dead, cracked, and old. A stillness had taken over, casting dark shadows across everything. A lone leaf trembled on the ground, disturbed by the sudden transformations. The statue that had stood triumphantly before Lara only moments ago was gloomy, its once shiny scales now dull and cracked.

Then without warning, a shrill cry came from above, and a huge vulture swooped down toward Lara, flexing its claws in preparation for attack. She whipped up her pistols and fired at the bird. Its fluorescent eyes flashed at her as it let out another cry. With its claws outstretched, it dashed toward her, ready to slash her face. She quickly side-flipped, shooting rapidly. One of the bullets tore into its body, instantly propelling it in the opposite direction. The vulture landed on top of the statue, then slid down the side, onto the ground. A thick red line of blood dripped from the statue, each droplet pattering lightly onto the corpse. Lara re-holstered one pistol as she slowly made her way further into the garden.

Something had happened to Babylon and Lara felt that she was being given the opportunity to find out what that was. Perhaps she would discover why the Gardens had vanished one day, and why there was so minimal information about them. If she wanted to discover their true meaning, she would need to perform a search of every inch of every

terrace level. She moved on, making her way past broken pieces of fallen statues, and dead plants. Nothing on the first level was of any interest so she approached the staircase leading to the next level. She placed her right foot on the first step and felt a slight rumble beneath. She paused for a moment before pushing herself forward into a run.

The steps instantly crumbled beneath her, smashing on the ground below. She quickened her pace while trying to be light on her feet. Just as she was halfway up, the stairs in front of her folded and broke into pieces. The few remaining stairs in front started to tremble, and at the last possible second she pushed off the step, jumping forward into the air. She caught hold of the ledge. Pieces of the staircase crumbled under her fingers, crashing into piles of dust below. Her free arm lashed around in the air while she tried to reach for the ledge. Just as her other hand began to slip she grasped hold of the ledge and immediately pulled herself up. She turned around and looked over the edge.

“What can’t go down, must go up.” She wiped off pieces of clay from her clothes and adjusted her backpack. Several vines had been planted along the perimeter of this level and their once luscious leaves now overhung in a crumpled, dormant mess. Lara reached over and lightly brushed her hand along them. The aged leaves instantly cracked into pieces, sending a shower of debris down below. She continued along the second level, her boots stepping over dry and cracked plants. Suddenly, out of the corner of her eye, Lara saw something move. She whipped her head to the side, but no one was there. Both pistols outstretched in front of her, she cautiously made her way forward, turning in small circles, ensuring no one caught her by surprise.

Just as she turned around once more, Lara stubbed her boot hard against something on the ground. A small ticking noise began to crescendo. Lara leaped forward

just as a sharp blade pierced upward through the ground. She didn't bother to glance back — she knew these types of traps. She darted forward, jumping repeatedly, past the deadly blades. Sounds of scraping steel invaded the area, each screech helping to keep her pace and determination high. Lara peered over her shoulder, astounded by the field of blades that stood strong and triumphant. Immediately, just as she turned her head forward, one blade thrust through the ground only a few feet away. Without a moment to lose, more blades shot upward, bolting their way toward her. Lara's eyes darted from side to side; she was taking what seemed to be an eternity to make a decision. Six more blades burst up, one foot away.

Lara stood on the only part of the ground where one blade had yet to make an appearance. Adrenaline pumped through her body as she forced her knees down, then thrust herself straight up into the air. The lethal blade sprang upwards, only millimetres from her feet. She grabbed onto a pole that jutted out from the wall. Her hands firmly wrapped around the lifesaver, locking instantly in place. Lara's heart pounded in her chest and up into her throat as she caught her breath. She scanned the area below her as she held fast to the pole. Each razor sharp blade stood strongly in place, ready to skewer anything or anybody who dared to venture near. While she looked for a way to escape her current situation, a loud cry pierced through the air from above. Three large black birds swooped over the edge from the above terrace.

Lara's face turned into a frown as she clenched her teeth, ready for attack. The first bird dove straight down with its claws outstretched. She let go of the pole with one hand and grabbed a pistol. She whipped the gun over her head and fired two bullets. A small squeal escaped its mouth as it fell down, hitting Lara on the head before plunging

to its death below. The second and third bird each took off in opposite directions, circling around her body. One swooped toward her leg and its nails gouged her flesh, scraping a good part of her leg. She let out a cry and kicked the bird as hard as she could, sending it flying right into an awaiting blade.

The last bird flashed its eyes at her before taking off to the next level. She grunted as she put away pistol away, noticing a line of blood seeping out of her wound. Suddenly, she felt the pole drop a little, causing her body to tighten instantly. It continued to bend, slowly pulling out of the wall. Lara grabbed the pole with her other hand and pulled her body upward, then let it fall down into a swing. She sailed forward, forcing her body to swing up and around the pole a couple of times. Just as the last piece of the pole was about to come free, Lara let go, allowing her body to soar through the air. She flew over the last set of blades before gravity won, pulling her to the ground.

She landed roughly, knees bent to cushion her landing, and ended with a forward roll. Her leg burned where the bird had attacked her, and she looked around for something to wipe away the blood with, but decided sharp vines and twigs weren't the answer. She bent down and scooped up a small pile of dirt and poured it over the wound. A sharp pain gripped at her chest as she exhaled, trying to ease some of the burning. Lara explored the rest of the level, unsuccessful in finding anything of use. As Lara started up the staircase to the next level, something flashed by her. She drew her guns and whipped them to the side. No one was there. She moved her arms in all directions as she turned around.

“What’s going on?” she muttered. She tucked the guns away and quickly moved up the stairs. When she reached the top, she came to a halt. A tall, dark statue of a dragon loomed before her.

“The dragon statue,” she whispered, “symbolizes divine power.” It stood on a ceramic base of carefully carved tiles. Flaking blue paint had collected on the ground below. “This would have been beautiful when it was made,” she said out loud. She moved in front of the dragon and swept her hand over its incredibly smooth surface. When she touched its face, its mouth suddenly fell open and a burst of fire shot out. Lara instantly dropped to the ground and the hot flame passed over her. She tilted her head to the side, keeping an eye on the fire as she crawled out from underneath.

Lara stood beside the statue trying to figure out what to do when suddenly the flame extinguished. A moment passed, and the flame returned twice as strong as before. Lara nodded and smiled to herself as she braced herself for her next move. The instant the fire died, she bolted forward and shoved her hand into the statue’s mouth. Her fingers brushed against its tongue and she pressed down firmly. She jerked out her hand and hopped to the side with only half a second to spare before fire spewed from its mouth once again. The sound of rattling chains found its way to Lara, instantly alerting her. She ran past the statue, leaving the fiery creature for now.

Lara came across a new section of the terrace now, which had been blocked off by fallen pillars. To the right, a small grate was open, leading into the core of the Gardens. Before the door slammed shut she ran forward into the tunnel. As soon as she made it inside, she stepped on a pressure pad, sending the gate falling back down. She stepped on it again, but nothing happened. She looked ahead but couldn’t make out what was in front

as the light only cast in so far from the outside. After striking a flare to life, Lara began to proceed down the tunnel, one pistol locked and loaded at her side.

The dirt that covered the sides of the tunnel was completely dry, and small pieces crumbled to the floor. A stale odour wafted about, sometimes in short gusts of wind. Every now and then she passed by pictures that had been painted on the walls. The once brightly coloured paint had run in several places over the years, and small cracks added texture. The drawings consisted of animals ranging from alligators to dragons similar to the statue she had previously encountered. She wasn't sure of the meanings of the paintings but she suspected she would find out soon enough.

A moment later, Lara reached the end of the tunnel and found herself in a small, circular room, made out of the clay bricks, like the rest of the Gardens. She walked to the centre and looked up, amazed to see how high the shaft was. Every storey had a couple of windows that let in rays of sunlight. The walls were aged, and pieces of clay had broken off and collected in small piles on the ground. At one time, vines had lined the walls and small plants had grown in between the bricks, but now all that remained were bare branches and shrivelled yellow leaves. Two long ropes hung from the ceiling, ending just above her head. Lara gently tugged on one, then escaped back into the tunnel, anticipating an unwelcome shower of some sort. When nothing came crashing down, she stepped into the room again and went back to the ropes.

One rope was longer than the other by about a foot. She jumped up and just managed to catch hold of the longest rope. Gravity pulled her back down and she hung suspended in the air, only a few feet from the ground. A loud noise came from below. She looked down and watched as the floor rose a few inches. She climbed a little higher

and again the floor was raised. Lara grinned as she reached over her head and pulled her body up higher. Her muscles flexed as she climbed the rope, using her arms and legs to manoeuvre upward, at the same time pulling the circular floor up beneath her.

“Not your typical elevator, but it works just the same,” she said aloud. She pressed upward, quickening her pace. She passed by a couple of windows but they were too small to see out. Lara didn’t want to stop climbing in case her muscles locked. The clay floor had risen a storey from the ground now. As it ascended, it chopped off the dead vines that protruded from the wall. Lara’s arms began to burn as she rose higher and higher. She breathed in and out of her mouth as she gripped the rope, pulling herself up inch by inch. Several minutes passed before she neared the top. A large cut-out in the wall loomed only a few more feet above. Just as her hand reached once again, she felt the rope loosen. Lara snapped up her head and saw that the rope was quickly unravelling at the top of the shaft. Teeth clenched, she grabbed the rope and forced her body upward, her arms burning and begging for a moment’s rest. Just as she came a foot away from the hole, the rope snapped, and Lara fell roughly onto the elevator lift. The bottom plunged downward, hitting the wall hard, sending chunks of brick everywhere. She bent her legs to support herself as the elevator fell faster and faster.

A window suddenly zoomed by, and without the slightest bit of hesitation, Lara sprang toward it, arching her body in mid-air, and at the last second grabbed onto the windowsill. One of her hands slipped, but she quickly recovered, getting a firm grasp of the window. She looked down and watched as the elevator plunged to the bottom. The clay smashed to the ground, splitting and breaking into countless pieces. A huge cloud of dust flew upward, sending small chunks of clay flying around Lara. She turned her head

the other way until the cloud of dust began to settle. She blew off the debris from her arms, then looked back up and let out a small groan.

Lara had fallen about halfway and was now stuck. She looked behind her at another window, which was a bit higher than the one she currently held onto. She let go with one hand and turned her body toward the other window. With both feet planted firmly against the wall, she pushed off, twisted mid-air, and caught hold of the windowsill safely. She looked up again, annoyed when she noticed the next window wasn't at all close by. The second rope, however, dangled only a few feet above. Lara looked around but there wasn't anyway she could climb up. Then an idea struck her.

Lara pulled herself up onto the windowsill and carefully turned around. She stood only on her heels on the narrow window ledge. One slight off-balance movement would send her toppling down to the jagged rocks. She eyed the rope carefully, mentally going over her planned movements. She wasn't exactly sure if it would work, but no other opportunities had presented themselves thus far, so she didn't have much of a choice. Lara braced herself before she bent down and at the last second sprang off of the ledge toward the opposite wall. She let her momentum carry her across the gap, and the second her feet hit the adjacent wall, she thrust herself back in the opposite direction, pushing up and off the wall.

Her body soared through the air toward the rope, but it was losing momentum and height. Desperately, Lara reached for the rope with her right hand, just grazing it. At the last second, she managed to catch on with the other. Her body jerked hard, hanging several storeys above the ground. She reached up with her right hand, straining to get a

grip on the rope. Her other hand held fast as she secured herself and clambered up toward the hole in the wall above.

Lara was now only a couple of feet from the alcove. She swung forward to get enough momentum to reach the ledge, then let go of the rope and sailed toward the gap, her body arched perfectly for a smooth landing. She landed safely in the doorway, pleased to have finally made it to the top. Lara kicked a small stone over the ledge, then turned to face her new locale. She walked down the short hallway and found herself in a large room. Stone pillars lined the walls, supporting large stone tables and shelves. It appeared to be some sort of a library: hundreds of books lay stacked on the tables, covered with dust and dirt. Several rodents, which had long destroyed the pages of the books, meandered about. Lara used her pistol to turn over the books to see if anything of interest lay underneath, but rat feces wasn't on her list. She made her way to the other side of the room, where on a raised platform there lay a pedestal. She climbed the steps and approached the stand. A solitary book lay on top, perfectly centred on the white pedestal. It appeared brand new and untouched — certainly out of place from the rest.

Lara had plenty of experience with pedestals and objects lying on them, and knew better than to waltz over and pick it up. The book seemed too perfect, and was obviously not revealing its true self. Lara backed away, turning around, eyeing the room carefully. Something wasn't right; she could sense a change in the atmosphere. Just as she went to turn back to the book, a rumble shook the room, sending books to the floor, crumbling on impact. She quickly drew her pistols and pointed them out in front of her. Abruptly, something whizzed by her side. She jerked her head over, this time finally seeing what had been following her.

A grungy, nasty skeleton stood beside her holding a long, deadly sword. It took another swing at her, sending a sharp cool wind across her face. It took another step forward and slashed its weapon at her again. Lara hopped back and fired both pistols at it. The skeleton advanced, its bony legs trampling over the ground as it tried its attack again. Lara side-flipped and shot rapidly at the unexpected visitor. Her bullets burst into its bones, their force pushing back the skeleton's body. The skeleton didn't seem to be hurt by the guns; it recovered in a matter of seconds before charging at her again. Suddenly, a sharp sting grabbed at the back of her arm. She turned around, and another skeleton greeted her with a nice slash to her arm. Lara clenched her teeth as she fired several shots at the ugly enemy. She darted to the side, then ran from the invaders. She turned her head to confirm they were chasing after her. Two more skeletons appeared in front, both holding two knives. They too shot toward her, slashing the blades around in the air.

“The book is that good?” Lara called out sarcastically. She sprinted toward them and, at the last second, jumped over them. She darted back to the elevator shaft, stopped at the edge, and turned back around. All four skeletons charged at Lara, holding their weapons in the air. The first two were only a foot away when she pushed off the ledge, back-flipping into the shaft, and caught hold of the remaining rope. The skeletons weren't very bright, Lara noticed with amusement: they ran right off the side and fell to the ground below. Their swords clanked together loudly as they smashed onto the rubble, scattering pieces of their bones everywhere.

The remaining two assassins proved they could learn by observation. They waited at the edge holding their weapons out in front, ready to attack her at the first chance they got. One slashed its sword, hoping to slice the rope. She looked around as she schemed in

her mind what she was going to do to them. A devilish grin swept over her lips as she gave them a small wink. Lara forced her body forward, swinging toward the ledge. Both skeletons frantically slashed at her but missed completely. She swung back, then pushed herself forward as hard as she could and flew over them. Before they even had a chance to turn around, Lara whipped herself around the rope, then swung back toward the skeletons. She kicked out with both feet as hard as she could, slamming both adversaries and sending them tumbling over the ledge. Lara swung back to safety and dropped to the ground. She glanced over the ledge and smiled at the pile of bones sprawled across the bottom.

“Easy come, easy go. Now, back to that book.” Lara ran back inside to the pedestal. She placed both hands on the book and paused, waiting to see if there were going to be any other visitors. Her fingers grasped the book and she picked it up, quickly stepping off the platform. Nothing happened. Lara walked over to one of the tables and sat down on an old clay bench. She ran her hand along the glazed cover and opened the book to the first page.

“Amyitis, my wife, will be delighted when she sees the Gardens for the first time. I have gone to all ends of the world gathering exotic foliage for my masterpiece. Not only have I created a perfect and impossible environment, but I’ve also created something even more magical than the Gardens. Together they will work, finally completing my vision. All that is left is to turn the irrigation system on and envelop myself in this mystical paradise.”

Lara turned the page to find the following one blank. She continued to flip through the book finding nothing but plain white paper, and then turned to the end. On the last page lay a red key, secured in the centre with a small piece of blue wax.

“Not much of a bookkeeper, but at least you keep all the essentials together,” Lara said, tucking the book and key into her backpack. She stood up, scanning the room for an exit, but nothing obvious stuck out. Looking up, she noticed a small floor supported by four pillars. A wooden ladder was attached to the floor, but it was broken in two. The other half of it lay on the ground in several pieces. Lara looked around again and spotted a pillar on the other side of the room that had a large chunk out of its side. She ran over, jumped up, and grabbed hold of the crevice. Her hands slipped as loose rocks crumbled under her fingers. She jumped up again and grabbed hold of a crack further up. Inching around to the opposite side, she spotted a couple of poles on the wall perpendicular to her. Lara let go of the pillar with one hand and turned to face the first pole. She pushed off and grabbed it, swinging around it a few times. Just as she swung near to the bottom, she let go and sailed toward the second pole. The pole that she should have been able to get to next was broken. She stopped her swing and hung in mid-air while inspecting the wall beside her.

Pieces of the wall had eroded, leaving cracks and small holes visible. Lara forced her body into another swing and flew toward the wall, catching hold without difficulty. She continued to progress along the wall until she had arrived at the platform, and dropped carefully to the floor, ready to jump back if the old platform decided to give way. A small lever lay on the wall in front of her. The image of a devil decorated the floor. She studied the engraving for a moment, noticing that there wasn't a single scratch

on the picture, but many had wrecked the floor around it. The devil had been etched in a way that made it look as though its face was covered in dark shadows. Its eyes seemed to pierce through the floor, almost embossed on top of the clay. They gave off a lustre that puzzled her. Lara walked over to the lever and placed her hand on it.

“The Devil: a personification of true evil,” she whispered. She turned her head and stared at the horrific picture while pushing down the lever. She held still as she waited for something to happen. Out of the corner of her eye, Lara noticed the pillar down below starting to sink into the floor. She glanced back at the picture and found, to her surprise, that it had vanished. She stepped onto the broken ladder and climbed carefully to the last stable rung before dropping roughly to the ground. Her leg burned, sending a reminder of the bird who gave her the wound. She drew both pistols and proceeded toward the platform carefully. The pedestal was gone now; a dark hole gaped in its place. She re-holstered a gun and tossed a flare down the hole. The light bounced off the dark walls until it hit the bottom. It was hard to tell what was down there, though it looked as though it led to another tunnel. Lara holstered her other gun and gave her leg a quick inspection before dropping silently into the hole. She picked up the flare and began to crawl through the claustrophobic tunnel.

Emerging from the end of the tunnel, she found herself overlooking a large room. Over a dozen tall columns of various heights stood scattered about the room. Down below — at least a thirty foot drop — lay burners rapidly spewing flames into the air, some reaching the heights of the columns. Flame emitters lined most of the walls and sent bursts of fire outward in hopes of claiming a victim. The air was extremely hot. Lara eyed the room carefully but was unable to spot anything of use or interest, so she decided to do

a little exploring. She wiped her hands on her shorts, then jumped forward onto the first pillar. The second she landed, a burst of fire shot up beside her. Lara tensed, ready to move, but thankfully it was the only flame that greeted her. She turned her back to it and made a running jump to the next pillar. She caught hold of the edge, and another burst of fire was emitted from below. She quickly advanced to the other side, going hand over hand flawlessly.

Lara pulled herself up and gazed at the brilliant blaze in front of her. She jumped to the next column, which was much shorter than the other ones, and landed in a crouch. She grimaced as a sharp pain escalated through her leg. Just as she was about to stand, a large flame ploughed out of an emitter directly at her. Instinctively, Lara dropped onto her stomach and pressed her body firmly to the ground. An incredible wave of heat blew over her as the fire billowed out of the wall. Unfortunately, this one wasn't timed and it continued to plough a steady inferno above her. She looked over the edge from where she was positioned, but there wasn't anywhere she could go. Carefully, she turned herself around in a circle, looking to see how she could advance. The tallest pillar in the room was only a couple feet away, but it was about seven feet taller than the one she was occupying. She looked down and noticed a small cut-out close to the bottom. Something was in it, but she couldn't make it out through the thick heat waves.

Lara pulled herself over the ledge some more, and inspected the pillar she was on. Several chunks were missing, so she carefully lowered herself over the edge and dropped to catch hold of one of the holes. She pressed her feet against the side, then pushed off, making a small jump toward the next pillar. Her momentum carried her across the gap, then gravity pulled her down, and she landed perfectly in the small alcove she'd seen

earlier. Several flames burst up behind her, creating a wall of fire, now preventing her from making an exit. The light from the fire lit up the alcove, revealing a lever on the floor. On the wall behind it, another image of a devil had been etched into the stone. The fire from behind her somehow reflected mostly off its evil eyes, dancing wildly around inside them. A tongue had also been carved into the picture, unlike the first engraving she had come across. The tongue actually stuck out from the picture, and a small ring had been pierced through it. A gold key dangled from the ring, possessing a strong temptation to anyone who would look at it. Lara put her finger through the ring and quickly pulled hard on it. The ring instantly snapped, releasing the key and sending it sailing through the air and onto the floor. She immediately picked it up, and when she stood back up, she found herself looking at a blank wall. She frowned as she reached out to touch where the image had been.

“Ouch!” she cried out, snatching her hand back. The wall was scorching hot, as if an invisible flame was guarding the wall. She turned back around and pulled the lever, not entirely sure what was going to be the result. In an instant, the sound of rushing water filled the room. The wall of fire hissed and crackled as it was put out by the sudden flood of water. A wave rushed into the alcove, almost pushing Lara off her feet. She ran out and jumped into the water, holding tightly to the key. The water continued to rise as Lara swam upward with the current. When it had reached just inches below the tallest pillar, it stopped as if someone had abruptly turned it off. She pulled herself onto the column, and the second she did so, the water level took a plunge. Within seconds it had completely evacuated the room. Lara raised her eyebrows as the burners were re-ignited and as the

emitters burst to life once again. She unclenched her fist, revealing the key in the palm of her hand.

“Someone sure went to a lot of trouble hiding all of these,” she said. She added the key to her backpack, then took out the book. The water had destroyed it, smearing the ink on the first page. Not to her surprise, it sort of reminded her of the devilish face that kept appearing everywhere. She removed the key from the last page before tossing the book over the side. Instantly, it was engulfed in flames. Lara glanced down at it momentarily before jumping upward to catch hold of a ladder that hung in a small shaft above her. As she began her ascent, the fire suddenly vanished from the book, leaving no damage to the peculiar smear of ink.

When Lara arrived at the top of the ladder, she found herself on one of the terrace levels of the Gardens. She breathed in the cooler air and stretched her legs as she looked around. The view was incredible from where she stood. She was about halfway up the entire structure of the Gardens, and could barely make out the desert landscape through a thick haze. As she made her way along the terrace, she passed several water fountains attached to the wall. Each one was dried; it looked as if they hadn't been used in ages. As Lara got closer, she noticed small crevices located under each fountain. At one point in time, fresh water would pour out from each fountain, down along the ground to the next terrace. Two of the fountains were dragon's faces, with holes visible in their mouths for water flow. The middle fountain had been carved into a woman. She sat in the bowl of the fountain and her long hair flowed to the bottom. Lara met her gaze and felt a sudden sadness run through her. A shiver swept through her body and she broke the stare. She

wasn't sure what was going on, but she was starting to believe that something had taken possession of the Gardens, and she wanted to find out what that was.

Lara glanced back at the woman to find that she was now looking down into the bowl. Lara peered down into the bowl but saw only a handful of dead leaves. She reached in and scooped them out, revealing yet another key in the bottom. She picked it up to examine it. The key was blue and had a light coating of glaze on it. It was the same size as the other two keys she had found. Upon closer inspection, she noticed that the key shapes were almost identical, except the lengths of one section of the keys were slightly longer.

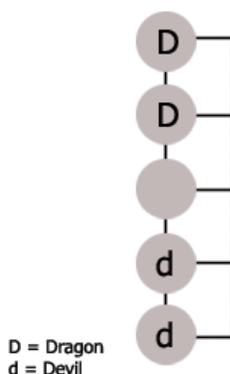
“All of these must go together,” Lara stated aloud. “I wonder how many there are?” She looked at the statue again. This time the woman's gaze was returned to its original position, and a small smile lit her face. “It's almost as if you want me to figure this out,” Lara said to the fountain, smiling back. She tucked the keys away and climbed the stairs to the next terrace level.

The next level was different from the other ones she had been on in that there weren't any trees or old flowers. It almost resembled a courtyard; the entire surface had been tiled with great care. Blue glazed tiles had been precisely placed to form a large circle in the middle of the ground. Several statues were situated at various points within the circle. Lara also noticed a tile with writing on it.

“I love ancient puzzles!” she exclaimed aloud. “No one goes to that type of trouble anymore.” She walked over to one of the statues and rested her arm on it, examining the puzzle in more detail. There were two dragon statues at one end, one in front of the other. They rested in two small grooves in the ground and possessed a bar on

the back so they could be easily pushed. In the middle was another circular groove, which was unoccupied. The last spots contained two devil statues. Small cuts had been made between the grooves, allowing the statues to be pushed forward or backward. On the outside there was one track along which statues could be moved as well. Lara walked over to the engraved tile and bent down to read the inscription.

“Move the pieces so that the Dragon no longer lords over the vile devil. Eight moves only, or suffer the consequences.” Lara stepped back and pondered the message for a moment. If she didn’t complete the puzzle she had nowhere else to go; failure to succeed in eight moves would result in a severe punishment. Unfortunately, there wasn’t room for trial and error this time. If Lara wanted to ensure success, she would have to solve the puzzle in her head before making her moves. She closed her eyes as she pictured the setup and mentally began to move the pieces in her mind.



She knew how the puzzle worked: the dragon pieces had to swap places with the devil pieces. She couldn’t lift the pieces since they were secured under the tracks, so she would have to push them to where they needed to go. You were allowed to jump one piece at a time by using the track along the outside, but weren’t allowed to slide it down the track to cheat. Lara mentally went over various routes in her mind, trying to figure out

the solution. Finally, with a quick breath she placed her hands on one of the statues and began pushing it to make the first move...

Lara moved the final piece to the finishing spot and a big smile crossed over her face. The puzzle had been completed, and she'd done it in exactly eight moves.

“Not so bad once you get started,” she said aloud. “I’d love to add one of these to the mansion — it would keep Winston baffled for some time!” Out of the corner of her eye, Lara noticed the middle circle starting to rise from the ground. The skinny pillar continued upward, and Lara quickly hopped onto it. She had to catch her balance several times as it ascended another couple of terrace levels. One slip and she would be vulture food for sure, mashed to perfection. After several minutes, the pillar came to a slow stop. She jumped off it and landed on the second to last terrace. Lara looked over the side and stared in astonishment at the wondrous sight; then she turned around and entered through an open door into the core of the Gardens once again. A cool breeze greeted her at the door as she passed through a short hallway. She arrived at another large door, which was closed. This door was made of stone and stood about seven feet tall. It had numerous animals etched into its frame. Lara placed her hand on the door and paused as the coolness passed through her fingertips and spread in circles on her palm. She lifted her hand away and surveyed the images again. She could feel something behind the door, but wanted to hold the feeling of mystery just a moment longer. Then, she pressed both hands flat against the door and pushed it open, using all of her strength.

“Oh my—” Lara choked up. She stared ahead, eyes wide, arms hung at her sides at the insuperable masterpiece before her. “The Temple of Babylon!” she exclaimed

excitedly. “So the statue of Bel does exist!” She ran forward and stopped at the base of the figure. Bel was made entirely out of gold, and to complete the set, a large throne on which he sat and a table beside him were also made of gold. Lara had read that more than twenty-two tons of gold had been used to construct the statue. She reached out to touch it, mesmerized by its beauty and tortuous craftsmanship. Just as her hand grazed its surface, her stomach tensed with a feeling of foreboding. She backed away from the statue, placing her hands on her pistols. She continued to take small steps when, suddenly, she felt something brush past her leg. Without a moment lost, Lara whipped out her guns and shoved them in front. Her mouth fell open as thirty camel spiders emerged from around the statue of Bel. Each one was an impressive six inches in length, earning their title of one of the most terrifying spiders in the world. They scampered closer, flexing their legs and flashing their deadly, flesh-eating fangs at her.

“A *beautiful* paradise?” Lara questioned out loud. “It’s nothing short of a *perilous* paradise, especially with you nasty looking things!” One of the spiders let out a terrible high-pitched, scratchy hiss at her. She swung her pistols to the side, noticing more of the fatal creatures scuttling in. A deep frown overtook her face as she glared at her would-be assassins.

“Well? Have anything to back that hiss up?” she mocked. That’s all it took. Instantly, the spiders ran toward her, fangs ready to tear her flesh. She shot half a dozen bullets and watched as several spiders flew backward, blood bursting out of their bodies from the hits. One scurried across her boot and she kicked out as hard as she could, but the creature held on. Just as it took the plunge with its hideous face, she jumped straight

up, swung her leg out to the side, and fired one bullet directly at it. Its head exploded on impact, and the force from the shot burst the rest of its body into a bloody mess.

Lara turned around to see a dozen more running toward her. The spiders screeched as they drew near, their mouths dripping with anticipation of their meal. Lara fired bullets from both guns, her arms jerking up and down from the recoil. One by one the spiders met their destiny as they exploded around one another. Blood-soaked, fuzzy legs lay sprawled all over the floor. Lara did her best to avoid the mess while continuing her fight. Out of the blue, she felt a thud on her back. She winced as a spider dug its legs through her shirt, searching for the perfect spot to begin its meal. She flung her body around in a circle but it held on tightly. She whipped her arm at it, hoping to knock it free.

“Ah!” she cried out in pain. The spider had taken a small chunk of skin out of her reaching arm. Blood seeped out of the wound quickly, trailing off in several directions on her arm. She turned around, desperate to get rid of the evil beast. She sprinted toward one of the walls, trampling several other spiders along the way. Blood oozed steadily from her arm and ran down to her hand. She clenched her teeth as she prepared for impact. When she was a foot away from the wall she jumped forward, twisting in the air. Her back smashed into the wall, sending bits crumbling around her. The spider was crushed on impact, squeezing every last organ and ounce of blood from its body. Lara heaved in a deep breath as she recovered from having the wind knocked out of her. She turned around and grinned at the mess of blood and spider parts on the wall.

She slowly turned back around, holding her lucky charms up beside her. She ejected both clips simultaneously and flashed a wicked smile at the remaining spiders

before her as the clips fell into the slosh at her feet. She re-holstered the guns and reached into her backpack for the Uzi. She pointed it at her targets, slightly annoyed by the dripping blood from her arm.

“Let’s get this over with, shall we? You’ve already taken up far too much of my time.” She dropped to the ground, one knee bent and the other leg stretched out at her side. Pursing her mouth determinedly, Lara pulled the trigger hard, sending a spray of bullets in front of her. The spiders shrieked in pain as each and every one of them was struck by the deadly bullets. A moment later, silence took its turn piercing the air. A small bit of smoke escaped through the barrel of the Uzi. Lara breathed through her mouth as she stood up, surveying the scene around her. Rich blood completely stained the floor. Splatters decorated the walls while limbs and other body parts added texture to the once smooth surfaces. Lara threw the Uzi aside and made her way back over to Bel. She gazed at him again, pleased to see that not one single drop of blood had poisoned the beautiful statue. On the table beside him, a silver key had been placed with care in the exact centre. Lara smiled as she reached for it. Suddenly, another shriek rang out in front of her. Another camel spider flew through the air toward her, its fangs flickering with excitement. Lara grabbed a pistol and swung the butt hard at it. She hit it square on, and sent it sailing back toward where it had come from. A soft cry escaped from its throat before it was silent again.

Grimly, Lara tucked her gun away once more and quickly snatched the key. Just as she picked it up, a small hole opened in the ceiling above her. She hopped up onto the table, giving a look of condolence to Bel for the mess she’d made. She jumped upward, and pulled herself through the hole and onto the final terrace level. She stood up, and saw

that in the centre of the level was a huge stone tablet. A small inscription had been carved above four keyholes.

“May there be everlasting life in the Gardens with the continuous flow of fresh water to the exotic environment below.” Lara pulled all of her keys out and noticed a faint strip of colour above each keyhole, corresponding to the keys she possessed. She used the red key first, which she had found in the book from the library. Next, she used the gold key from the devil’s tongue, then the blue one from the water fountain. She held the last one, the silver key that she had obtained from Bel. She carefully inserted it into the right hole and turned it clockwise. She heard a small click, but nothing happened. Then, she noticed a tiny hole with more writing near the bottom of the tablet.

“And with one breath it was as if the entire world had come alive.” She took a step closer, bent down, and blew softly into the hole. An enigmatic feeling swept through Lara as she went slightly light-headed for a moment. Then, a sudden spout of water came up from the ground below, pooling around her feet. It flowed past her, rapidly picking up speed as it overflowed to the next, lower level, splashing down the wall. Lara ran to the edge and stopped dead in her tracks as she stood in awe at the empyrean vista before her. She cried out in excitement as she witnessed the rebirth of the Gardens. Swiftly, she climbed down a ladder and ran to the edge of the next terrace.

Water streams lined all parts of the terraces, soaking deeply into the earth, and small waterfalls plunged over the Gardens, creating a holy atmosphere. Lara looked over the ledge and saw an enormous, already deep pool below. With a grin, she ran forward and pushed off the ledge, performing a perfect swan dive. She rolled in the air several times before plunging cleanly into the invigorating water below. When she surfaced, she

climbed out and continued to look around in amazement. The Gardens were alive again, showing off their striking beauty. Exotic flowers vivified within seconds, bursting with bright, unimaginable colours and exuding a multitude of fragrances. Vines that had been dead and withered now flourished with bold green colours, while lush greenery climbed the walls and overhung from the terraces. Water fountains filled with crystal clear water, and the sound of trickling water filled the air. Lara made her way down each level, enjoying the divine scenery. When she had finally reached the lowest level, she turned around and stared up at the magical setting. King Nebuchadnezzar had done the impossible; it was a miracle that such a place of great intricacies could thrive in the middle of the desert.

With one last look, Lara turned to leave the Gardens. She had proven their existence, and had come out doing far more than that, getting more than what she had hoped for. Just as she pushed open the gates to leave, she picked two *Musa ornata* flowers, and then slowly exited the Gardens. As Lara began her walk through the hot desert, a feeling of self-fulfillment passed through her. She walked by the spot where she had been able to get the Gardens to rise from beneath the ground, and smiled. She looked back, but all that was there were piles of sand and rubble. A soft haze shimmered where the Gardens had stood not a moment ago. Lara looked down at the flowers in her hand, which still glistened with fresh water droplets, as she continued on, back to the small village in Al-Hillah.

It was nearing dusk when Lara finally arrived at Haneefa's house. She placed one of the exotic flowers on the woman's doorstep, smiling to herself as she pictured Haneefa's expression when she found the small treasure.

Lara caught the next train out and rode through the night with the remaining small flower cupped in her hands. No one, except for her, yet knew the truth about the Gardens. By resurrecting them, she had been able to see into the magical world of the Gardens for a short time. She still wasn't sure how they had vanished, or who had been responsible, but some things were better left secret. Lara felt certain that the Gardens held other mysteries deep beneath their beautiful exterior, but she was honoured that she had been able to unlock at least some of the past from one of the greatest wonders of the world.

Perilous Paradise

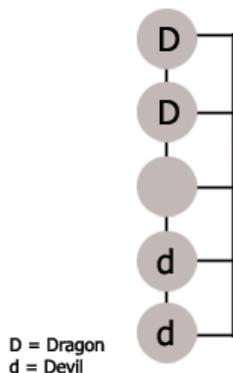
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The Garden Puzzle

While Lara was in the Hanging Gardens she came across a puzzle with four statues. Can you figure it out?



Rules:

1. You have to move all of the dragon pieces to where the devil pieces are, and vice versa
2. You must finish the puzzle in exactly eight moves
3. You can move one piece at a time, up or down
4. You can skip one piece at a time, like in checkers

Solution:

See if you can figure out the puzzle before looking at the solution. If Lara can do it, so can you!

1. Slide the second dragon statue (hole #2) down one, to the third hole
2. Jump the first devil statue (hole #4) over the dragon statue you just moved (hole #3) to land in hole #2
3. Slide the last devil statue up one spot, to land in hole #4
4. Jump the dragon statue in hole #3 overtop of the devil statue in hole #4, to finish in hole #5
5. Take the dragon statue in hole #1 and jump it overtop of the devil statue in hole #2 to land in hole #3
6. Slide the devil statue in hole #2 up to hole #1
7. Jump the devil statue in hole #4 overtop of the dragon statue in hole #2 to finish in hole #2. Now the devil statues are on the opposite end
8. Slide the dragon statue in hole #3 down to hole #4 to complete the puzzle