

A Room in Waiting

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Rivulets of perspiration trickled down Lara's back in the hot Guatemalan sun as she sat on the side of the road waiting for a bus. The pavement shimmered in the late afternoon heat. For two hours she'd waited here, just outside of the Santa Elena airport, in spite of the fact that the locals had told her the buses came every twenty minutes. Lara wiped her brow on her arm. She watched the people passing by and then turned back to her notebook to go over the plans for her latest quest. Finally, an old white bus pulled up. Stretching, Lara picked up her pack and hopped on. The driver greeted her in Spanish.

"Hi there," she replied, "how much?"

"Diez dólares," the driver responded.

Lara handed him the money and found an unoccupied seat. She pulled a small notebook from her pack and continued to review the notes she'd made. Her destination: Tikal, Guatemala, southeast of Mexico, site of the largest of the ancient ruins in the country, located in the national park. For months she'd researched Tikal to prepare for her escapade, and planned on staying several days at the park to explore the ruins to their fullest. She had made notes about specific monuments and facts she had come across that might serve as an aid.

The Maya were one of only two civilizations ever to be successful at building and establishing cities in the rainforest, she had written. Similar to the Egyptians, they had crafted and erected pyramids and temples with extraordinary amounts of detail. The Maya were even said to have knowledge far greater than that of the Egyptians and Babylonians when it came to astronomy, and were deemed the brightest civilization ever

to have existed on the planet. Through pictures that were carved and embossed on stone monuments, a large piece of their history had been decoded.

An hour later, the bus stopped. Lara shielded her face from a large dust cloud as she exited the bus, emerging only a few yards from the Tikal National Park entrance. It was late in the evening, already dark, and the only thing she could make out were the silhouettes of trees. A soft whirring noise rode the night air, the sound of singing frogs. Several armed guards patrolled the premises while tourists and locals checked into the park. Lara swung on her backpack and walked to the gate. A tanned, middle-aged man dressed in red and white striped pants, a colourful shirt to match, and an oversized straw hat greeted Lara.

“Sies dólares,” he stated.

Lara handed him the money and received a small slip of paper. “How long is this valid for?”

“Uno día,” he responded. “One day, until six o’clock. You are required to purchase another if you wish to stay any longer.”

Lara nodded as she tucked the receipt into her backpack. Glancing around, she noticed one of the guards give her an unpleasant look, and she hurried inside to escape the unwelcome attention. The park was closed for the day, but she was able to check into one of the hotels on site. It was old, made of wood planks, and showed signs of wear in the carpet and on the walls. Lara guessed it had housed thousands of tourists over the years.

A receptionist greeted Lara as she entered the small lobby. Lara smiled at the woman and took out more money from her backpack. "I'll need a room for three nights, please."

"Our largest is still available with a king-size bed, balcony, and large bath."

Lara shook her head. "The smallest is great, thanks. I doubt I'll be spending much time inside." She accepted a key from the woman and took the stairs to the second floor, where she found her room. "Lucky number seven," she noted wryly, unlocking the door. She entered the room and was pleased to see a twin bed and small bathroom; exactly what she had wanted.

Lara ran the water for a bath and unplaited her hair. Feeling grimy from the flight and the long, hot wait for the bus, she sank gratefully into the hot water. Resting her head on the back of the tub, she opened her notebook and was soon completely absorbed in the mystical realm of the Maya.

Just before six in the morning, Lara stepped from the hotel foyer doors and surveyed the area around her. Spider monkeys pierced the air with their shrieking and chattering. Screeching parrots welcomed the new day. A light layer of sparkling dew blanketed the ground. Lara closed her eyes and breathed in the heavy, moist air. She could already feel the heat from the rising sun, which she could see just above the trees. Bright, luscious greenery spread everywhere; everything seemed so alive and fresh.

It was hard to believe that only a few thousand years ago, this exact spot had been bustling with hundreds of thousands of people. Lara followed a small crowd of tourists to

the visitor's centre where she showed the guards her receipt for the days' stay and purchased a map. On her way out, she was stopped by one of the workers.

“¡Hola! My name is Juan and I am a translator here in Tikal. Would you be interested in hiring me for the day?”

Lara gave her map a little pat. “This trusty map isn't good enough?”

“For navigating, but not for giving you the full history of Tikal.”

“How much for the day?”

“Sixty-five dollars.”

“Forty-five.”

“Fifty-five.”

Lara considered. Should she bother with a tour guide when she had already researched the area? “Sure, let's go,” she said, handing him the cash. They started down the only trail leading to the ruins.

“So what is your name, and what brings you to Guatemala?”

“Lara. I've read about the ruins for quite some time. I've always wanted to visit.”

“Tikal is a fascinating place,” Juan said. “It actually wasn't discovered until 1948, and then researchers undertook an eleven-year study of the area.”

“How large is the whole park?”

“Over two hundred and twenty-two square miles, located in the middle of the Peten jungle.”

“What does Tikal mean, exactly?”

Juan scrunched his forehead into a frown. “Some say it means ‘at the reservoirs’, and others believe it is known as ‘the place of whispers’. It can’t be reservoirs. There aren’t any lakes or streams here.”

“Perhaps there are some spots that have yet to be discovered. I read somewhere that there are still hundreds of acres to be searched.”

“Absolutely! Tikal is enormous, still many ruins to be located, for sure. Just look at how long it took to uncover this section.”

“Where are we headed first?” Lara asked as she pulled out her map.

“Temple One, roughly fifteen minutes from here,” Juan answered.

Lara studied the map for a moment, confirming to herself that it was almost identical to the one she had examined prior to leaving for Guatemala. For the next little while, the two walked in silence. Lara guessed that Juan was in his early forties and had obviously worked in Tikal for many years. His Spanish accent was faint, perhaps from the lack of practice from chatting with tourists. He was native to the area, his tanned skin and dark hair putting him in the majority.

Few tourists walked along the pathway with them. It seemed as if they had the park to themselves. Lara gazed at the dense jungle surrounding them, amazed by the canopy the trees provided high above them. Beams of light penetrated sparse places, sending streams of brilliance from above. A light mist drifted through the air, glistening softly in the light. The trail they travelled was wet from the morning dew. Half a dozen spider monkeys continued to greet the day with their loud screeching. Lara watched intently as they swung from tree to tree, almost defying gravity.

The two continued southwest along the path, travelling deeper into the jungle. Shortly, the trees began to funnel inward, forcing them to walk in single file through the tight passage. Then, without warning, the tree line ended abruptly. Lara emerged out of the bush and into an incredible realm.

Juan extended his arms in front and toward the landscape situated before them. “Feast your eyes on this!”

Lara stepped slightly in front of him, eyeing the breathtaking environment. From where they stood, she had a clear view of two large temples. They stood among the lush landscape, one towering above the treetops. Vibrantly coloured toucans and many other tropical birds flew here and there, putting the finishing touches on the astounding scene.

Juan smiled at Lara. “The temple straight ahead is part of the East Plaza, which we will be visiting later, but we’ll be walking through there to get to Temple One.”

Ten minutes later, they arrived at the base of the temple, and Lara let out a small breath as she stared up at the magnificent structure.

“Photos don’t do this justice,” Lara murmured.

“You’re looking at the perfectly proportioned Temple One, also known as the Temple of the Great Jaguar.”

“It’s stunning,” Lara exclaimed.

“This temple was built around 700 AD, in solid limestone.”

Lara studied the temple with great interest. There looked to be at least one hundred steps to the top, none of which were accompanied by a handrail.

“This temple is one hundred and forty-five feet tall and faces Temple Two, directly in front of us.” Juan pointed to the farther temple, situated approximately a hundred meters away.

“There appear to be several terraces,” Lara noted, her head cocked upright.

“Nine,” Juan confirmed. “This number was said to be sacred to the Maya.”

Lara walked a few more feet toward the base, where several stone columns stood side by side, bearing peculiar inscriptions on them. “These are stelae, correct?”

Juan nodded. “They are scattered all around Tikal, you will see them everywhere. Most of them provide small tidbits of history relating to the temple they accompany.”

“Is this where its name was derived from?” Lara asked as she brushed her fingers over the symbols.

“No, it was discovered on a lintel at the top of the temple. I’ll show you it when we get there.”

Lara’s stare lay fixed on the stelae for another moment as she examined each symbol with fascination. Before she began the strenuous climb, she studied the temple from where she stood, trying to imprint every detail that she could into her mind. Tall, beautiful cecilia trees surrounded the back and sides of the complex. The structure itself was enormous, and Lara felt microscopic in comparison to its grandeur. From what she could see, the steps were quite wide, a fair warning to those who wished to venture up to the top. The temple, as Juan had pointed out, was perfectly proportioned. Not one side had one step too many or too few. Its silhouette, she imagined, would look flawless against a dusky background. Each subsequent step, starting at the top of the temple, jutted out the exact length as all the rest, creating an unblemished geometric frame. The

temple's only staircase lay situated down the front, precisely in the centre, which led to the open doorway, one hundred and forty-five feet above the sanctified ground.

Lara tightened the straps on her backpack before beginning the climb. Juan was several steps ahead, but she wasn't in any hurry to catch up. With each step she took, she felt a higher reverence for the ancient locale. The muscles in her legs flexed as she continued upward, soon falling into a natural rhythm. A light breeze wafted through the air, a welcomed comfort on her warm skin. The hot sun scorched her from behind, casting her shadow in front. She pressed on, never needing to stop for a break. Lara's constant and intensive training always kept her prepared for any strenuous activities she might need to execute on her travels.

Finally, she stepped onto the ninth platform of the temple. Juan stood beside her, pointing at the scenery that lay beyond. Slowly, she turned around and gazed at a completely surreal landscape. Lara's eyes overlooked the tops of many trees, a reminder to her of how high she was from the ground. Light patches of steam moved around stealthily, mystifying and beautiful. The loud screeching that had followed them earlier was now dull and barely audible.

"Take a look at this, Lara," Juan said.

She turned around and looked at a badly eroded carved image on the side of the door.

"The stelae below talked briefly about this. The seated man in this picture is a priest king." He pointed along the perimeter at other carvings. "You can see there are many snakes surrounding him. The stelae below hinted at them being boa constrictors, which were said to hypnotize their prey."

Lara moved in for a closer look and pointed at a few smaller engravings. “Are these scrolls?”

Juan nodded. “Unfortunately, the weather has destroyed most of this picture over the years. Those are indeed scrolls, but no one has been able to decipher their true meaning.”

“There’s something else here,” Lara observed, lightly brushing a finger on the picture. Small flakes of paint broke from the stone and fell in a soft shower to the ground.

“At one time this was painted in vivid red and white paint. It’s remarkable, really, that any still exists.”

Lara nodded in agreement and Juan turned to catch the breeze on his face and gaze at the scenery. Taking advantage of his turned body, Lara quickly retrieved from her backpack one of the many small glass bottles she had packed. She carefully scraped some of the paint flakes into one and tucked it away safely.

Juan turned back around to face her. “Take a look at this lintel,” he said, pointing to the wooden frame around the door. Strange symbols and pictures had been carved into the wood, perfectly preserved from the elements. One image, a jaguar, was the largest of the bunch, complete with large eyes and sharp claws.

“Are all the temple’s names carved into the doorways?” Lara asked.

“Not all of them. The majority of the names were discovered on monuments and a few on stelae.”

“In researching Tikal I came across a small tidbit of information about this temple,” Lara stated. “That researchers discovered a tomb under here.”

Juan grinned, nodding. “The tomb of Ah Cacaw, deep inside the bottom of the temple. Once a royal ruler in Tikal,” he added.

“I would love to see it,” she said, staring eagerly through the open door.

Juan extracted a few flares from his pack, handing her eight in total. “Some extras, in case you need them later.” They both lit the flares and entered through the door.

“Didn’t Ah Cacaw have another name?” Lara questioned.

“Yes. He also was known as Moon Double Comb but primarily was referred to as Ah Cacaw, which humorously means ‘Lord Chocolate’. He ruled here around 700 AD, according to the stelae. Cacaw was responsible for building the majority of the temples around the Great Plaza, the exact centre of Tikal.”

Lara moved her flare around the small room. “Are all of the temples like this?” she asked.

“Strangely enough, yes. Most of the temples are extremely high, their only room resting at the very top. Typically they were all used for observing the people below, and for astronomy purposes. The secret room below wasn’t discovered for a very long time, until one of the researchers accidentally found a weak spot on this wall.”

Lara swung the flare over to where Juan was standing and watched as he carefully pushed his hand on the wall. The limestone appeared to be sponge-like, retracting inward, effortlessly. A small rumble passed through the room, echoing off the walls and escaping out through the door. In the exact centre of the room, a small circle appeared as the floor shifted downward, revealing a small hole. Lara shone the light into the opening, illuminating an old ladder, carved out of rock. She couldn’t see much further as the darkness quickly consumed the glow.

“We rarely let visitors down here,” Juan stated. “For a few years we had actually closed down this temple altogether due to two deaths from people falling on the stairs.”

“I’m a big girl, I can do it.”

Juan laughed, taking off his hat and setting it on the floor beside him. “I can tell you’re eager to see the tomb. Please be very careful climbing down. It’s almost a one hundred foot climb. I’m going to stay up here, it’s safer to only have one person go down at a time.”

Lara crouched down and swung her legs into the hole. “Over and out,” she winked.

Juan took a seat on the floor and pulled out two canteens. He handed one to Lara, then propped himself against one of the walls for a quick rest.

Lara turned around, placing her feet on the first rung. With the flare in one hand, she began her descent using her free hand. She moved quickly, but cautiously as she climbed deeper into the long shaft. The ladder had been carved into the limestone walls, the footholds just the right depth. A thick layer of condensation seeped down the walls, causing Lara’s feet to slip every once in awhile.

Before she knew it, she was already fifty feet down the ladder. She paused for a moment to look up; the hole was barely visible. “Don’t you seal me in here, Juan,” she whispered as a small shudder passed through her. Memories from Egypt. She lit another flare and tossed the dead one below. She heard no noise of it hitting the bottom. In fact, she noticed there wasn’t any sound in the shaft at all. Dead silence gripped on tightly, refusing to let anything inside. The deeper she descended, the more quiet it seemed to become.

Lara continued downward, digging her boots roughly into the ladder. A strange smell greeted her when she finally reached the bottom, an unusual scent of growth and decay. "Don't tell me they left the body down here," Lara laughed to herself. She let go of the ladder and dropped to the ground. The air was full of moisture, making it somewhat difficult to breathe. A heavy feeling seemed to be pressing down on her. Was it the prodigious temple that loomed overtop of her? She took another look up the ladder and wasn't surprised to see complete darkness.

Lara was somewhere in the bottom half of the temple, only forty-five feet or so above the ground. She wasn't sure what was more daunting: knowing she was deep inside the nucleus of the temple that could crash around her at any second, or the thought of being locked inside. If Juan did trap her, she wouldn't be able to shoot out the ceiling. She had left her pistols at home. The distraction of her flare suddenly extinguishing erased the thought from her mind. She lit a new one, keeping a mental count of how many she had left. She moved it in front of her and it instantly illuminated a small hallway ahead. She proceeded down the passage, accompanied by the reflection of the flare, which danced brightly along the walls.

When Lara had reached the end, a circular door made of stone stood before her. An enormous jaguar face had been painted in the middle, the light from her flare catching its intimidating gaze. Instinctively, with her free hand she reached out, firmly pressing the picture. Without warning, a small lever holding the door released, rolling the door quickly out of the way.

Before her lay a large room, lit dully by four torches on each wall. Lara stepped slowly into the room and looked around. A thin layer of dust blew about softly under her

feet as she walked. The ceiling and walls, like the rest of the temple, were made of limestone. Extra time had been put into this room, she could see: both the walls and ceiling were perfectly smooth, an inverse to the outside of the temple. Lara ran her hand over its perfect surface, finding no flaws.

The torches were somewhat puzzling. How long had they been lit for? Surely one of the park's workers had been here early to light them for the day? Upon closer inspection, she proved herself wrong. The torches had been made out of bone, and judging from the craftsmanship, Lara estimated them to be hundreds of years old. The bone had some sort of substance inside, never allowing the flame to consume all of it. It almost looked as if the flame and substance were working together, refuelling each other over and over. Lara gazed at the flame as she reached for another bottle from her bag. She unscrewed the lid and grabbed a handful of dust from the ground. She threw it toward the flame on a slight angle. The flame went out, but it didn't leave behind any smoke. Carefully, she withdrew the bone piece from its place in the wall and slowly poured some of the opaque liquid into the bottle. She tightened the lid and put the bottle back in her pack. She walked over to another torch and lifted the bone piece to the flame. It was still about half full and the flame took to it instantly. She replaced the torch, and tossed aside her flare, the third one she had used.

Lara moved toward the centre of the room, where an old stone table lay. It was empty, the body of Ah Cacaw removed to a museum long ago. She rested a hand on top of the cool surface, gazing around the empty room. It was a different feeling for her, knowing she wasn't the first to discover the tomb...almost a first since she'd begun her

series of adventures. She walked around the table, looking for writing, but found none. Researchers had emptied the room, not leaving any of Cacaw's treasures or ornaments.

Just as she turned to leave, Lara noticed a small bump on the floor in the corner, perpendicular to where she had entered. She walked over to it and used her boot to gently tap the pile of sand. She felt her foot hit something hard. She bent down and used her hands to push away the dirt, uncovering a small wooden bowl. She rubbed the excess sand from it and inspected it near one of the torches. Apparently, the researchers hadn't searched the room too carefully. The bowl had several strange symbols painted on it, unrecognizable to her. Not wanting to leave the beautiful piece behind, she tucked it into her backpack. With one final look around, she left the room, the round door rolling back into place as she exited. She lit another flare, then proceeded to climb back up the ladder, one hundred feet to the top.

When Lara emerged from the hole, she was greeted by Juan who gave her a hand up. From the expression on his face, it looked as though he had woken from nap only moments ago.

"What did you think?" he asked.

"Absolutely incredible. A good workout on the legs."

"It's been suggested to put in an elevator," Juan laughed.

Lara smiled. "What was in the tomb when it was discovered?"

"Not much," he replied. "Ah Cacaw's perfectly preserved body, a few stone statues, one jade artefact, and the torches."

"Why weren't the torches removed?"

"Far too dangerous to move them, they didn't want to risk damaging them."

Lara nodded, placing one hand on a shoulder strap. “Simply amazing.”

Both of them exited the temple and stood at the top a moment before beginning the steep descent. Lara led the way down the stairs, happy to be back in daylight once again. The air was hot and the sound of piercing screams from birds filled the area once again.

“Temple Two next?” Lara called out, glancing behind her.

“Yes, it’s right in front.”

When they had both reached the ground, they headed across the small field to the next temple. It wasn’t as large as Temple One, but its presence was still authoritative among the jungle landscape. Similar to the first temple, this one was also built up of terraced pyramids, three in this case. Many trees surrounded the left side of the temple, almost as tall as the temple itself.

“Welcome to Temple Two, also known as the Temple of Masks,” Juan announced.

“I was almost expecting it to be a twin to Temple One,” Lara stated, “since they’re so closely positioned.”

Juan nodded. “There are similarities. This temple was dedicated to Ah Cacaw’s wife. Her body was never found, though inscriptions were able to give us some insight.”

When they had arrived at the bottom of the staircase, Lara noticed two large masks, high up on either side of the stairway at the third terrace.

“What do those masks represent?” she inquired.

“This building primarily served as a platform where priests could observe the people. However, on one of the lintels it is said it was also used as a religious building. The masks are supposed to represent the gods of rain, sun, corn, and wind.”

“Excellent,” Lara said. “Let’s go have a look.” She placed her foot onto the first step and looked back at Juan, who hadn’t moved.

“I’m going to wait this one out, Lara,” he said. “Going to take another rest, if you don’t mind. Climbing these stairs on a daily basis can get a little tiresome, and hard on the legs!”

Lara frowned slightly but nodded.

“The steps are more narrow than on Temple One so it’ll be an easier climb,” he called out.

Lara nodded again and began her ascent. She found it a bit peculiar and somewhat annoying that her guide, whom she had paid after all, kept sitting out, but she preferred to explore the temple alone. She was accustomed to searching tombs and other ancient cities by herself, and she welcomed another break. As she climbed the stairs, she guessed that the temple was around one hundred and twenty feet tall, only twenty-five feet or so shorter than Temple One. There wasn’t any debris on the steps, a clear indication of the amount of traffic the stairs saw on a day-to-day basis.

A film of sweat covered Lara’s body in the muggy air. As she climbed higher, she kept an eye on the masks near the top. They had been carved out of stone and were enormous, four feet tall at least. Great care had been taken while carving out detailed facial expressions and moulding the stone with their knives to create a sublime statue.

When she reached the top, she sat down on the last step, looking out at Tikal. She took several drinks of water from her canteen while enjoying the scenery. A brilliantly coloured parrot flew past, completely oblivious of her existence. The air was incredibly fresh where she sat, and possessed a scent unique she'd never smelled before. She still hadn't found any evidence as to why Tikal had been abandoned so long ago. Many spectators believed that all the surrounding waters had dried up and everyone died from dehydration. But no evidence was ever found to support this: theoretically thousands of bodies should have been scattered around Tikal.

Others believed that too many civil wars had broken out and eventually killed the entire population. Again, no bodies were discovered. Lara wasn't sure if she would be able to solve this mystery, but she was eager to see what she could find out. After swallowing another mouthful of water, she stood up and climbed the few remaining stairs to the top. The roof of the temple looked fairly similar to the first, but it had three block sections cut out, giving a look reminiscent of a castle. Like Temple One, Temple Two's doorway was also open and did not have a physical door to close off the entrance. Lara remembered reading that the remains of another ruler were discovered in a tomb among jade artefacts and carved bones, something Juan had neglected to inform her.

"So much for the history lesson," Lara said to herself sarcastically. She lit a flare and ventured into the small room. Hundreds of tiny pictures depicting various events from long ago decorated the walls. Lara skimmed over them, holding the flare close to illuminate the ancient work. One particular strip of images caught her attention. The pictures were accompanied by words, some of which she understood from her research. She crouched down, holding the flare only a few centimetres from the wall and studied

the writing. “Two souls...vocalizing in regular tones...Great Jaguar.” Lara rocked back onto her heels lightly as she pondered the message. Unfortunately, she wasn’t able to translate the writing in its entirety since some of its characters were foreign to her. She thought for a moment, but couldn’t recall coming across anything similar to this in her research. She took another look at the wall before getting back up.

Lara looked around the room but didn’t see anything else of interest. She felt along the walls with her hands, feeling for a soft spot, but was unsuccessful. She was certain that a tomb had been discovered in the temple, but how could she get to it? Nothing came to mind from her readings, just that one had been discovered. She peered out of the doorway, searching for any clues that might help her. Strangely enough, there wasn’t a lintel on this doorframe, so that wasn’t going to be of any help.

She turned around and exited through the doorway on the opposite side of the temple. Another set of stairs were carved into the side, an alternative route back to the ground. She sat down on the first step, facing west. She saw other temples ahead, one barely visible through the trees. Lara tossed her flare aside as it extinguished, then rested her hand on the step. Her fingers brushed up against something that was incredibly smooth, something out of the norm for being on the *outside* of the temple. She moved down a step and turned around, crouched on the stairs. A small, straight piece of rock protruded from the step, a push button of some sort. She placed her pointer finger on the tip of it and pushed it in gently. It receded inward quite smoothly, locking in place once it had been fully retracted. Something above in the room caught her eye. She stood up and noticed a large piece of the floor had risen out of the ground to reveal a tall rectangular hole on one side.

Excitedly, Lara climbed the two stairs and entered the room, pulling out a new flare, her sixth, as she neared the stone piece. She held it out in front of her and stuck it into the hole, illuminating a ladder leading into the belly of the temple.

“Surprise, surprise,” she grinned. Before climbing down, she took a quick peek out the door and saw Juan, quite miniature looking, sitting at a table with what looked like one of the park’s guards. She went back inside and began yet another descent.

To Lara’s surprise, the ladder was only about twenty feet long, a fraction of the size of the first one she had encountered. She dropped to the ground and proceeded down a short hallway. Just as she turned the corner, she stopped suddenly, noticing a slope in the floor. She stretched her arm forward as far as it could go, but the flare wasn’t bright enough to illuminate very far ahead. She took a quick glance around, ensuring she hadn’t missed anything. She flexed both ankles then jumped forward. “Down it is,” she called out as she landed on the slope, instantly catching her balance as she slid down the steep slant. The tunnel twisted left to right as she continued downward. Her flare flickered about wildly and her braid flapped behind her back. Lara maintained her footing as the slope continued to change, never stumbling for even a second. Hundreds of small paintings on the walls flew by. She held the flare up higher and admired the ancient work, catching brief glimpses of animals, trees, war scenes, and other intricate designs.

Her flare began to flicker, giving her a quick warning before it extinguished. She was so caught up in admiring the art that she didn’t react in time. She went to grab another when the slope took a hard right, sending her flying into a wall. She hit her side hard and fell roughly to the ground, landing on her back. She flung her arms out, trying to grab onto something, but the smooth walls offered no assistance. Lara somersaulted

forward, smashing her back into the next wall, and began to tumble down another slope. She slammed her face on the floor, grunting as a sharp pain reverberated through her body. Manoeuvring quickly, she managed to roll onto her back and slid down feet first. She whipped out a flare and ran it along the wall, a flame blazing to life just in time to illuminate another deadly turn ahead. Lara rolled onto her side and slid down, flare extended in her hand, her arms and legs burning as she continued downward. Just as she neared the turn, she pushed herself up and flew sideways toward the wall. She landed on the new slope, dead centre.

Lara grinned as she continued forward, this time on her feet. She rounded a few more corners before skidding to a long halt when she reached the bottom. She placed a finger up to her lip and wasn't surprised when she saw blood. Wincing, she stretched her back and noticed that the back side of her left arm had been badly scraped.

“No sightseeing on the way up,” she breathed. Lara tossed her flare aside and looked around the room. Several torches lined the walls, creating a warm glow. The room was rectangular in shape, and a large sarcophagus lay on a raised platform on the far end. A beautiful red rug had been laid as a walkway leading to the altar. Small bowls of incense lined the walkway, casting a multitude of fragrances into the air. Lara stepped onto the rug and proceeded slowly. Twisted ancient vines that had long dried up lay scattered around the perimeter of the room. Their shrivelled leaves looked as if they would burst into dust if anyone were to draw too near.

When she had reached the end, Lara placed her foot on the first step as she gazed around at the incredible splendour of the room. She swiftly climbed to the top and lay her hands on the lid of the sarcophagus. A strange feeling came over her suddenly, and she

turned around quickly. No one was there. Her eyes expertly scanned the room as she stood motionless, listening for any sounds. Satisfied there was nothing, she turned back around. She placed both hands on the lid again and pushed as hard as she could. The aged limestone slowly gave way, crumbling in places as she pushed the lid. She peered into the tomb, and to her surprise, nothing lay resting below. Instead, she could see that the sarcophagus had no bottom; it led to a small tunnel below the platform. A sharp, cold wind escaped into the room. Surely this led below ground, then. Lara took another quick look behind her before climbing into the tomb.

She lit her eighth and last flare as she made her way, crouching, through the tunnel. A sharp pain spread through her back, reminding her of her earlier route to the bottom of the temple. Loose dirt crunched beneath her as she shuffled forward, pushing aside the hanging roots of the vines above that had penetrated the ceiling. A thick smell of soil, together with a rotten odour of decay, filled her nostrils. She covered her nose with her free hand as she continued on, stepping over small pieces of broken bones.

Finally, Lara emerged from the tunnel into a new room where she was able to stand again. She was definitely under the temple, evident from the room's structure. Dirt walls surrounded her, filled with rotten roots and decaying pieces of matter. A single torch had been set into the ground, but it was unable to lift the heavy feel from the room. An enormous painting of a brilliant red, white, and black mask lay propped against the wall across from where she stood. It didn't appear to be very weathered; only a few bits of paint had worn off around the edges. Lara stepped forward to take a closer look.

A sudden snap made her jump back, and a heavy door crashed to the ground in front of her, blocking the painting. She stepped forward and then swiftly back flipped as a

second door slammed to the ground and a shower of dirt fell from the ceiling, covering her. She retreated once more, spitting a chunk of muck from her mouth.

“Lovely,” she snarled. She grabbed the torch and yanked it out of the ground. She walked around the now limited space and noticed three bricks of stone in one wall. Clearly out of place in the room, Lara was naturally drawn to them. She passed the torch in front, looking for any inscriptions. She found none. She hadn’t noticed the bricks when she first came in and was convinced they had appeared when the stone doors had fallen. Not one to ever leave a puzzle unsolved, she placed a hand on the first brick and pushed hard. The brick receded slightly, then sprang back into place. A huge rumble overtook the room as she heard the second door being lifted back into the ceiling. More dirt fell around her; this time she kept her mouth shut. She pressed the second brick and watched as it too sprang back. She looked over at the first door but nothing happened. Not having had time earlier, now she noticed there were symbols that had been carved into the stone. She walked slowly to the door, careful not to step too far ahead, holding the flare up beside her.

“Wind,” Lara whispered. She quickly returned to the bricks and pressed the third one. This time, an enormous rumble shook the room as the second door plummeted to the ground once again. More dirt poured from the ceiling, this time breaking off in several small chunks. The first door, late with its cue, retracted into the ceiling, revealing the second door beyond with a wind symbol etched into it as well. The room continued to shake. Small pockets of the ceiling began to give way as more dirt poured down.

Impatiently, Lara slammed her hand against the first brick again, instantly sending the last door into the ceiling. She ran forward through the almost knee-deep dirt and

debris to the painting. The mouth on the mask had opened, revealing a small jade stone. Not wasting another second, she snatched the precious stone and shoved it in her backpack as she ran from the room to escape the falling rubble. Mere seconds after re-entering the tunnel, the entire ceiling collapsed in the room, filling it with age-old dirt.

“Hope you closed your mouth, too,” Lara whispered, thinking of the strange mask as she crouched once again and began to move swiftly but blindly through the tunnel, feeling the walls. Finally she pulled herself out of the sarcophagus. She dropped onto the platform and let out a small breath.

“*Hey!*” a voice called out.

Lara’s head shot up. One of the park’s guards was running toward her. Armed with a pistol and an AK-47 strapped to his back, he made it quite clear that she was in trouble. He raised the pistol and fired several shots at her. Instinctively, Lara side flipped repeatedly, dodging the fatal bullets. Dirt flew in all directions from her body. The second she heard the click from the gun, she sprang forward into a full sprint. The guard fumbled with the gun, uttering in Spanish as he jammed in a fresh clip. Unfortunately for him, he was a little late.

“A tad bit too slow,” Lara sneered as she jumped forward, knocking him to the ground. He took a swing at her with his fist but missed as she moved out of the way. She yanked the pistol from his hand and whacked him on the head with it, knocking him out on the spot. Lara stood up and dragged him down the walkway and up and onto the platform. She rolled him onto his stomach and retrieved the spare clips for the pistol. Unable to conceal an AK-47 very easily, she withdrew its clips and left the gun behind. Lara rolled the guard back over and searched his pockets, extracting a few flares, a small

medi-pack, and a pocket knife. She gathered her new findings and added them to her backpack, except the medi-kit, and placed the jade piece she'd found earlier in a glass bottle. Then she dragged the body up to the sarcophagus and heaved it inside. It landed with a loud thud and a puff of dirt. She rounded the sarcophagus and pushed the lid back on top, giving it a pat when she was finished.

“Sleep tight,” Lara murmured and turned around, heading to the exit. She took a few wipes from the medi-kit and cleaned the small scrapes on her arm, a stinging sensation grabbing her for a few minutes as her arm absorbed the antibiotics. She wiped off the excess dirt still on her and continued to the door, where the sloped tunnel had ended. Lara sighed at the treacherous and challenging climb ahead of her, for the slanting floor was too steep and slippery to make with nothing to grab hold of. Scanning the tunnel to plan her method of ascent, she discovered that the ceiling had hand holds embedded in it. She smiled wryly. This was going to be one heck of a monkey climb.

Lara tightened the straps on her backpack and ensured it was secure. She pulled her black fingerless gloves tightly over her hands and flexed her fingers in preparation for the affair. She had four flares left, the ones she'd grabbed from the guard. Would they be enough? It would be almost impossible to light a new one once she had begun the climb, and there weren't any spots to rest along the way. Only one way to find out...

Lara positioned herself and lit a flare, tucking it under one of the straps on her boots. With one swift jump, she caught hold of the first handle in the ceiling and began to move forward, one arm after the other, legs swinging for added momentum. The flare added just the right amount of light to see where she was going. The ceiling sloped

upward at an extreme angle. Lara reached the first turn and didn't stop for a second. She continued up the next section, moving now at a comfortable and rhythmic rate.

Her flare flickered softly as she swung her legs back and forth. Not stopping for any sightseeing along the way, she was making good progress. She moved along flawlessly, never slowing for a moment. When she was about halfway up, her flare began to die. She grunted as she forced herself to go faster and rounded another corner before it died. Darkness instantly overtook the tunnel, consuming the last of the light the flare had provided. A small pain formed in her throat — not of fear, but of annoyance. She pressed on, slowing herself down to feel for the handles. A small burning sensation had formed at the base of her back and was rapidly creeping toward her shoulders. Her neck felt tight from looking up at the ceiling. Her fingers ached and threatened to cramp up, begging for a break.

Lara clenched her teeth as she swung higher and higher, kicking her legs. Worried she wasn't going to have enough strength to make it to the top, she stopped, tightened her right hand as hard as she could at her current position, and hung perfectly straight. Gingerly, she let her left hand go, and felt the brunt of her weight shift entirely to her right side. With extreme care and her usual flexibility, she reached into her backpack and withdrew a new flare. She struck it against the wall and welcomed the flame with a small smile. The next part could be a little trickier. Slowly, Lara lifted her left leg, bending her knee. Her right arm began to shake as it lost strength. She slipped the flare in between her boot and one of the straps, then shot her arm back to the ceiling. She felt a huge sense of relief pass through her right side and rested only a moment before beginning her climb again.

Finally, making sure that she had fully cleared the top of the slope before letting go, Lara allowed herself to drop down to the floor. She sat with her back against the wall, breathing heavily, facing the slope with her knees bent in front of her. She pulled both flares out from the sides of her boots and tossed them forward. She watched them instantly descend, making their way deep into the tomb.

Lara leaned back again and took her canteen from her pack. Without bothering to light another flare, drank the rest of the water without taking a single breath. She breathed heavily when she was finished, stuffed the canteen back in her bag and took out her second last flare. Standing again, she lit it as she continued down the hallway to the ladder. As before, she secured it to the side of her boot and began the final climb.

Lara made her way down the side of the temple, busily forming a variety of scenarios to explain her lengthy visit to Temple Two. Luckily for her, she found Juan fast asleep at the table, completely oblivious of her extended trip. She sat down across from him and put her canteen on the table. Within a few minutes, his eyes slowly fluttered open as he regained consciousness.

“Lara!” he cried out, startled. “How long have you been waiting? I am so sorry.”

She leaned back and stretched her arms. “Not a problem, Juan, I wanted to make sure you had a nice nap. I *am* out of water, though,” she said, giving the canteen a little nudge.

Juan checked his watch and got up from the table. “We have enough time to go to the East Plaza before calling it a day. It’s on the way back, only a five-minute walk.”

Lara grabbed her canteen and followed Juan. They walked across the field of well-kept grass to a small area filled with various sweat baths and a market. Many

workers fluttered about, fussing over their carts of items for sale. Lara meandered among the shops for a little while, but didn't find anything of interest.

It was late evening when Lara parted ways with Juan, promising to hire him for the next day. She went back to her hotel room, shrugged off her backpack, and flopped onto her bed. One of the hotel staff had left several bottles of water in a small ice bucket, which she happily drank, all except one, keeping it to pour in her canteen the next morning. Since Tikal didn't have any bodies of water — lakes, streams, or even ponds — she wasn't sure where she could get water while she was exploring, and she didn't want to be without.

Before anything else, Lara drew the curtains and made sure her door was locked. Satisfied she would remain unwatched, she arranged the pillows on her bed and sat propped up against them as she extracted the glass bottles from her backpack. The first bottle contained the red and white paint flakes she had taken from Temple One. She held it up to the light and studied them for a moment. The second bottle contained the strange fluid that was used for the torches, also from Temple One. She turned it around a couple of times, noticing tiny gold specs floating in the liquid.

She saved the best for last: the bottle containing the jade stone from Temple Two. Lara unscrewed the lid and dropped the stone into her hand. She held it up in front of her and smiled. It was only about an inch and a half tall, but it was absolutely remarkable. It was in mint condition, and its light blue-green colour was not faded in any way. Lara turned it over and noticed a strange set of markings etched into the stone: `.._.._.._`
Intrigued but exhausted, she gathered the artefacts and placed them in the bowl she had

found in Temple One. She set the bowl on her bedside table and headed to the shower to wash off the dust and grime from the day.

Clean and refreshed, Lara sank beneath the covers of her bed, eager for the night to pass so she could continue her search of Tikal.

The thought of towering pyramids looming above Tikal's dense jungle, filled with ancient mysteries and priceless artefacts, flowed through Lara's head as her eyes began to open. A thin stream of light shone through the window between the drawn curtains and across her bed, carrying a wave of tiny particles.

Lara shoved back the covers and hurriedly dressed to prepare for the day's adventure. She carefully tucked all of the precious objects she had found the day before in her backpack. She grabbed her canteen and carried it outside, where she met up with Juan once again.

"¡Hola!" he exclaimed when he saw her.

"¡Hola," she smiled, greeting him with a warm handshake.

"Ready for another day of tombs and temples?" he asked.

Lara nodded and reached inside her bag for money. She counted out the same amount as the day before and handed it to him.

"No, no," Juan said, looking at the money. "I'll give you a deal today!" He took twenty dollars and handed the rest back to her. "Save some for souvenirs," he said, smiling.

They made their way down the same pathway they'd taken the day before, passing through the thick jungle. Beautiful brightly coloured toucans flew among the

trees with deafening squawks, picking at berries and seeds. Hundreds of tiny leaf-cutting ants scurried around their feet, racing to the other side of the path with miniscule pieces of leaves in their mouths. Lara took a deep breath of the pure air and pulled out her map.

“Where are we headed first?” she asked.

Juan pointed to a spot on the map. “Temple Three. You might have seen the tip of it through the trees when we were at Temple Two. It’s southwest from here, fifteen minutes or so.”

Lara studied the map for a moment before returning it to her bag. They followed the same route again, passing through the East Plaza, then past Temples One and Two. A tall temple loomed out from the trees deep in the jungle, and a heavy fog wafted about the edge of the tree line, seeping inward through the forest. As they walked, Lara couldn’t help but ponder the strange markings on the jade piece she had found.

Juan pointed ahead. “We’re almost there. Just through this part of the forest.”

They continued until they had reached the tree line. They walked single file down a narrow path that had been trampled by many visitors. The earth was uneven where vines had started to regrow. Large trees towered high above them, creating a flawless canopy, and large green plants covered the jungle floor, thick and vibrant. Monkeys swung from branch to branch in their playground of unlimited space.

They approached the clearing a few moments later, and there Lara beheld in wonder the highest, most majestic temple she had seen in Tikal thus far. Its exterior was the same as the rest of the temples: rough limestone, weathered all around. Small designs, faces and holy figures, had been carved all over. Thick, vibrant green vines grew around

the entire temple, hugging the limestone tightly. Lush moss had overgrown a great portion of the structure, giving it a truly unique and untouched feel.

A spectacular green bird perched on one of the vines, busily eating small insects on the side of the temple. The bird bore long green and white tail feathers, a bright green head with a mixture of yellow feathers on top, a yellow beak, and a warm red chest. Juan noticed Lara admiring the unfamiliar bird and stepped beside her.

“That is a resplendent quetzal, Guatemala’s national bird.”

“It’s beautiful,” she said, and not for the first time, she wished she’d brought a camera. Winston would have loved to have seen this.

Lara followed Juan around the base of the temple to the front. Unlike the others, no stairs led to the top. “Welcome to the one-hundred-and-eighty-foot Temple Three,” Juan said. “This temple was said to have been built around 810 AD and is one of the more peculiar-shaped temples in Tikal. As you can see, from its side it almost looks like a giant staircase, instead of the pyramid-type shapes we’ve been seeing.”

Lara stepped up to a large sculpture situated at the base of the temple. The statue represented a man who wore some sort of ancient-looking mask, his hands down at his sides. Large circles had been carved out of the stone to form his eyes. Two smaller holes had been carefully dug out to form his nostrils, and two lines formed his lips.

“This is a sculpture of the god Chaac, the god of water,” Juan informed her.

“What did the Maya do to retrieve water?” Lara asked. “There aren’t any streams in Tikal.”

“In some temples and palaces there are underground storage chambers, shaped like bottles. They’re called chultuns, and rainwater that was collected was stored inside.

Many people believe that the prolonged droughts could have played a large factor in the collapse of the Maya civilization.”

“Was there any water in any of the ones that were discovered?”

“None. Dry as a bone.”

“Are we able to go inside the temple?” Lara asked, eyeing the vines with interest.

“There’s no way to the top anymore. The ladder doesn’t go all the way. It’s too dangerous. No one ever goes up.”

Lara smiled and bent down to tighten the laces on one of her boots. “No one?” she challenged, raising an eyebrow.

Juan shook his head. “Only an empty room at the top, nothing to see, really.”

Lara shrugged and walked around to the right side of the temple. An old wooden ladder lay hanging from several vines. Pieces of rope had been secured around the small wooden planks and were fastened to several vines. She grabbed a hold of the first rung and pulled herself up. With each climb, the ladder wobbled and twisted beneath her. Lara held fast to it to prevent it from pushing her off. She took a quick peek below and saw Juan keeping a close eye on her.

Once she neared the halfway point of the temple, she arrived at the end of the ladder. For whatever reason, they hadn’t completed it to the top, leaving her with two options: climb back down, or embrace the vines and finish the climb. Never one to give up on a challenge, Lara grabbed the closest vine and assumed a tight grip on it. She pulled down on it roughly, and once she was satisfied that it would hold her weight, she hoisted herself higher and off the ladder. She pressed the bottoms of her boots flat against the side of the temple, and pushed her body out from the wall, assuming a wall-climbing

stance. With both hands holding tightly to the vine, Lara continued her climb up the side of the ancient temple.

She took a short break to look around at the incredible scenery. She was over one hundred feet above the ground, entrusting a single vine with her life. Her boots sunk into the moss that covered the temple, scaring small insects out of the way as she climbed. Behind her, the thickness of the trees, filled with spider monkeys and songful quetzals, now hid Juan, who waited far below. Lara grabbed hold of another vine and wrapped the end tightly around her wrist for extra support. She climbed higher, digging her heels into thick, dishevelled patches of moss. The air suddenly became cooler as she rose above the treetops. The landing of the temple was in sight now, only ten feet or so more to go. She pulled on another vine and it snapped instantly, breaking free from the wall. Lara cried out as her hands slipped free and her feet stumbled down the rock.

Her body fell backward and her arms sprawled in all directions. Just as she began to plummet, she kicked up her right leg and rammed her toe up and behind a network of vines, catching her foot. Her body slammed down hard, a large jolt passing through her as she stopped instantly in her free fall. Lara hung upside down over one hundred and seventy feet above the jungle floor. Her right leg was perfectly taut above her, the other bent slightly over her head. For a moment, she held still, breathing slowly. A monkey stared at her from a nearby tree, cocking his head sideways while chattering quietly to himself.

“You make it look too easy,” she muttered. She lifted her head slowly to examine her predicament and pursed her lips when she noticed there weren’t any vines within reach. The only one within close proximity was the vine she currently hung from — a

risk to try and pull herself up to. A slight slip of the boot and she wouldn't have a hope. Of course, trying to place her other foot under the vine might loosen it from the wall too much.

Lara looked back at the monkey with a solemn look on her face. "Any ideas?" The monkey lifted his lips and made a face. She snickered and began to pull herself upward, using only her abdominal muscles. Pressing her arms to her sides, she pulled her upper body, vertebra by vertebra, so she was perpendicular to the wall. A sudden shriek rang out as the monkey leapt from the tree toward Lara. He landed on the side of the temple and grabbed hold of the vine from which she precariously hung. Instantly, she swung her arms out to keep her balance. The monkey chattered quietly while peering at her intently with his small eyes. His prehensile tail grasped the vine only inches from her boot as he grabbed a handful of insects above him and shoved them into his mouth. The few remaining bugs scurried between the moss, seeking immediate protection. Finishing his snack, the monkey returned his attention to Lara.

"Not going to try and push me off, are you?" she said, cocking her head.

The monkey uttered a few more peculiar sounds before it leapt upright, grabbing hold of another vine several feet above her. He swung back and forth, dangling from the thick woody-stemmed plant, keeping a close eye on her. He grabbed another vine beside him that had grown in a long curl. Slowly, he worked the vine from the wall, releasing it from the hold of overgrown moss. Once it was free, he let go, and dropped the vine down beside her.

Lara raised her eyebrows. "Thanks," she said. She eyed the vine, gauging its toughness, and carefully grasped it. Giving it a firm tug, she was confident that it would

hold. She wrapped it around her arm a few times before carefully unhooking her foot. Her legs fell and she held fast to the vine. She quickly assumed a climbing position once again and gave the monkey a wink before resuming her ascent.

Reaching the top without further incident, Lara swung one leg onto the platform, pulled herself up, and rolled further inward. She stood up and breathed out, revelling in the warm feeling that swept through her body as her muscles began to relax. She stretched both arms above her head and bent her legs up to her chest.

The view from where she stood was incredible, a truly spectacular bird's eye view of Tikal. Thick patches of mist rose from the treetops, flooding through the dense jungle. She could see Temple One and Two at a distance among the overgrown landscape. Several toucans eyed her from nearby branches, scratching their bills on the rough bark. The monkey that had assisted Lara popped up suddenly from the side and clambered onto the terrace level. He rolled around playfully, glancing at her every once in awhile. Lara smiled and turned to face the small entrance to the temple, and the lintel over the door. Small patches of thin moss had crept in and out of the cracks of the wooden support, giving the doorframe a sense of life and regrowth. On closer inspection, Lara noticed several intricate lines where an image of a woman had been etched into the aged wood.

Lara's eyes followed along the length of the doorframe, studying the image. The woman was completely clothed in a long, majestic jaguar skin. The intricacies of the skin were stunning and carefully constructed on the frame. Lara walked through the narrow doorframe into a tiny room. A single bench occupied the majority of the space, a small block of stone that barely showed any signs of erosion. She took a seat on the cool bench facing the door.

From where she rested, Lara could vividly imagine the view as if it were nighttime. Like most of the temples in Tikal, Temple Three was no exception for being a perfect astronomy lookout. She had a clear view in front; there weren't any trees in the way. The longer Lara stared out at the landscape, the more she viewed it differently. The haze seemed to dance through the air, resembling soft waves in the ocean. From inside the temple, it appeared almost as though she was sitting in an alcove at the bottom of a waterfall.

Suddenly, the monkey darted into the room, lifting Lara out of her trance. Chattering, he hopped up onto the stone next to her. "I know," she said, "I owe you a favour for helping me back there, but I don't have any food with me."

The monkey pushed his lips into a large pout and covered his eyes. When Lara didn't react, he opened his mouth and stuck his fingers inside, letting out a small wail. She shook her head, unaware of what the small creature wanted. She took out her canteen and swallowed a few mouthfuls of cool, refreshing water. The invigorating liquid moistened her dry throat and helped cool her off a little.

Lara felt a slight tug and she jerked her head to the side to see that the sneaky monkey had taken the small bowl from her backpack. "Hey!" she exclaimed, motioning to take it back. He jumped to the ground, holding tightly to his new prized possession.

Lara shrugged her shoulders. "All right, you can have it." She double checked that her bag was secure. She didn't want him taking anything else she had found.

The monkey set the bowl down in front of him very carefully, and stared up at Lara intently. Just as his bottom lip began to creep outward, she bent over and poured

some water into the bowl. He shrieked with joy and grabbed the bowl, drinking the water down in seconds.

“Ah,” Lara nodded, “that’s what you wanted.” She poured the rest of her canteen into the bowl, happy to be helping him out. So far she hadn’t come across any water reservoirs and didn’t mind trading her small portion for the invaluable help he had provided earlier. She stood back up and looked around at the walls of the room. Strangely enough, there weren’t any drawings or paintings on them; they were bare limestone. Lara tilted her head up and gazed at the ceiling, which had several small cut-outs that formed a small circle. Without warning, the monkey jumped onto Lara’s leg and scurried up and onto her shoulder. Uncertain of what he had in mind, she slowly reached toward her backpack for the pistol she’d taken from the guard the day before.

Luckily for her, the monkey had other plans. He wrapped his long tail around her arm and stretched himself toward the ceiling. In his mouth he carried the small bowl, which he turned upside down and pushed into the circular cut-out. It fit perfectly. Once it was in place, he jumped to the ground and ran outside. She looked up at the bowl and peered at it as it slowly began to turn around and around. Just when she thought there wasn’t any point to the procedure, it stopped. She squinted her eyes as a small hole gave way in the centre of the bowl. A thin stream of water began to seep through the hole, eventually dropping a small silver key.

The shiny key fell onto the stone bench, making a small *clang* as it hit. Lara looked back up at the bowl, which had miraculously healed its wound. Lara picked up the token and examined it carefully. A minute replica of the god of water sculpture she’d seen earlier had been recreated on the key. On the flipside was a small engraving: .

The bowl suddenly released from the ceiling and fell to the ground. Lara picked it up and walked back outside in amazement. The small monkey sat in the middle of the platform, as if waiting for her. She bent down in front of him and held out the bowl.

“Here, you can keep this,” she said.

He accepted the small dish and chattered at her. He scurried back inside the temple and sat on the bench, licking the small amount of water that had collected on the stone. With one final look to confirm there was nothing else to explore, Lara secured the key in her backpack and made her way to the side of the platform. She sat down on the edge and let her legs overhang the luscious green wall. Ensuring she had selected a strong vine, she swung herself around and began her long descent.

Juan gave Lara a pat on the back once she had made it to the bottom of the temple. She smiled at him, pulling out her empty canteen.

“Impressive!” he exclaimed. “Did you make it to the top?”

Lara nodded, looking back at the temple. “That’s quite a climb after you run out of ladder to use.”

“Most people don’t do it, of course. But the view is incredible after dusk, seeing the light spread throughout the bottom half of the trees,” Juan added.

“Are we going to Temple Four next?”

“Yes, and we’ll be passing by the Palace of the Windows along the way. We’ll hit that spot on the way back.”

Lara checked her map as they began to trek away from the temple, giving one last look at the monstrous wonder. The two continued northwest toward the next temple, on a narrow, trampled path that enabled them to move at a comfortable pace. As they walked,

Lara mentally went through the inventory in her backpack. The key she had just retrieved had spiked her curiosity. She hadn't read anything about the concealed key during her research. While the picture of the god of water would have had a spiritual meaning to the Maya, what did the symbol on the back represent and, most importantly, what did the key fit into? Unfortunately, she would have to wait a while longer to find out.

"Lara!" Juan whispered suddenly. He pointed ahead of them at a small puma that occupied the pathway.

Lara stopped instantly and reached for her backpack.

"Don't move," Juan whispered, freezing in his tracks. "Tikal is full of puma but they rarely bother anyone if you leave them alone."

Lara eyed the tawny-coloured cat, meeting its gaze. Its sharp eyes pierced back, gleaming among the dark foliage. Without blinking or making a single sound she crept forward in a stealth position, never losing eye contact with the wild animal.

"Lara!" Juan insisted through clenched teeth.

Ignoring his plea, she continued forward, inching her way closer to the cat. It hissed suddenly, bearing a full set of razor-sharp teeth. Unmoved by its threat, Lara pressed on, only a few feet from the animal. A low growl bubbled in its throat but the cat remained where it was. A split second later, it took off at full speed, deep into the surrounding jungle.

Juan let out a huge sigh from behind her and wiped his brow. He took off his hat and looked up at her in disbelief.

"How much further now?" Lara asked, without a hint of worry in her voice.

“Not long, just around the bend ahead of us,” Juan replied. He gave her a questioning look.

Lara turned back around and led the way along the remaining portion of the path. She kept a close eye on the area around her, on lookout for any other small nuisances. As they turned left along the bend, they could see the Palace of the Windows through the thick forest. Within minutes, they entered another clearing, leading to Temple Four.

“Now *this* is impressive,” Lara stated, placing her hands on her hips.

Juan stepped up next to her and nodded slowly. “Welcome to Temple Four, Temple of the Double-Headed Serpent, the *tallest* in all of Tikal.”

Lara tilted her head back and shielded her eyes from the sun as she scanned the temple before her.

“Towering to an extreme height of two hundred and twelve feet, this is the optimal site for viewing Tikal.”

“When was it established?” she asked, gazing at the remarkable structure.

“Roughly 741 AD. From the highest point, you can pretty well see the tops of all the temples. The discovery of this temple was a huge milestone in locating other temples and palaces when Tikal was first excavated.”

Lara walked toward the temple, which was also largely overgrown by vines and patches of moss. Several stelae lined the ground at the base. She visited them first. The ancient stone columns bore commemorative inscriptions like the ones she had seen earlier. However, one difference she noted instantly was that the stones seemed to have a red tinge to them.

“Were these painted at one time?” she turned to Juan.

He shook his head and rested one of his arms on top of the slab. “Not with paint – with blood. The Maya were very spiritual, conducting rituals to their gods, most of which involved human sacrifice.”

Lara took a step over to the next column. “Why cover the stelae with blood?”

“These ones display writings and pictures of the temple. Its name was derived from these, and not surprisingly, small serpents have been etched into every single stele here. Snakes were sacred to the Maya, so to splash blood on these monuments would have been a normal ritualistic event.”

“Incredible how after two thousand years the rain hasn’t been able to wash away the stains,” Lara observed. She walked by the remaining stelae then proceeded to the base of the temple. A grin swept over her face.

“I guess they finally grew tired of endless vine climbing,” she said, looking at the obvious route before her.

Juan chuckled. “Wooden ladders and stairs all the way to the top, something I can definitely do.”

Lara led the way up the steep staircase. Several areas on the steps had eroded away over the years, leaving small holes and debris, unlucky to anyone who wasn’t watching their footing. The thick jungle loomed around the temple, providing a blanket of safety and privacy. A light layer of condensation rested atop the steps, glistening in small droplets among the green foliage. On every few steps were carvings of serpents and various leaders of Tikal. Moss and fungus had long invaded the designs, adding a pleasant colour to the dark limestone.

The hot sun penetrated deep into their skin from above as the two climbed the extreme slope of the temple. Finally, they reached the top platform. Lara walked around the level, looking out at an immaculate panoramic view across Tikal's jungle canopy. Bountiful stands of zapote and ceiba trees seemed to go on for miles, breaking rarely to allow a select few temples to peak their heads above the tree line. Mystic scents drifted across the site, riding in the glistening, soft mist.

“Over here is the largest patch of ramon trees,” Juan said, pointing to the right side, past the temple. “The Maya made the ramon fruit a large part of their diet. And on the other side are many mahogany trees. The bark was used to create medicine.”

Lara surveyed their surroundings, amazed at how different the view was from temple to temple. From where she stood, all of Tikal was visible. No one knew for sure just how many other temples there were yet to be discovered among the immeasurable jungle.

“Looks like we have a visitor,” Juan pointed out, nodding toward a small grey fox that had appeared from inside the temple. The small animal was harmless, simply taking a peek to see what company it had. It sauntered around the platform and began to climb down the temple stairs.

“Ready to go inside?” asked Juan.

“Absolutely!”

Juan paused at the door momentarily, pointing up at the lintel. Long, thick serpent drawings had been etched into the frame, two of which met in the exact centre, face to face. “I forgot to mention an interesting fact about the lintels,” he said. “Fragrant sap is extracted from these which is used to make bubblegum.”

Lara smiled as she eyed the depiction, wondering if it held more symbolic meaning than representing the name of the temple. She entered through the door behind Juan. Unlike the other temples, the room they entered was quite large. Like Temple One, a few torches lined the walls, providing just enough light to pierce through the darkness the walls entombed.

Juan extended an arm in front toward a raised circular platform in the middle of the room. Two large snake sculptures lay on the platform, each approximately four feet in length. They had been positioned very precisely: their eyes, made out of shiny black matter, reflected the torch light. They seemed alive, the bright orange flames dancing about wildly in their pupils. Their bodies had been sculpted out of limestone and had been painted a bright red and white. Small rings pierced the nostrils and long beaded necklaces stretched the length of their bodies.

“These have been a mystery since the temple was discovered. Many researchers have repeatedly searched the stelae below the temple for some sort of an explanation, but have been unsuccessful.”

“Perhaps they were used in ceremonies. This *is* the tallest temple in Tikal, so symbolically it has the highest reverence.”

“You’re quite right, and the stained stelae below can almost prove that.”

“Are those the original beads?” Lara asked, bending down for a closer inspection.

“Yes,” Juan smiled. “Dried fruit strung on desiccated pieces of vine. No one has ever touched them, and surprisingly there is no evidence that any animals have been near them, either.”

Lara placed her hands on her hips as she studied every inch of the sculpture. It seemed so simple, yet she sensed it held or possessed some deeper meaning. She began to walk around the platform, her eyes riveted on the snakes, which appeared to be identical and did not contain any visible flaws. She circled the room twice before stopping, unable to see anything out of the ordinary. She glanced at the torches in the room and paused.

“It has to have something to do with the light,” she said aloud.

“What’s that?” Juan asked.

“Their eyes...they seem to be the main focus. It has to be something to do with them. And notice how there are only two torches?” She pointed around the room, her back to the doorway. “One on the left wall, perfectly centred, and one straight ahead, but off-centred, to the right. Why not have a torch on the right wall, or one even on the short part of the wall near the door?”

Juan shrugged his shoulders. “I’ve never thought about that.” He paused for a moment, a blank expression on his face. “Why, what are you thinking?”

Lara opened her mouth to answer but had second thoughts. “Just seems odd that they weren’t consistent with the layout, that’s all.”

Juan shook his head. “Perhaps the different time in which it was constructed compared to the other temples.”

Lara turned around and exited through the open door back onto the platform.

“Ready to hit one more spot for the day?” Juan asked, emerging beside her.

Lara nodded. “Palace of the Windows?”

“Yes, just off the path we took to get here.”

He started down the steps and Lara took one last look behind her at the peculiar sculpture. She followed Juan down the steep side, paying attention to the small gaps on the steps. The fox they had seen earlier had decided to take a rest and was sprawled on one of the steps in the sun. A few more had ventured to the temple while she and Juan had been inside and were slowly making their way up the stairs, giving them nonchalant looks.

Back on the path, they continued down southeast toward the palace. As it slowly came into view through small patches in the dense forest, the canopy above them seemed to grow thicker, casting dark shadows down below. The air grew still and sounds were stifled. Within a few short minutes they emerged into the small clearing that surrounded the palace. Unlike the vast temples they had already visited, this palace was only two storeys high.

“Welcome to the first palace in Tikal,” Juan stated. “Palace of the Windows, also sometimes referred to as the Bat Palace. This one is particularly interesting because of its interior. Many people have actually died in this one, and you’ll see why once we get inside. As you can see it’s two storeys high. The upper one is almost completely ruined from severe weathering. We won’t go all the way up.”

Lara followed Juan into the palace and up a steep staircase through a tunnel that led to the only room inside. No torches lit the way and they walked in the dark up the old, crumbly stairs. Juan lit a flare and cautioned Lara to stay close in order to avoid the cracks on the stairs as they made their way. They emerged out of the tunnel onto a large platform. Three torches lined each wall. The ceiling was beautiful; pictures of animals

and faces covered the space in its entirety. The flickering of the fire gave life to the engravings, aiding to the remarkable piece of art.

“Here’s what I was talking about before,” Juan said. He walked closer to the edge of the platform, which had a wooden guardrail on all sides, and pointed below. An enormous black hole greeted Lara’s eyes as she peered downward. Only a handful of torches lined the walls on the way to the bottom, making it incredibly difficult to see exactly what lay beneath them.

“And the bottom?” Lara questioned as she squinted to try and focus her vision.

“Razor-edged spikes that skewer then shred anyone or anything that comes into contact. Nasty things. Very out of the ordinary for the Maya to build something like this.”

“Perhaps it was another form of ceremonial practice?” Lara asked, placing a hand on the rail and looking over.

“Yes,” he nodded, “but like Temple Four, no one has been able to locate any writings about it. Yet another one of Tikal’s mysteries!”

Lara took one last look around before exiting the room and heading back to the staircase. Once they had left the palace and were back outside, Juan pulled out his canteen and took a long drink.

“That’s it for today, Lara,” he said, wiping a small drop of water from his chin. “Tomorrow we’ll visit two more temples and two plazas, and that will conclude the tour of Tikal.”

Lara nodded with a small smile on her face. “I’m looking forward to it. Tikal is absolutely fascinating, full of puzzles and mysteries, something I’m particularly fond of.”

As they both continued east along the Tozzer Causeway, they discussed more about Tikal and the places they had already visited.

“I bet you’ve been wondering when you’re going to see the work of the intricate Maya calendar?” Juan asked, grinning.

“I had a feeling it would arise at some point.”

“Tomorrow we’ll be taking a look at some. Absolutely fascinating at how accurate they were with dates and times and future predictions.”

“Can always learn from the past,” Lara answered. “I can’t wait to see it.”

They headed back toward the park entrance and parted ways once they had arrived. Lara visited a small store beside her hotel and purchased another canteen for the next day. She also bought ten key chains that had a variety of photos from Tikal on them. The worker Lara paid grinned when he noticed how many she was buying. “Great souvenirs,” she stated and smiled back.

When Lara arrived at her room she took the time to eat a delicious meal she had purchased in the lobby. She washed it down with icy cold water from the numerous bottles of water that were in her ice bucket, then locked her door. She pulled a blanket from her bed and laid it on the floor. To help illuminate her work space, she picked up the small lamp from the bedside table and placed it on the floor as well.

Sitting cross-legged beside the blanket, she removed all of the items she had discovered and spaced them out with care onto the blanket. She organized them by when she had found them: Temple One: paint flakes and fluid from the torches; Temple Two: jade stone; Temple Three: silver key. When she had talked with Juan earlier about the Maya calendar system, suddenly one of the pieces had made sense — the jade stone. She

picked it up and examined it once again. The light from the lamp lit up the stone, its colour bright and unique. On the back, $_._._._.$ had been etched into it and Lara now understood why. It was so simple. She took her journal from her backpack and flipped to the page on which she had written facts about the calendar system.

Different from the Gregorian calendar, which was adopted in 1582 and still used in the present day, the Maya calendar was based on the Long Count. While the Gregorian calendar consists of various parts — millennium, century, decade, year, month, and day — the Maya calendar was composed of the bakton, katun, tun, uinal, and kin. Essentially, dates were written out as a series of five numbers, one in each of the categories. Each category limited how high a number placed in it could go. Each number was separated by a period, separating the bakton from the katun, and so on.

The jade stone Lara had in her possession was virtually a blank calendar: no numbers had been filled in. Without any numbers, the stone was fairly useless. It didn't contain any other clues. She placed it back on the blanket and picked up the key next. Considering she had found it at Temple Three, Temple of the Jaguar Priestess, which housed the god of water sculpture, she was fairly confident that the key opened one of the chultuns, the underground facilities in which the Maya had collected rainwater. She turned the key over to reveal the symbol of the two bars and three dots: . Lara flipped through her journal to where she had copied down the symbols the Maya used for their numbers. Sure enough, it matched up, and was the number thirteen.

“Lucky,” Lara murmured. “Maybe they locked it up for a good reason.” She extracted the ten key chains from her backpack and removed the rings from each one. Linking them, she created a small chain that was two rings thick by five rings long. In

case she had to do anymore climbing, she wanted some sort of support, and something was better than nothing. She packed the chain in her bag with the rest of the things she'd laid out and decided to call it a night. She carefully hid the pack under the covers against the wall, then crawled into bed. Turning off the lamp beside her, she was greeted by a new light — the soft white glow from Tikal's mystifying moon.

Lara awoke to a soft pattering on her window. Her eyelids fluttered for a moment before her richly coloured brown eyes acknowledged her surroundings. She turned her head to the left and looked up at the small window, streaked with hundreds of rain drops pitter-pattering against the glass. Rain was very infrequent in Tikal and was a welcome relief to all the people and creatures who inhabited the tropical Maya city.

Lara dressed quickly, slipping into a fresh pair of green khaki shorts and a black tank top. She secured the straps on her boots, swung on her backpack, luckily waterproof, and headed out into the rain.

A soft drizzle broke through the overgrown canopy, showering a light mist on Lara as she waited for Juan to meet up with her. The multifarious colours that surrounded her were astounding. The once matte scenery was now bursting with bold and bright hues, casting a new radiant life over the vista. A toucan perched high above her, housing tiny particles of water on its bill. Lara continued to enjoy the scenery for a few more minutes when she was greeted by a familiar face.

“¡Hola, amiga!” Juan called out with a warm smile.

“Hello!” she replied. “Isn't this fascinating?”

Juan extended his arms up to the sky with a grin. “I am so pleased you are here to experience this, Lara. Rainfall is very scarce here and it is something to surely celebrate! Tikal is even more beautiful when the gods shower this beauty around. Come, let’s go straight to Temple Six.”

The two of them travelled down the well-known path they had taken many times. They followed the same route as before, except this time instead of continuing past the central market, they proceeded northeast, circling it. Just as they neared a vast pile of ruins, they changed direction and followed a new path, southeast, deep into the jungle. The rain showed no signs of slowing. Lara’s clothes clung to her body tightly, thoroughly soaked. Water droplets ran over her skin and fell in a shower to the muddy ground below. Her boots were covered in muck but her feet were warm and dry.

As they proceeded closer to the temple, Lara continued to eye the beautiful scenery. Large water drops bounced on and off the luscious plants they passed by, magnifying the colours below. They passed under another thick canopy and Juan stopped to take a drink from his canteen. His hat shielded his face from the elements, but the rest of him was just as drenched as Lara.

“Today, many of the workers in Tikal will open various chultuns to preserve some of this rain. The market will be very busy.”

“How long will the water last?” she inquired.

“Not long. The people today do not preserve and ration it like the Maya did before. It is more of a duty they feel they owe to the Maya: to keep renewing and acknowledging past practices.”

They continued their walk again and followed the path as it turned south. The terrain had changed, and it looked like a long climb uphill. The jungle was so overgrown they now had to walk single file. Large vines stretched across the path, and the wet earth made it tricky to step over them as the hill continued upward. Lara spotted a variety of birds in the trees, all of which had found some sort of shelter, whether under larger leaves or in small holes in the trunks.

“We’re on the Mendez Causeway right now,” Juan called out from in front. “There are four in Tikal, and this is the second we’ve come across so far. The other two, the Maudslay and Maler, are in the north zone.”

“Will we be visiting those?” Lara asked.

“No, there aren’t any temples up there, just solid jungle. Most of the paths aren’t accessible because it has overgrown so much. There hasn’t been a lot of research done there, though, but I suspect one day there will be a discovery.”

“I’ll have to come back for that!”

All of a sudden, a man came into sight, heading toward them on the path. He carried an AK-47, a miserable look washed over his face.

“Don’t worry,” Juan turned to her, “there will be many guards along this path, and at the site. This is one of the most dangerous spots in Tikal.”

“So I’ve heard,” Lara answered.

Juan nodded. “It’s completely secluded, making people easy targets. Most don’t bother coming to see the temple because of this, but they’re missing out.”

The guard, holding his weapon firmly against his chest, stopped and moved off the path to let them pass. He gave Lara a look as she passed by – she didn’t trust him one

bit. As they continued, Lara glanced back until the guard was quickly out of sight. No other visitors were on the path and they proceeded in silence. The climb was getting harder and more tiring because of the slippery ground. They used nearby vines and plants to help pull themselves up the steep hill. Mud splashed onto Lara's legs as she continued to climb and she rammed the toes of her boots roughly through the muck to aid her.

“At last!” Juan declared, slightly out of breath. “Temple Six!” He pulled himself onto the top of the hill and Lara followed suit seconds later. The terrain had flattened out, providing relief to their tired limbs. “This is the Temple of Inscriptions,” Juan said, pointing straight ahead.

Lara stepped a few feet forward and surveyed the ancient structure. The jungle had long taken over, making it look suffocated among the crowded vegetation. Portions were not even visible due to the thick weeds and vines, as well as hefty patches of soft moss. The temple was not very tall and the trees surrounding it had no competition. Long branches reached over the sanctuary, and a few small monkeys ran across the rooftop.

The temple bore no real signs of deterioration. The jungle around it provided safety for the precious limestone. Small clouds of mist escaped through the canopy every so often, and the soft moisture fell lightly through the air and settled gently on the temple. Small birds found delight in drinking the precious water that had collected in folds of leaves, and a strong fragrance of moss and fresh vegetation wafted through the air. The temple faced west and appeared to be completely surrounded by a large walled courtyard. Three doors lined the front of the building, leading to complete darkness. As they moved closer, Lara spotted an extremely long panel fully decorated with hieroglyphics.

“This is the longest hieroglyphic text that has been found in Tikal,” Juan said.

“It’s remarkable,” she answered, staring at the panel that resided near the temple’s roof comb.

“Each glyph is three feet wide by two feet tall and talks about the death of Tikal’s twenty-eighth king.”

“It’s interesting to see how damaged the glyphs are compared to the building,” Lara noted.

Juan nodded and placed a foot on top of a nearby rock. “They were carved into the stone and the finer details were added at a later date in plastered stucco.”

“Some seem to have that reoccurring red tinge,” Lara added, starting intently at the work of art.

“Not blood this time,” he answered. “They were painted red but have been weathered severely since then, making it nearly impossible to decipher.”

Lara grasped the straps of her backpack and moved closer to the temple. “And who exactly was this king?”

“The twenty-eighth in the succession.” Juan removed his foot from the rock and made his way over to her. “No one knows anything about him. None of the texts have ever mentioned him. All we know is that this text here gives the date 766 AD.”

The two made their way up the small path inside the courtyard. The thick grass surrounding the temple brimmed with water droplets. The temple was fairly long and its roof was a peculiar shape, the last third of it leaning toward its right side. Strong vines wrapped snugly across the limestone, some daring to venture deep through the doors into the darkness.

Juan took out two flares and handed one to Lara. "It's quite dark inside. Hopefully the rain hasn't destroyed these."

She gave her backpack a small tap. "Waterproof," she said and grinned. And she had far more valuable items stored inside than two flares. Lara lit her flare and followed Juan through the first door on the far left. The second they were past the frame, the pitch black seemed to create an instant suction around them. It gripped Lara hard and she knew instantly that something wasn't right. The chilly air made her shiver in her wet clothes.

Juan flashed his flare around, seeming to be desperately searching for something. He moved along the inside wall with the flare outstretched and his free hand, running it along the wall. "Here!" he whispered loudly. He reached into a pocket and retrieved a lighter. A torch hung from the wall, different from the ones she had seen so far. After several attempts he got a solid flame, and Juan quickly lit the torch, illuminating his wet face.

"Are there any more?" Lara asked, extending her hand for the lighter.

"Yes," he said, pointing, "straight across to the other side of the room. Move slowly. There are broken pieces of rock on the floor." He handed over the lighter and held back, close to the torch as she made her way blindly across the room. It was so dark that her flare was barely able to penetrate the barrier. She held out a hand as she walked, moving it slowly in front of her. A few moments later it brushed up against the cool wall, and she located and lit the second torch within seconds. Juan was visible across on the other side, but there seemed to be a thick haze making it difficult to see clearly. The flame behind her flickered softly and dark shadows crept across her face.

"Any more?" she asked, almost hushed.

Juan nodded and pointed to his right side. "That's the last one."

Lara made her way over to the side, this time more quickly. Small pebbles and dust escaped from under her boots as she moved, creating a soft crunching noise as she walked. She lit the third torch and tossed the lighter back to Juan.

"I can see why there aren't many brave enough to come here," Lara said as she began to look around the dimly-lit room.

"Wouldn't want to come alone, that's for sure," he replied.

"Other than the outside, how else does this temple get its name?" she asked, looking at the bare wall in front of her.

Juan made his way to the centre of the room and motioned her over. He bent down and used a hand to move away a layer of dust. Lara bent down next to him and held her flare in front. Small holes, just wide enough to perhaps drop a straw through, covered the floor. Dirt and rubble had plugged many of them, but hundreds were visible all around them.

"Researchers have studied these countless times. They thought that if they looked down on them they would form some sort of message. They brought light and looked at the holes from every possible angle."

"And?"

"Nothing," he said and shrugged. "Others thought that perhaps it was a drainage system, but the temple is at the top of the hill. Some just assumed bugs or rodents made the holes."

Lara ran her finger over the holes and watched as more dirt spilled into them.

"Any idea how deep these are?"

“No more than an inch before hitting the bottom. We tell visitors about them but no one seems to want to take the extra time to hike here. Not really too much to see, I guess, but it’s kind of interesting to think and wonder about.”

“Sure,” Lara smiled as she stood up, wiping her hands on her wet shorts. “They look as if they’ve been dug out on purpose, though.”

Juan stood up slowly, wincing slightly at his dying flare. “Mind if I take a quick breather outside?” he asked.

“Not at all. I’m going to look around some more.”

Juan hurried back outside and Lara was alone once again. Now that she didn’t have a pair of eyes watching her, she felt able to give the room a better search. She walked over to one of the torches, ditching her extinguished flare. She retrieved the small pocket knife from her backpack and began to cut away the ancient vines that held the torch. She pulled it out of the wall and moved it around in front of her.

The room wasn’t large, though the darkness made it seem deeper than it was. She walked by one of the walls, holding the torch in front to illuminate the limestone. The walls were bare, different from the typical decorative ones in the other temples. A very thin layer of condensation clung to the rock, and she ran a finger over its cool surface. The liquid was somewhat sticky – definitely not water. Lara put her face close to the wall and inhaled. Besides the expected mustiness, there was something sour. She frowned slightly. She couldn’t pinpoint what it was.

Lara continued to circle the room, examining each wall, but didn’t find anything. She moved to the centre of the room and looked down at the strange floor. Large pieces of broken rock were scattered about, but upon inspection of the smooth ceiling, she was

unable to locate their origin. She crouched down and placed the torch on the floor just off to the side. She retrieved her knife once again and began to dig at one of the holes. She had just about gotten all of the dirt out when she heard a gun being loaded from behind.

She jerked her head around to see a guard positioned in the doorway, gun pointed directly at her. The next couple of minutes seemed to go by in slow motion. She heard the man yelling at her, waving his gun angrily. She saw Juan run up from behind him and watched as he yelled at the man. The next thing she knew, gunshots were being fired at her as the guard advanced. She forced her body to the side, rolling out of the line of fire. Bursts of bright light shot from the gun barrel, illuminating small amounts of the room for split seconds.

Lara tumbled repeatedly to avoid the danger and thought she saw Juan trying to struggle with the guard. She landed on the ground and immediately sprang back up, back flipping over the torch on the floor. Several bullets whipped by as she shoved her hand into her backpack and grasped a hold of the pistol she had taken from the first guard she'd met. The second she landed she assumed a shooting position, raising the gun up and out in front. Teeth clenched, she fired off a few shots, hitting him in the forehead and chest and sending him toppling to the floor. The dull light from the torch stirred across her face and illuminated the thin line of smoke from the gun. The soft clinking of the shells soon faded and everything was quiet again. Lara looked back at the door into Juan's eyes. He looked completely stunned and ran over to her.

“Lara! Are you hurt?”

She lowered the gun to her side and shrugged her shoulders.

Juan looked extremely worried and his face showed signs of sympathy.

“I don’t know why he shot!” he muttered quickly. “No guard has done that before! Perhaps he thought you were damaging the temple.”

Lara held a hand up in front of her and nodded slowly. “Juan, I’m fine, I took care of it! Now, more importantly, what are we supposed to do with the body?” She scrutinized her guide’s face for signs of judgment or defence, but to her surprise she found none.

Juan looked around for a moment. “The next room! Help me drag him there.”

Lara picked up the guard’s pistol and shoved both guns in her backpack. Again, Juan didn’t seem to mind. They each grabbed hold of the dead guard and dragged him outside and to the second door of the temple. Different from the first room, several windows had been cut out of the far side, allowing a plentiful amount of light in. The air was so heavy with moisture that it collected quickly on their skin, trickling down their faces and arms. In the centre of the room was a large hole in the floor with a wooden frame that had been constructed around it. It acted as a guard to prevent visitors from accidentally falling in.

“What was this used for?” Lara asked as she let go of the guard and helped Juan move the wood out of the way.

“For a while people thought it was for storing water, but it’s not deep like the other chultuns. Many believe it was a sacrificial pit, and bones have been found at the bottom.”

“Human or animal?”

“Both,” he replied.

“Either that or they weren’t too careful,” she said with a smile as she helped push the body over the edge into the deep pit. The sound of breaking bones travelled back up to them as it bounced off the hard walls. A final *thump* ensured them he had arrived safely, and they replaced the wooden structure. After exchanging looks of relief, they headed back outside into the mist, only to spot another guard, climbing up the side of the hill and heading toward the temple.

Juan gave Lara a small push and motioned for her to go. “Hide quickly! He’ll be looking for the other guard. I’ll go talk to him,” he whispered.

Lara ran back into the first room and made her way swiftly to one of the far corners. Luckily for her, the torch was not bright enough to give her away, even if someone were to enter. She could hear Juan talking loudly outside in an overly cheery tone, and couldn’t help but grin. She certainly had not expected him to act the way he did. She’d thought for sure he would attack her or call for help after she had killed the guard.

A figure stepped in front of the door suddenly and she crouched lower to the ground, covering her face with her hands to prevent any light that may accidentally reflect in her eyes. The light outside wasn’t sufficient enough to see who it was, but judging from the size of the dark silhouette, it wasn’t Juan. As she waited patiently for it to move, her eyes began to wander around the room. Her gaze shifted down to the floor where she saw a small bubble burst from one of the holes. She frowned and blinked her eyes, making sure the dark wasn’t playing any tricks on her. Another small bubble burst from a different hole.

“*What...*” she whispered.

“¡Adiós!” Juan yelled out as he entered the room.

Lara raised her head, noticing the other guard was gone. Juan looked around, obviously unable to locate her whereabouts.

“It’s safe, Lara!” he called out softly.

She slowly stood up and walked over to the torch on the ground. “What did the guard say?”

Juan waved his hand in the air. “Got rid of him quickly – was looking for his friend. Told him I hadn’t seen him.”

Lara nodded. She was slightly puzzled by Juan’s cooperation, how lightly he took the fact that she had just murdered a guard and that he had helped her dispose of him. Perhaps there was more to Juan than he let on.

Sensing a friend in Juan, she picked up the torch and motioned him over. “Come see this, I noticed something strange with the floor.” She walked back where she had seen the bubbles and bent down to take another look. A few more popped in and out of a few other holes, a reassurance to her of their existence.

“What is going on?” Juan asked, crouching down beside her. “What is that?”

Lara held the torch closer and Juan did the same with his flare. Tiny specs of red could be seen in many holes, and seemed to be flowing underneath the floor. She placed her finger over one of them when another bubble appeared, then moved her hand in front of the light.

“Blood,” she whispered, wiping the bright red fluid on the side of her shorts. She got up and walked, hunched over, around the room, inspecting the floor. “It’s everywhere,” she noted, looking back at Juan. “Come look.” Some of the holes were

black, while others were illuminated and pulsing with blood. Lara stepped back, trying to see if there was a pattern of some sort.

“Where is this coming from?” Juan asked aloud, in disbelief. “I have been to this temple hundreds of times and have never once seen *anything* like this.”

“Yes,” Lara said coyly, “but have you ever dumped a body in the room next door?”

Juan looked somewhat stunned. “You think it’s *his* blood?”

Lara shrugged her shoulders, placing her free hand on her left hip. “Sure, why not? It makes sense. Who *really* knows what’s at the bottom of the pit? Could be some sacrificial pit the Maya used, as you said. The hieroglyphics on the roof comb spoke about a death. Who would really know what went on here?”

Juan nodded and placed his hand under his chin. “I do remember part of the passage mentioning smoke entering into the shrine, but never heard the ending.”

“That could suggest the death of the king, the passing of his soul. Perhaps it suggested the movement of his soul, his blood, to an altar or shrine — this room.” Lara held the torch high above her, her arm fully extended. She peered forward, trying to study the floor as a whole. “Is there any way of being able to climb, a ladder or stool of some sort?” she asked. “I want to be able to look down on the floor.”

“What do you see?” Juan asked, quite curious.

“I think there’s some sort of a pattern here, or at least I hope so.”

“Ms. Croft, I’d love to learn about your history. You are one remarkable woman!”

Lara laughed and shook her head. “Maybe once this adventure is over. I’m afraid you’ll want to cancel our current arrangement if you knew now.”

Juan smiled back and nodded. “Fair enough. There’s a large stone outside, but I’ll need help lifting it in.”

They hurried out the door and she followed Juan partway down the hill. He pointed at two stone pieces that were just beyond a few trees. “Introducing Stele 21 and Altar 9!”

Lara looked stunned. “You want us to move a *monument*?” Indeed, there was more to Juan the guide than she had thought.

Juan laughed and gave her a harmless slap on the back. “Hurry before someone comes!”

She peered down the hill but didn’t see anyone. It seemed to be raining harder; more and more rain came through the canopy, and she thought perhaps this was why there were no other tourists. She bent down on one side of the monument, Altar 9, and lifted it very slowly with Juan on the other end. The huge stone piece was extremely heavy, and its wet surface made it quite difficult to get a good grip on.

“Has anyone ever moved this before?” Lara asked, heaving as they began to climb back up the hill.

Juan grinned at her without saying a word.

“Fair enough,” she answered, her arm muscles flexing as they continued back to the temple. They carried the stone into the room and set it carefully on the floor. Lara hopped on top of it.

Juan handed her the torch and lit a new flare. “See anything?” he asked, staring intently at the floor. His eyes darted around with excitement.

Lara surveyed the floor and began analyzing it in small pieces in her mind. “Can you stand in the entrance?” she asked. “I’m getting a little bit of background light.”

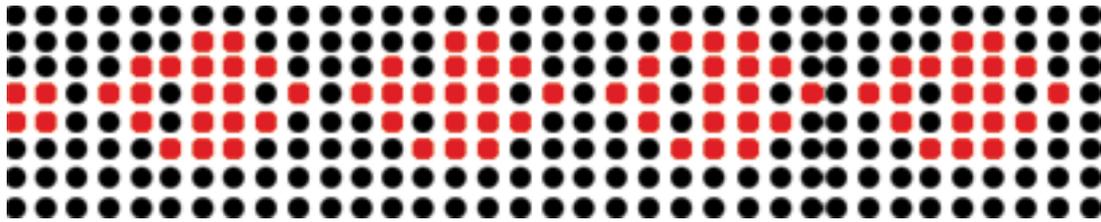
He moved quickly behind her into the doorway. Every once in awhile he peeked behind him to ensure they didn’t have any visitors.

“Ah,” Lara murmured aloud. “Just as I thought.”

“What? What do you see?”

Lara turned her head and moved the torch slowly in front of her. “It’s not *just* a pattern. It’s a message. Do you have a notepad?” she asked.

He reached into the pouch he carried around his waist and brought out a small pad of paper with a pencil. He held the torch as she scribbled down what was on the floor.



“There,” she said contently, stepping down and showing him the paper with light and dark dots. “Only certain holes are filled with blood, making this pattern,” she pointed out. “These are Maya numbers, calendar numbers. The number one and four zeros.”

Juan nodded, with an excited grin on his face. “What date is this for?” he asked, looking back at the blood-filled floor.

She shook her head. “I’m not certain. It’s one piece of a puzzle for sure, though.”

“We’d better move the stone back before someone comes,” he said, setting the torch on the ground.

They replaced the weighty piece of monument where it belonged and returned to the temple. After returning the torches to their places on the wall, they took one last look at the remarkable floor before setting out, back to the Mendez Causeway. Lara folded the piece of paper with her sketch and tucked it away safely in the notebook in her backpack. They both made their way down the steep hill, slipping and sliding on the mud. The rain was finally showing signs of abating and the air was heavy with humidity. Lara's legs and arms were covered in dirt from their little escapade.

“Still have some energy left for a few more temples?” Juan asked with a smile.

“Tons,” she replied, jumping over a large vine.

The next stop was Temple Five, which, Juan informed her, didn't have any other name. They turned left just as they were nearing the central market, heading northwest along the meandering trail. A light mist clung to their skin, providing a fresh, cool feeling. Once they reached the temple, they travelled south to its entrance.

“And here we have Temple Five,” Juan said. “This is the only one of the great temples in Tikal to face north.”

“It's beautiful,” Lara replied. “Look at all the rounded corners.”

“It's the second tallest, too: one hundred and ninety feet.” They walked up to the base and began to climb its incredibly wide staircase. A few foxes rested on the stairs, their fur housing water droplets from the rain. After several minutes, Lara and her guide reached the top. All four sides were partially covered by the thick Peten jungle, ancient trees standing a hundred feet tall. As with all of the other temples, the view was simply remarkable, and they could see other temples nearby.

“I hope you’re not too disappointed,” Juan said as they entered the doorway at the top. “There’s only one tiny room up here.”

Lara followed him inside and looked around. “Hard to imagine building such a magnificent structure for such a small space.”

“This temple was mostly used as an astronomical observatory. Being the second tallest, the Maya felt very close to the stars here. Researchers *did* find an unknown ruler entombed, but sealed the tomb many years ago.”

“Look at that!” Lara exclaimed, pointing to the ceiling.

Juan grinned and spoke quickly. “I didn’t want to tell you about that, I wanted you to find it!”

“It’s incredible.” She stared up at a huge slab of rock that had been mounted above them. Inside were small gemstones, fitted securely in smoothly chiselled circles. Each gem represented one of the planets, and their colours matched accordingly. “The sizes are even accurate, in comparison to the other ones,” Lara said admiringly, “and they’re in the correct positions.”

“The Maya were astronomical geniuses. There are people who believe that the Maya knew far more than we do today. They studied the universe with such respect, and they were able to create their calendar perfectly.”

“I’m surprised no one has ever moved this,” Lara said, staring up at the captivating artefact.

“It would be a shame to move it out of here, thousands of years later.”

“Just like the altar?” Lara mocked.

Juan laughed, his voice echoing throughout the tiny room.

“And what are the chances of you letting me crawl up there and letting me have a closer look?” she asked sweetly.

“Slim to none!” Juan said, chuckling.

“The altar?” she inveigled.

He gave her a sombre look, revealing a smile a moment later. “Oh, all right! But you helped me move it, too!” he said jokingly.

Lara gave him a wink and hoisted her body up, pressing her legs firmly on the opposite walls that were a mere meter apart from one another. Juan stood by the door watching, as she climbed to the ceiling. Upon closer inspection, Lara noticed that the gems weren't flat. They were small circular balls that had been popped into their own individual tracks. She reached up with one of her hands and shifted her weight to maintain her position. Very carefully, she pushed on one of the planets, and it immediately rolled to the side, out of its original position. She pushed another one and it too rolled away.

“Let's hope that doesn't have control of our *real* planets!” Juan joked.

Lara looked down and grinned. “Don't trust me?”

“Not with the whole universe!”

“Ah,” Lara said coyly, “that's where you've made a mistake.” She continued playing with the various gems, uncertain as to what the Maya had created it for.

Almost as if he had read her mind, Juan said, “Perhaps they would keep track of the planet's orbits on a daily basis? There aren't any stelae nearby to confirm.”

Lara nodded and continued to jumble the order. Just for fun, she aligned all of the planets side by side, and looked down at Juan. “What do you think? A nice equal balance?”

A shocked expression overtook his face suddenly as he pointed at the ceiling. “Quite the opposite.”

She looked back, noticing symbols that had suddenly appeared over the gems. “They’re numbers, like from Temple Six,” she said. “*Big* numbers.” She retrieved the piece of paper she’d used earlier and scribbled them down, along with the diagram of the planets.

“What are they?” he asked, peering at the gemstones.

“One hundred and forty-four thousand; seven thousand, two hundred; three hundred and sixty; twenty; and one.”

He shook his head, “Doesn’t mean anything to me.”

Lara rolled the planets back to their original positions and watched as the numbers faded. She hopped down and joined Juan on the top step for a short rest. They both drank from their canteens and sat in silence, enjoying the landscape around them. She now had two sets of numbers and wanted to know more about them. She quickly jotted down the sets of numbers beside each other.

1	144,000
0	7,200
0	360
0	20
0	1

“Looks a little like the basis of the Maya Long Count Calendar,” said Juan, watching her. “Now that I look at it, I believe it’s just missing one more set of numbers.”

Lara looked over the table, remembering what she had read earlier about the calendar. She pointed at the left-hand column and spoke their corresponding names, one at a time, as she moved down the list. “Bakton, katun, tun, uinal, kin.”

“That’s right,” Juan encouraged her, sitting up a little taller.

“Each of the five categories has a limit for how high it can go,” she said, “so these have to be what they start out as.”

A small grey fox slowly climbed the stairs from below, stopping for a nap only a few stairs away from them. An incredible haze had formed and was slowly creeping up each step. The sky was still dark, though it appeared to have grown tired of spilling more rainfall over the sacred land. After a few more minutes, the two climbed down the steep temple and made their way west, to their next destination. It was only a few minutes’ walk down another path.

“Here we have the Plaza of the Seven Temples,” Juan said. “As you can see there are seven structures that were built very close together. These were ceremonial temples, said to be dated from the Late Classical period.”

They walked around each one and Lara noticed hundreds of carvings of human bones and skulls in the stone that decorated large portions of the temples. The backs of the temples were almost impossible to view because of the jungle, which partially covered them.

“Just north of here is a ball court,” said Juan. They headed over to it and Lara looked around with great interest. “As you can see,” Juan said, walking through the court, “we have seating on opposite sides and the ball court in the centre. People would sit on these benches and watch the game.”

Lara looked up and pointed at one of the walls, just below one of the high seating areas. “What’s that hoop for?”

“The point of the game was to get the ball through it.” He looked at the ground. “The loser was sacrificed right here.” Several statues of monkeys surrounded the open ball court, perhaps a good luck charm or the vehicle through which the Maya spirits were taken from the bloody ground. “Nothing else to see here,” Juan said. “Ready to see the Lost World?”

“Absolutely,” Lara replied, following him west to the next area. Temple Three and Palace of the Windows were in close view.

They arrived at the Lost World in only a few short minutes. A group of buildings presented themselves around a massive structure that resided in the centre.

“This is one of the most ancient sections of Tikal,” Juan explained in hush tones. “There are more than thirty-eight structures, all serving a different purpose: mathematical, astronomical, and chronological. It was here where some of the greatest works were produced by the Maya, all with real scientific value today.”

“And the big temple?” she nodded behind her.

“The Great Pyramid of the Lost World. A real beauty.”

Lara walked around the square base and gazed up at the pyramid. She guessed it was at least one hundred feet tall. A staircase rose on each of its four sides. As she made

her way around it, she noticed enormous masks, which added to the elaborately built masterpiece. Some were at least nine feet tall, of various gods with intricate facial features. They arrived back at the front and began climbing the staircase. There were two superimposed terraces that supported the impressive pyramid, weathered in many spots, but not succeeding at deteriorating its beauty. As they climbed each step, Lara noticed bright and fresh foliage that had long made its home inside the cracks of the ancient stone. At a distance it made the pyramid look alive, a sort of immortalization. After a long day of strenuous climbing, the staircase seemed to go on forever. When they had finally reached the top, they sat down for another break, both finishing off their canteens. A few lone trees surrounded the pyramid, the majority towering just beyond the height of the massive structure.

“Another perfect observatory,” Juan noted. From where they sat, they could see the Plaza of the Seven Temples, Temple Five, Palace of the Windows, and even Temple Three.

“There’s no room up here,” Lara noted, looking around at the scattered ruins behind them.

“No,” Juan replied, looking over his shoulder, “there are a few pyramids that don’t have any rooms on top. This one, though, has a chultun inside.”

Lara stood up and took a tour around the top of the pyramid. Large pieces of badly eroded rock formed small walls and she followed the path to the centre, where she located the entrance to the chultun, closely guarded by Tikal’s infantry.

“Does anyone ever go down here?” she asked Juan, peering into the hole.

“Never,” he replied, joining her. “It’s forbidden by the guards. It’s not safe.”

“What’s down there, exactly?”

“Not any water, if that’s what you mean. No one has been down there in years, it’s just a dried-up hole in the pyramid. Too bad, really, since the Maya would have gotten a lot of use out of it.”

She took one last look before heading back down the stairs with Juan. She could feel the eyes of the guards on her back as she made her way to the bottom. There were a couple of places she wanted to revisit, alone. She had uncovered an abundance of clues thus far, and wanted to see if she could find out what they were all leading to.

They walked mostly in silence as they made their way back to the park entrance. The sun was setting quickly, and warm coral streaks mixed with brilliant yellows spread across the sky. Darkness crept out of the jungle into the open; soon the park would be closed for the night. A cool breeze advanced with the shadows, sending small shivers through the foliage. The animals in the Peten jungle grew silent —portents for the events to come?

Once they had arrived back at the entrance to the park, they said their goodbyes. Lara informed Juan that she would be leaving Tikal in the morning and thanked him for being her guide.

“My pleasure, amiga!” he exclaimed, taking her hand in his.

“It was quite an experience seeing all of the temples in this magnificent city.”

“It certainly was,” Juan said meaningfully, perhaps thinking of their encounter with the hostile guard.

After exchanging a few more words, they parted ways, and Lara proceeded to her room. She made her way up the stairs quickly, locking her door and closing the curtains swiftly.

“I’ve got a lot of work to do,” she stated aloud. “Better get ready.” She pulled a large bag out from under the bed and extracted her pair of holsters. Next, a black pair of army shorts and a tank top followed by a fresh pack of flares. She slid off her backpack and set it on the bed while she changed into her new attire. Glancing in the small mirror that was affixed to the wall, she strapped on her holsters with a smile.

“*Much* better,” she said, smiling, as she slid both pistols into place. “My legs were feeling quite bare without these.” She grabbed her black pair of boots and traded them with her current brown ones. She tightened the straps all around and stood back up, tossing the bag onto the bed. She took out a black backpack to match her ensemble and began packing her necessary supplies.

Lara tossed in a small medi-pack and the rest of the spare pistol clips. The AK-47 clips she had rid the first guard of were packed as well. She added the new flares and the extras she had left over, and ensured both canteens were full. Next, she strapped the small pocket knife to the side of one of her boots and tucked her notebook in a safe, zippered compartment in her bag. She placed each glass bottle containing all of the goodies she had found in another compartment, where each fit into a padded sleeve. She fastened the small key rings she had put together earlier on one of the front shoulder straps, and mini binoculars with night vision on the other.

“Simple embellishments make such a difference,” she remarked. Lara pulled out the map of Tikal from her dirty shorts and tucked it safely inside her new ones. After

tossing the items she didn't require back into the bag and pushing it under the bed, she turned off the light and moved over to the window. "Right," she whispered against the glass, "let's get going."

After lengthily surveying the view from her room with the night vision, she unlatched the lock on her window and pushed it open very slowly. The old wood creaked softly as she opened it the entire way. Very carefully, she swung one leg up and over the ledge, pulling herself into a sitting position on the window. Grasping the frame, she stood up and turned around to face the window. An old drainpipe ran vertically beside her, and she grasped it tightly. Before continuing, she reached out as far as she could, pushing the window closed. The sound of tree frogs and various insects pierced the air, providing some audible cover for her. With her boots pressed firmly against the wall, she began to climb onto the roof. A seasoned pro, she made it to the top in record time. She pulled herself onto the roof, rolling onto her stomach and immediately checking out the area with the night vision. Fortunately for her, no other individuals had decided to scale the hotel wall and she was alone. Seizing the solitary moment, she retrieved the map and studied it carefully.

"Temple Four, I'm coming to pay you another visit," she whispered, reattaching the binoculars to her shoulder strap. She ran across to the far side of the roof, hunching her back slightly to maintain a low profile. Up ahead she could see the entrance to the park, which was still heavily guarded. It was absolutely prohibited to go into the park at night, and the vast number of guards reinforced this decree. Two towers stood on either side of the entrance, equipped with guards in each, armed with AK-47s and spotlights. The powerful beams of the searchlights made continuous sweeps.

“Well, walking right in isn’t an option,” Lara muttered, studying the grounds carefully. She took a peek over the edge of the roof and noticed one guard patrolling around the building. She swung around and quietly slipped down, hanging from the ledge. The guard had passed under her, and she wasted no time beginning her descent. Just as the guard rounded the corner up ahead, she dropped to the ground, barely making a sound. She slowly crept into the first patch of jungle, heading parallel to the main path. Every now and then one of the spotlights swept in front of her, and she dropped to the ground as it passed overhead. When it was safe, she moved swiftly through the thick jungle.

All of a sudden, she spotted a guard ahead who seemed to have appeared out of nowhere, his black silhouette barely noticeable among the crowded landscape. Lara grabbed the binoculars and fell instantly into a crouch. One of her boots rested atop a branch, threatening to snap at any second. Gingerly, she rocked forward, her toes holding her steady. The branch crackled softly as it puffed back up, creating enough noise to alert the guard. With the binoculars held up against her eyes, she watched as he snapped his head around, looking at her directly. Lara held her breath and remained motionless, never taking her eyes off him, even for a second. Apparently, the noise hadn’t raised any more caution and he turned back around, heading back in the direction of the path.

Lara let out a small breath and quickly scanned the area before continuing, this time binoculars held down at her side. Within minutes she had covered a fair distance and was at the tree line that looked out into the main section of the park. Without the protection of the trees, she really needed to be vigilant. She scanned the area for several minutes until she was sure she had spotted all of the guards in the immediate area. The

park seemed to be swarming with them, though fortunately for her they were all patrolling solo. Most of them seemed to be staying out in the open. Several guarded the perimeters of the temples.

“All right, then,” Lara said quietly to herself, “a little detour it is.” Immediately assuming a stealth position, she erupted through the trees and out into the open. The jet-black sky overhead actually turned out to be somewhat of an aid, lacking the possession of any stars or the moon and providing the perfect blanket of cover below. Lara’s dark silhouette moved quickly over the terrain. She stayed light on her feet in case of any unforeseen obstacles on the ground. Just as she neared Temple One, a guard popped out from the back, heading in Lara’s direction. With the night vision turned on and pressed firmly against her eyes, she darted away, now toward the front of the temple. She ran quickly, hoping to go around the other side, but just as she was about to turn the corner, she spotted another little annoyance. With two guards advancing in the same direction on either side of the temple, she had one choice.

“Up, over, *then* out,” she whispered, sprinting back toward the middle of the base. Carefully, she bolted up the barely visible steps, optimistic she wouldn’t trip. As she continued up the steep side of the one-hundred-and-forty-five-foot temple, the guards each turned their corners, heading toward one another directly in front of the temple. Lara looked down for a second, seeing them clearly with the binoculars. Unfortunately for her, she was three-quarters from the top, an easy target to detect. Without wanting to take the risk, she dropped onto the step she was on, lying flat on her back. It was hard to say how noticeable she was from the ground, but she wasn’t going to take any chances. A gun

fight this early on would only draw the attention of all of the guards, and killing Tikal's entire soldiery probably wasn't a good idea.

Slowly, Lara moved the binoculars up to her face and casually rolled her head to the side. The limestone was rough against her skin, and the smell of moss was quite potent. With one quick flick of her pointer finger, the night vision turned on, revealing to her what her eyes couldn't. Since the staircase was so steep, she had a clear view of the guards — lucky for her, and perhaps lucky for them as well. She watched carefully as they continued toward each other, none ever glancing at the temple. A few moments passed before they met just to the side of the staircase, stopping for a quick chat. Every once in awhile, one of them would glance blankly at the stairs, clearly unaware of her existence. Just when she was seriously getting annoyed with their lengthy visit, the two broke from their positions, crossed paths, and resumed their patrol.

Lara stood up quickly, carefully wiping off bits of limestone that had pressed into her skin, and continued her climb. When she arrived at the top, she immediately entered the room, crossed to the other side, and peered out with her binoculars. Two more guards were situated at the bottom, trapping her where she was for now.

All of a sudden, she heard voices, loud enough to be from behind. She whipped around in surprise, absolutely certain she hadn't been followed up the stairs. No one stood behind, and a glance down the steps proved she *was* alone. Then it hit her.

“Two souls, vocalizing in regular tones,” she whispered. Recalling the message she had partially translated from Temple Two, it suddenly made sense: two people could communicate from the temples without any trouble. She looked across at Temple Two,

seeing a few guards in the upper room. She could hear them clearly but she was unable to understand the language they were speaking in.

“Saves running back and forth with messages I suppose,” she said under her breath.

After several minutes the guards in the temple left the room and exited via the stairs behind them. She zoomed in with the binoculars and watched until they had disappeared down the steps. The two guards who were at the base of the temple where she was had broken apart, each heading toward Temple Two in opposite directions. Without wasting a second, she rushed forward, running down the steep steps as quickly as possible. The second she reached the damp ground, she bolted forward and began sprinting to the next temple.

Her legs raced under her, smoothly travelling over the terrain. Both guards ahead had reached the opposite corners of the base and were continuing their patrol, each heading to the sides. Lara whipped her head around her shoulder quickly as her deep brown eyes were illuminated from the green night vision she held up once again. The guards from Temple One were nearing the second temple's face, about to cross in front once again. Assuming and hoping it was dark enough to conceal her identity, she finished her sprint and arrived at the base of Temple Two, skidding to a halt unnoticed. Not wanting to waste anymore time climbing stairs, she darted left, sprinting along the base, then perpendicular to one of the guards. Her boots barely pressed into the ground as she travelled over the grass swiftly, braid flapping wildly behind her. She continued southwest and didn't stop until she had reached the Tozzer Causeway.

Breathing hard, Lara leaned up against a tree as she caught her breath. She was close to Temple Four, and after surveying the pathway in front and behind, she continued on. She walked briskly but lightly down the familiar path, eyes and ears alert. Dark shadows flitted back and forth in the surrounding jungle and every so often a bird fluttered among the trees, eying the intruder in their territory. Just as she arrived at the last turn in the path before arriving at the temple, three guards suddenly appeared in front. Lara reacted instantly, rolling to the side and landing on her stomach in the foliage. Timing her movements carefully, she rolled further inward as they approached. One held a flashlight, which he used to scan both sides of the pathway. The incredibly bright beam passed over Lara's head as she pressed her body flat against the ground. Sharp twigs jabbed at her body as she peered through the thick foliage and watched the guards pass by. As soon as they were out of sight she slowly stood up, untangling herself from the vines she had escaped into. She poked her head out from behind a tree to confirm she was alone again, then climbed onto the path and moved toward Temple Four, now in sight. She stopped in front, gazing up at its beauty.

Tikal's moon rested just behind the temple, radiating a pure white glow around its perimeter. The two-hundred-and-twelve-foot wonder stood magnificently among the dark landscape, its glimmering exterior a real treat to the eye. Lara proceeded to the base and began to climb the staircase. Foxes, obviously unafraid of any dangers, lay asleep on the steps, and Lara passed by without so much as making them stir slightly in their sleep. She hurried up the stairs, captivated by the unique transformation of the temple's features in the night. As she climbed onto the top platform, she removed the binoculars once again,

looking all around in front of her. The area was free of guards for now, and not wanting to risk being snuck up on, she proceeded to assemble a small warning device.

She withdrew a few extra empty glass bottles from her backpack and set them on the second-last step from the top, finally crushing them with her heel. She spread the glass pieces across the step with a few pieces of moss scattered overtop. Satisfied with her concoction, she turned around and walked to the temple's only room, entering silently through the door. The soft flickering from the two torches greeted her as she moved inside, but they did not illuminate the entire room. Retracing her footsteps from before, she walked around the space slowly. The base that housed the two snake sculptures remained untouched, the shiny black serpents still perfectly preserved in the temple. As she walked around the rare sculpture, she paid more attention to the snakes' eyes than before. When she had mentioned the unusualness of them to Juan, she had held back explaining herself. Depending where she situated herself, she could see the reflection of the fire in their eyes. As she circled the room a few more times, she worked out the scenario in her head clearly. The snake on the left only had light illuminating in its left eye, its right one completely black. On the other hand, the other snake's right eye was being illuminated from the torch on the back wall, while its left eye had only a very dim reflection.

"The key is their eyes," Lara said softly, bending in for a closer inspection and talking her theory out loud. "The right snake's left eye is reflecting a small portion of the light from the left torch," she said, her eyes following what she was saying. "If there was another torch, all of the eyes would be lit up." Lara stopped and a large grin overtook her face. "Both snakes' eyes need to be illuminated. They're dormant right now."

A flashback of the astronomy board from Temple Five rushed through her mind. She climbed onto the base and crouched beside the sculptures, closing in as far as she could. Carefully, she reached out and rolled the left eye on the second snake toward her. Instantly, a flash of light burst into its eye as it caught the full reflection from the opposite torch. Another bright flash burst from its eye and Lara jumped from the base, alert and ready to react. The light turned bright orange as the beam penetrated into the other snake's right eye.

Lara stared at the streak of light as it continued to pulse strongly. She moved swiftly around to the other side of the room, moving counter-clockwise around the base to avoid disturbing the light. She closed in on the other side of the second snake, this time reaching for its right eye. She carefully nudged it and jumped back as another bright orange light burst from its eye, across to the other snake's, forming an intense beam. She moved back to the doorway, watching the light intently. Each snake had beams of light penetrating into its partner's eyes; both were transfixed. As the beams seemed to grow stronger, a loud gasp echoed against the walls. Lara shielded her eyes from the light as another gasp was emitted, and then the light died. Lara moved her arm away from her face, her eyes still somewhat stunned from the brilliance.

A moment passed and her eyes readjusted to the dim room. Both snakes' eyes were pitch black, no longer yielding the beams, and as Lara moved toward them, she noticed something new. The snakes' mouths now hung open. She stopped short, peering at both of them, looking for any signs of risk. The torches on the wall continued to flicker, casting small shadows across her face. When she was convinced it was safe to

proceed, she bent back down and glanced inside each mouth. A set of sharp fangs greeted her in each: one set red, the other white. She stepped back and shrugged her shoulders.

“Looks like one enjoyed a snack, but not the other.” Convinced there was more to the puzzle than just a fancy light show, she removed her backpack and pulled out the stash of glass bottles. She extracted them one at a time from their protective sleeves until she saw the paint flakes.

“Red and white,” she muttered. Acting on a hunch, Lara climbed back up to the snakes and sat down in front of them. She unscrewed the bottle and poured the flakes into her palm. Being heedful to their delicateness, she separated the flakes by colour.

“Here we go,” she uttered, gently pushing the white flakes into the snake’s mouth with the white fangs and the red flakes into the mouth with red fangs. Lara watched while both mouths closed slowly in sync. She sat back, eager to see the result, but frowned when several minutes later nothing happened.

“Well, I just got cheated,” she muttered. Then, as if in answer to her statement, a large crackle emitted from the snakes. A split second later, a huge beam of light erupted between each pair of eyes. Lara shielded her face immediately, backing away from the blinding scene. Small electrical currents launched into the air, popping and hissing loudly. A thick mass of fog had also materialized, twisting and snaking itself throughout the room. Within seconds the visibility fell to zero; Lara couldn’t see a thing. The exit, too, was concealed. The crackling continued for a few minutes, uttering small snaps and spitting sparks. Then, as quickly as it all had arrived, it dissipated within seconds. Lara moved toward the snakes, disrupting small patches of fog near the floor as she walked. She stepped onto the base and looked down, content with the outcome.

“Not cheated at all,” she whispered. She bent down, elated to see two small sparkling jade stones, one in each snake mouth. She reached for them both at the same time, carefully grasping her precious discoveries. She held them up in front of her face, catching the light from the torches. Then without warning, several loud crunching noises were emitted from outside. Lara shoved the stones into her backpack and, without any delay, grabbed both pistols from her holsters, swung around, and dropped to the ground in a crouch, one leg extended to the side.

Two guards ran toward her, AK-47s blazing, ejecting countless bullets. Lara fired back, hitting the first man with three bullets down the front of his leg. She quickly rolled to the side, away from the line of fire, and out of sight from the doorway. She heard screams from the guard she had wounded, and angry cries from the other. The second guard charged into the room, pointing and shooting at Lara instantly. The space was fairly small but she was a master of fluid gymnastics. Without a great deal of effort, she flipped backward and to the side, avoiding the constant spray of lead. She fired back as she side flipped again, both arms drawn out in front, fingers rapidly returning the gesture. She hit him square in the chest, sending him plunging to the ground, dropping his gun along the way.

Lara landed on both feet, knees slightly bent. She slowly stood upright clenching both pistols straight beside her body. The delicate sound of shells clinking off the stone floor faded as she made her way around the base to investigate the aftermath. The guard she had just shot lay dead, accompanied by a messy pile of blood and filth. She ventured out of the room but did not see the other one. She readied the pistols in front of her and

walked slowly to the top of the stairs. No persons were visible from where she stood, so she used her binoculars to help locate him.

“Ah, found you,” she stated smugly as she zoomed in on the mangled body at the base of the temple. Several splotches of blood were smeared along the steps, a clear indication of his unfortunate bumpy ride down. Not wanting to stick around any longer, Lara reholstered the pistols, grabbed her backpack and shrugged it on, and stepped carefully over the shards of glass she’d laid earlier as she descended the steps of the temple.

When she arrived at the bottom, she stopped briefly to grab the AK-47 from the dead guard, uttering a few sarcastic words of sympathy as she pocketed his extra clips. She hurried along the path, backtracking, as she scanned the immediate surrounding area with the night vision. Her next stop was a return to Palace of the Windows, only a few minutes’ walk away. She clipped the binoculars back onto her pack and soon disappeared into the absolute blackness of the thick and daunting ancient jungle.

Lara made her way along the Tozzer Causeway once again, moving swiftly through the vegetation. She turned at the next bend on the path, heading south. Within a few seconds she had arrived at the palace. She scanned the area quickly, spotting only one guard on the far side, heading away from the site. She looked up at the palace, its beauty reflecting the moon’s glow. When Juan had taken her to the palace before, they hadn’t gone to the top, so she headed there first, using the steps on the outside of the edifice. Unadorned by a roof, the second storey of the palace bore a single row of connected rooms. As Lara walked among the severely weathered and ruined quarters, she

kept an eye out for guards. Judging from the size and shapes of the rooms, Lara guessed that perhaps the palace had once been residential. Finding nothing of interest, she climbed down to the entrance she had visited before. As she stepped inside, a flash of light erupted from behind, followed promptly by a thunderous crash. A sudden heavy rain came down in torrents as lightning continued to dominate the sky.

Lara struck a flare as she ascended the dark staircase, walking carefully up the old steps. The rain continued to flow steadily, hitting and bouncing off the palace. Several screeching sounds rushed through the door and up past her as Tikal's birds made their way into hiding, deeper into the jungle. When she reached the top, she stepped onto the familiar platform, pressed her body up against the railing, and peered over the edge into the black hole. She glanced at the decorated ceiling again and watched the bright orange flames from the torches dance across the images. She lit another flare and tossed it over the side, throwing a second one a moment later, and watched carefully as they plummeted gracefully into the cavity of the palace. The flares illuminated small areas of the walls on their way down, which appeared to be heavily coated in condensation. Soon the flares disappeared, their bright flames unable to overcome the darkness. She flicked on the night vision and zoomed in as far as the darkness would allow. From what she could see, there were vines scattered down the walls, and numerous holes where the limestone had eroded.

Then, without receiving any warning, due largely to the thunderous storm outside, two dark silhouettes appeared at the bottom of the staircase. One flash of lightning showed her everything in a split second: two guards, two AK-47s, and two flashlights about to give her away. She grabbed the chain she had constructed from the key rings and

snapped it onto a clip on her backpack. Just as the beam from the first flashlight reached the top of the staircase, Lara hopped up and over the railing, grabbing hold of the platform while tucking herself up and underneath the floor. The sounds from the guards grew louder as they made their way onto the platform. Both were using their flashlights to scan the top of the room. Mercifully, they never shone them below. Lara held tight to the supporting beams, upside down as the guards continued to chit-chat above. A thin layer of condensation had collected on the beams, thankfully not enough to cause her to slip. After what seemed like an eternity, the guards left the room, ready to venture back outside and continue their patrol through the storm.

Grasping as firmly as she could with one hand, Lara let go of the beam with the other and reached for a flare. She struck it against the wall a couple of times and a brilliant orange flame burst to life. She tucked the flare into a strap on the side of one of her boots, and grabbed a hold of the beam once again. Directly in front of her on the wall were a few vines that had grown from small crevices in the rock. She pulled herself closer to them and reached out with one hand to test their strength. Satisfied with her only obvious option, she attached the free end of the key rings to the vine. At least if she slipped she had *something* to help momentarily stop her fall. With one last listen, she let her legs drop from the beams and pressed them firmly against the wall.

She began to make her way down, using the vine to help scale the wall. It was fairly sturdy and wasn't showing any signs of weakening. Step by step, Lara moved deeper into the darkness, the flare emitting enough light to see where to place her feet. The sound from the storm outside grew less and less audible as she descended further. She moved quickly but carefully, hand-over-hand down the vine. Luckily for her, it

seemed to look as if it were going to reach the bottom. Taking a deep breath, Lara jammed her boots into a couple of the crevices and retrieved her binoculars with a free hand. She zoomed in, flicked on the night vision and grinned, the green light glowing softly against her face.

“Perfect,” she said, refastening the binoculars and grabbing a few more flares. She struck them against the wall and tossed them away from her, her eyes following the bright streaks of light below. The small cluster of flares fell in synch, separating further from one another as they plummeted to the ground. Their final resting place: a bed of serrated spikes. Lara eyed the scene below with great interest, the now dull glow from the flares catching in her eyes. She smiled as she crept down the remaining portion of the vine, dropping an additional four dangerous feet below. Landing in a field of daggers, it suddenly felt more like home. She reached out, brushing a hand gingerly down the side of one of the spikes. Its cool and crisp texture was a fair warning and she removed her hand immediately. Her path was illuminated by the flares she had sent down moments ago, which revealed to her a few unfortunate, and perhaps accidental, deaths.

Several age-old and mostly disassembled bones lined the floor, which was marked with a dark brown patina of dried blood. The ground was extremely sandy, some areas rising slightly higher than others. Lara walked very slowly among the spikes, extra attentive to the constant and permanent danger. She made her way around the floor, lighting more flares as she needed them. One particular skeleton suddenly caught her attention. Apparently this one hadn't been so lucky: one of its legs was still prisoner to a spike. The razor-sharp spear had pierced right through the bone and would hold fast to its prey for eternity.

Lara bent down as slowly as she could to avoid skewering herself and noticed something small, shining through the sand, just below the skeleton. She jammed the end of her flare into the sand beside her and began to dig with both hands through the long-untouched sand. Within seconds, she uncovered a small flint. She lifted it quickly to her face to inspect it. The shiny blue exterior reflected the light around her, its flawless and surprisingly heavy form truly unique to Tikal. The eccentric flint was approximately five inches long and was the first Lara had come across thus far. During her research, she had read that excavators had discovered other flints in Tikal, none of which they could attach any true meaning to.

Lara turned over the ancient weapon and saw a whimsical scene of faces that she knew from her readings had been shaped by flaking chips with bone tools. She remembered that it had required hundreds of hours to carefully sculpt the flints, and that they were the rarest of all art forms created by the Maya. The ancient paint had been well preserved in the sand. The overall shape was rather peculiar: small, skinny serpent-like pieces jutted out from the ornately carved body

“Thanks for keeping it safe,” Lara whispered to the long-decomposed body. The artefact was too large to secure in the glass bottles she had brought along, so she tucked it in one of the pockets in her backpack. Aware of her severely limited supply of flares — only two left — she snuck back to the wall, moving with less effort now through the spikes. She placed both hands against the cool limestone and tilted her head up. “Now for the hard part,” she muttered.

It was four feet to the vine, and she was well aware of the consequences that awaited her if she missed. Using the small crevices and footholds, she carefully pulled

herself up onto the wall. She dug her fingers into the rough stone and gripped at the jagged rock with all of her strength. As she climbed, one of the spikes grazed her back and she winced slightly as she felt a thin layer of skin tear, followed by a warm stinging sensation as a tiny amount of blood trickled down her spine. She climbed on, grabbing at the cracks and making her way closer to the vine. She took hold of the vine as soon as she could, and assumed a rock-climbing position once again.

Feeling came back into her hands as she rested a moment to light another flare. After tucking it into the strap on her boot she began to climb the wall more quickly, almost running up the cool stone. The flares in the pit had extinguished and the darkness provided its disguise once again. Lara climbed faster when she felt the vine beneath her starting to give. Suddenly, it broke free under her feet as she took another step. The vine snapped from the wall and fell below, not issuing a single sound as the spikes consumed yet another victim.

Lara hung from the wall, swinging back and forth on the remaining vine. She jolted her head up and watched as the vine began to tear out of the cracks faster and faster. Any second it would be free, and she didn't want to pay the spikes another visit. Teeth clenched, she sprang off the wall as hard as she could, forcing her body across the pit, while holding steady to the vine. Midway through the air it snapped, but she was prepared, and she let go instantly, allowing her momentum to carry her to the opposite side. The front of her body hit the wall roughly as she was slammed against the rock. Immediately, she grabbed at the cracks, her fingers slipping before she was able to catch hold. The insides of her lower arms were skinned badly and burned from the short but rough fall. She stuck one of her boots in the only foothold available and looked around.

The ledge above was roughly six feet from her, on the opposite side of the pit. She continued to climb the wall, her fingers flexed with effort, and found it even more difficult as she got higher. Fewer crevices lined the walls than down below, and she was having to really stretch to reach the available ones. A thick layer of condensation had built up suddenly, from the heavy humidity that had seeped in from outside. Beads of sweat formed on her forehead as she reached for the next crack, her back and arms burning from the wounds she had received. Just as she neared the ledge, her flare spit and sputtered against her boot before its light dimmed for good.

Momentary darkness consumed the room, but the torches nearby were able to shed enough light for Lara to see as she reached the top. A long shadow down one of the walls caught her eye. She looked up, and sure enough, a solitary pole missing its torch stuck out from the wall. Unable to determine how she had missed it before, she wasted no time leaping from the wall, catching hold of the pole, and swinging around it a few times before flying off and landing square on the centre of the ledge. She bent her knees on impact, and rose slowly to stand as she caught her breath.

“Can’t seem to figure out the reason for all of those deaths,” Lara said aloud with a grin. “Easy walk in the park.” She lifted her leg and pulled the dead flare from her bootstrap, tossing it over her shoulder as she headed down the staircase. The storm was beginning to let up. Small streams of water flowed from the roof down the palace steps, meandering through the cracks and drowning the moss, making their way down the hundred-foot descent. Lara scanned the area with the night vision and didn’t detect any guards. She began to climb down the steps quickly, ready to revisit one last location.

Tikal's moon peered out from behind the thick canopy, mapping out her next route, heading south, deeper into the jungle.

Lara's binoculars were the only part of her that peered cautiously over one of the stone walls that housed the Great Pyramid of the Lost World. She was concealed by the wall and foliage around her, providing plenty of time to survey the area without pressure. The palatial pyramid looked flawless before her, its grand structure dominating the immediate area. The dark stone competed with the blackness of the night, triumphing overall, casting a sharp silhouette against the jungle. Lara sat on her shins as she peered through the lenses, captivated yet again. She reached up slowly and turned the binoculars slightly while zooming in for a closer look.

"Just as I expected," she scoffed. "A little welcoming party." She shifted her weight and pushed herself up onto the balls of her feet, leaning in closer and supporting the binoculars now with both hands. Her thumbs and fingers adjusted the dials and buttons as she continued to absorb the whereabouts of her new guests. So far she had detected half a dozen guards, all patrolling the pyramid, covering each side at all times. Each sentry carried a readied AK-47 or pistol and was shielded by an armoured vest and face mask.

A few guards held flashlights, making sweeps of the area with the bright beams. Others held small radios and communicated with them every once in awhile. A couple of jeeps and trucks were also stationed nearby, equipped with ammo and other weaponry. The ground was still soaked from the storm and the guards slogged through the mud nonchalantly. Lara slapped at a bug on her arm and crouched down again onto her knees.

She pulled off the AK-47 that hung over her right shoulder and ejected the old clip beside her, shoving a fresh one into place and loading the gun.

She retrieved the pocket knife and medi-pack from her backpack and cut a few pieces of gauze into long strips. Clenching the blade between her teeth, she tightly wrapped her hands in the bandages. She tucked the knife into the side of her boot, checked that her pistols were snug in her holsters, and looked through the binoculars once again. A small smile escaped her lips as she surveyed the grounds. “Nothing like a little excitement to get the party going,” she said, standing up and clipping the binoculars to her straps. “Time to cue the diversion.” She bent both knees slightly then jumped onto the wall, landing in a crouch. With the AK-47 secured and held steady in front, she aimed at her target, put pressure on the trigger, and muttered, “¡Hola, amigos!” before pressing her finger back all the way and sending them her welcome party.

The bullets pierced through the air and plummeted into one of the trucks. On impact, a huge explosion erupted and a brilliant ball of fire spread up and into the sky. Lara jumped forward from the wall and sped toward the pyramid, watching in amusement as the guards swarmed to the burning vehicle. The guards shot into the surrounding jungle, unaware of their visitor. Lara sprinted the remainder of the way, crouching low to the ground as best she could to avoid detection at all costs. She ran up one side of the pyramid and hurried to the centre, where the opening to the chultun lay. Just as she neared the hole, a loud sound from someone pumping a shotgun rang out from beside her. Whipping her head to the side, Lara found herself face to face with its barrel.

“Not interested in the fireworks then, are we?” she questioned. Just as the guard let out a wicked grin and started to pull the trigger, she front-kicked the gun, sending it

flying upward. At the same time, the guard pulled the trigger and was thrown back from the unexpected recoil. He tumbled down the side of the steps, his clumsiness now a cover for the real reason behind the explosion. Before any of the guards had a chance to even think about returning to their posts, Lara grabbed a long piece of rope from her pack, untangled it quickly, and threw it around one of the short walls on top of the pyramid, grasping the ends in both hands. She leaned backward toward the chultun entrance. With a firm grip on each end of the rope, she bent her elbows slightly and fell backward into the pitch-black hole.

Lara plummeted deep into the chultun, the gauze bandages around her hands providing extra grip, and braced herself for a serious case of whiplash. She looked up just as the rope ran out, and was jerked up hard, her body springing higher as an acute pain shot through her arms. She let go of the rope, one hand before the other to pull it down with her, and fell fast, landing a few seconds later on the ground. She let out a grunt as her body crashed to the floor and winced as pain burst through her. The rope fell to the ground beside her, eliminating the possibility of a repeat performance from anyone else. The bandages around her hands were torn but luckily had provided enough cushioning to prevent rope burn. She pushed herself onto her side and grimaced as another throb of pain passed over her.

“Going to be bloody sore in the morning,” Lara muttered in annoyance. She reached into her backpack and pulled out her last flare. She stood up slowly and peered around the barely visible room. From what she could see, it appeared large. Stagnant puddles of water and muck covered the severely uneven floor. She slogged through the water and looked up from where she had fallen. The chultun was so dark she couldn’t see

the hole she had jumped into. Lara moved more quickly around the room, unable to locate any exit. Her flare, now a luxury item, greatly limited her time. She needed to work quickly before the darkness consumed the last of it.

The air was gelid, perfect if the chultun were still in use. She was careful to watch her footing as she climbed over small mounds on the slippery floor. Her flare flickered as the flame began to fade and then died. Lara's eyes darted around the room now defeated by utter darkness. The flare cooled quickly and she let it drop beside her. Undeterred, she undid the small latch and unhooked her binoculars from her shoulder strap. She felt for the power button to turn on the night vision. A dim green light pierced the room, and she whacked the binoculars with her hand a few times before the light fully kicked in. She held them up to her face and frowned in disappointment; one lens had broken during her fall.

Lara continued to scan the room, making use of the zoom, and was delighted to see various symbols on the walls that weren't visible before. As she made her way around the floor a second time, she stopped in front of one of the puddles, suddenly noticing a miasmatic mist hovering just above the water. Cupping a free hand over her nose, she zoomed in closer with the binoculars, curious to locate the source of the non-native substance. She waved her hand in front, forcing the vapour to disperse, and through the water, she located a hole in the floor. Two blue lines had been painted on either side, surprisingly vivid and untouched by time.

Lara reached out and stuck her hand into the water, feeling around for any other holes that might be hiding on the bottom. A layer of dirt covered part of the floor and she pushed it up and out of the puddle. When she looked through the night vision once again,

she noticed even more blue lines. All of them snaked around in arbitrary directions, weaving in and out of the other lines. They reminded her of the flint she had discovered; the colour of the paint was almost identical. She reached into her backpack and found the artefact, relieved to see that it hadn't been broken during her fall. She held the flint upright and slowly inserted its tail into the hole. The piece fit like a key: the inside walls of the hole were a perfect receptacle for the snake-like body of the flint. When it had been inserted all the way, she released her hand and waited. Then she registered the full solution. The top face on the flint was upside down. Lara reached her hand back into the water and turned the flint 180 degrees clockwise. It turned in the hole effortlessly and clicked into place.

Within seconds, a small rumble emanated from deep below the flint, gradually increasing into a thunderous roar. The ground began to shake violently. Lara stood up quickly, her legs moving to keep balance. She kept the night vision locked to her eyes as she held out her free arm for balance. She watched the flint as it shook until its fragile body could take no more and was sprung from the hole. It clattered unharmed to the ground nearby. Lara watched, intrigued, as the hole that had housed the artefact moments ago began to expand, widening at a rapid pace. The water from the puddle was sucked down and she jumped out of the way before she was, too. Within a few more seconds, the hole had ceased expanding to reveal a steep staircase leading into the belly of the pyramid.

“Ah. The back door,” Lara said and smiled as she zoomed in on the steps. “Better check it out.” She reached down and tightened the straps on her boots, then moved toward the stairs. Water from the floor continued to trickle down the steps, making them

slippery. She stepped onto the first one and peered into the hole, unable to make out anything of interest with the night vision. Gingerly, she made her way down the stairway, avoiding the wet spots as much as possible. The steps slowly became brighter, and she moved faster, eager to see where the light source was coming from.

When Lara arrived at the base of the staircase she lowered the binoculars, flicking off the night vision with a finger, and reattached them to her shoulder strap. She was standing at the beginning of a long and narrow tunnel, complete with torches that lined the walls every twenty feet or so. As she walked, she noticed hundreds of intricately drawn paintings along the walls, masks similar to those on some of the temples she had visited, paintings of the temples themselves, and hundreds of various animals that were still native to Tikal.

A sudden icy breeze hit Lara in the side and she instantly somersaulted forward, just as a massive blade sliced past her from a tiny well-camouflaged seam in the wall. She looked back at the hazard and shook her head. “No sightseeing, I’ve got it,” she said, smirking. She winced, still sore from her earlier misfortune, but hurried forward, keeping a close eye out for any other traps, and soon arrived at the end of the hallway.

A large circular door bearing strange carvings blocked her way. A solitary torch lay on the ground in front, illuminating the ancient mechanism and casting dark shadows across its rough exterior. She walked closer and ran her hand along the stone, instantly recognizing the design.

“A blank Maya calendar,” she whispered. Five straight lines had been carved into the door, each at least an inch deep, separated by a small red gem. Above the engravings

was a large box that protruded from the door. Inside were a few dozen jade stones. Lara's eyes lit up as she reached in the box and picked out a few of the precious stones.

“Beautiful,” she exclaimed, examining their flawless forms in the light. She noticed that each stone had a Maya number written on it, and after emptying the box and placing them all on the ground in front of her, saw that the numbers ranged from zero to nineteen. She whipped off her backpack and sat down behind the stones. Rifling through her pack, she found and pulled out the three jade stones she had found during her earlier explorations in Tikal.

“Aha! A perfect match,” she said aloud, comparing hers to the ones on the floor. The first one she had found was blank, showing the template for the Maya calendar. The other two, that she had discovered in the Temple of the Double-Headed Serpent, had several numbers engraved on them. The first had five sets of numbers in a single column.

1,872,000
136,800
6,840
340
19

The second stone had the number 2,015,999 engraved on it. Becoming more curious and mystified by the puzzle, she dug through her backpack again, withdrawing the piece of paper on which she had jotted down other information while exploring the earlier temples. The first set of numbers was from Temple Six, which she had discovered from the blood on the floor in the hundreds of tiny holes. The second was from Temple Five, the temple housing the movable planets on its ceiling. She knew she was still missing a set of numbers, and Juan had pointed that out to her as well. Luckily, she had done enough research, which she hoped was now going to prove useful. She grabbed the

pocket knife from the side of her boot and began etching lightly into the ground. Only a few short minutes later, she had written out everything she knew.

	1	2	3	4
baktun	1	-	144,000	1,872,000
katun	0	-	7,200	136,800
tun	0	-	360	6,840
uinal	0	-	20	340
kin	0	-	1	19

She was missing one column of numbers, and thanks to her research, she thought she knew exactly how to decode the puzzle.

“ X times Y equals Z ,” she said, eyeing the numbers. “Column four divided by column three, equals column two.” She got right to work, doing the simple mathematical problems in only a few short minutes. When she had finished computing the numbers, she looked down at the now scuffed and scratched floor and nodded with satisfaction.

	1	2	3	4
baktun	1	13	144,000	1,872,000
katun	0	19	7,200	136,800
tun	0	19	360	6,840
uinal	0	17	20	340
kin	0	19	1	19

Lara looked over her notes, grazing the paper with the tip of the knife, pressing more firmly under the important details.

“Ingenious,” she said to herself appreciatively. She had read that with the Long Count they had created on 13 August 3114 BC, the Maya could calculate and identify any day within a span of 1,870,000 days, before the calendar ended. Today, we are still able to calculate any day in history.

Lara now understood what she needed to do to complete the puzzle. She grabbed six jade stones from the floor and stood up. She placed the stone with the blank calendar on it in the space on the door above the calendar. Below, there were five spaces to fill. While collecting the various clues around Tikal, Lara had been missing the last digits of the baktun, katun, tun, uinal, and kin, the ones that represented the highest they could go to correctly follow the Maya Long Count. She needed to calculate these last numbers, the highest numbers, the *highest the calendar could go*.

“The end,” Lara whispered, looking up from her notes. One by one, with assistance from her research, she pushed each of the five jade stones left in her hands into the slots in the door.

13.0.0.0.0

Her right eyebrow rose slightly as she decoded the date, writing furiously in her notebook of all the calculations needed. The four red gemstones on the door lit up suddenly, glowing brightly, alive.

“December 21, 2012,” Lara whispered, staring at the calendar. “Sooner than expected.” The mechanisms in the door were activated by the stones and the ancient gears began to lift the door. Lara reached down and picked up the torch and her

backpack, where she tucked away her notes. As the door continued to ascend, she bent down and peered into the blackness slowly being revealed on the other side. She straightened when she heard the loud noise of the door locking in place high above the ground, and stepped forward, testing the ground for pressure pads before continuing into the new room, which was darker than the first room in the chultun. Slowly, she crept forward, waving the torch around slowly from side to side, but she couldn't see a thing.

The floor was made of solid limestone and was incredibly smooth – not one flaw anywhere that she could see. Just as she was about to take another step forward, Lara's body stopped in place as her instincts took over. She leaned forward, extending the torch in front, and gazed at a barely visible ledge barely a foot in front of her. She stepped back, set the torch on the ground, and unclipped her binoculars. The night vision was no match for the strange room; she couldn't see.

Lara bent down to pick up the torch and it was then she noticed barely visible markings on the floor beside her. She leaned in further to inspect them, seeing drawings with the calendar numbers *13.0.0.0.0* painted all around. Crouching low to the ground, she continued along the platform. Two large cog wheels dominated the centre of the floor. She walked around the perimeter of the massive drawing until the point at which they met, and she nodded; it too confirmed the end date. In the centre of both cog wheels, she noticed the Maya number thirteen in silver paint. She stepped inside the drawn mechanism and bent down, placing a hand over the symbol. Remembering the silver key she had located in Temple Three, she grabbed it from her bag and held it beside the symbols.

“Another perfect match,” she exclaimed. Similar to the button she had accidentally stumbled across at Temple Two, a small, tube-like shape stuck out of the floor beside the symbol. Not having anything to lose, and truly filled with curiosity and excitement, Lara pushed the piece into the floor. As it retracted, the symbol on the ground followed suit, tucking into a compartment beneath the floor. Lara grabbed the torch and held it close, revealing a small keyhole. She held the key up in front of her, its shiny exterior catching the light of the flame.

“Time to see what you’re meant to do,” she said, inserting the key and giving it a twist. The sound of grinding gears filled the quiet room, growing louder and louder, bringing Lara to her feet. The floor rumbled slightly under her as she was drawn to the edge of the platform where a long, skinny horizontal piece of limestone had risen to her level. It was difficult to see exactly what it was, but from the groove running down the middle, she could only assume one thing. From her backpack, Lara grabbed the glass bottle containing the torch liquid and poured the fluid carefully into the narrow trough. As quickly as she had poured it, the darkness consumed it. The room grew incredibly still and silent as she reached out with the torch, touching it to the trough. She leaned forward, fully captivated as the fire leapt, beginning its journey down and across the jet-black pit before her.

Her body froze as her eyes, locked on the scene, watched as the brilliant flame made its way down the trough. Small bursts of fire erupted every few seconds, sending bursts of sparks into the air, which fell gracefully into the darkness below. Just as it seemed the track would go on forever, the fire stopped abruptly and she squinted, leaning even further over the ledge.

Suddenly, a wall of fire burst up, spreading frantically to the left and right, along the bottom of some sort of structure she couldn't make out. The fire spread rapidly, alive and vibrant. At the exact same time, the opposite lines of fire shot upright, climbing the sides of the structure, soaring higher and higher, faster by the second. The fire began to crawl inwards from both sides, the flames weaving in and out of each other, snaking and curving around in the middle that it had sectioned off. The fantastic scene left her speechless as she gazed ahead.

“Absolutely brilliant,” Lara whispered under her breath. Just as the fire had taken over the entire structure, its blinding light spreading throughout the entire room, it vanished, darkness quickly sucking the light from her eyes. Small bright dots fluttered throughout the room as a thunderous sound was emitted from across the pit. It grew louder, echoing off the walls. A new sight was unveiled before her, and her eyes widened in exhilaration.

A thin line of fire had crept around the perimeter of the structure again, illuminating two large doors. The fire shot into the middle once again, outlining two cogwheels, each turning in opposing directions. Lara stared in amazement as the doors suddenly began to slowly open outward, separating the cogwheels. Before her, as the doors opened wide, a massive waterfall presented itself.

The sound of rushing water burst into the room as thunderous chutes cascaded over the doors and plummeted to a massive deep pool below. The fire continued to spread through the room, outlining the perimeter and sending a bright, warm glow all around. The waterfall roared majestically, radiating a true feeling of powerful life.

Lara grinned at the excitement before her. She dropped the torch to the ground, yanked the straps on her pack to tighten it around her shoulders, hopped back and then flung herself forward, sprinting to the edge. At the last second, she pushed off and launched her arms out from her body, forming a swan dive, and plummeted toward the water. She dropped in perfect form, plunging deep into the sacred pool.

Lara opened her eyes and looked around as she slowly swam toward the surface. Thousands of precious gems lined the bottom and sides of the pool, the light from above dancing among the facets. She sucked in a deep breath of air as her head broke through the surface. Treading water, she looked up and all around her at the magnificent scenery. Warm bursts of mist danced on the surface of the water. Lara swam closer to the waterfall, took a quick breath, and swam back down, under the falls. The incredible strength of the water pushed her down farther as she swam through and past them, surfacing a few moments later behind the falls.

The tranquil sound of the falls greeted her as she surfaced. She looked behind her through the curtain of clear water. "So much for the lack of water in Tikal," she laughed. She pulled herself onto a ledge at the edge of the water and stood up, looking ahead. A small closed door stood in front of her, two torches on either side. It appeared to have been carved out of wood and was the first piece she'd seen in Tikal that wasn't limestone. The chultun had obviously housed the delicate piece for some time, but it appeared to be in good shape. Lara stepped closer and noticed hundreds of symbols that had been carefully carved into the ancient wood. She picked up one of the torches, careful not to get too close with the flame, and began deciphering the messages.

“The end, or the beginning? 1,870,000 days after the beginning of the calculation of days the calendar will cease. The End of Days. The calendar, the Sun Stone, has predicted the outcome: solar planets aligning as one, drought, solar fires, and great shifting of the lands.” Lara noticed an image carved below, depicting the inscription, and pulled out her notebook to retrieve the piece of paper with the diagram she’d made in Temple Five. “This explains the aligning of the planets on the ceiling,” she noted, comparing her diagram to the drawing on the door. “They’ve predicted that our solar system will line up in a straight line and intersect the Galactic Equator on the same day.”

Lara glanced behind her again and began to decipher the meaning of the chultun aloud. “Perhaps the Maya wanted to be ready for this event. Hence the creation of the Great Pyramid: to protect themselves.” She glanced at the torch in her hand and continued her thoughts. “Timeless torches and a multitude of water stored inside — a perfect location.” She returned to the door and pressed her hand against it while studying the other inscriptions and drawings. “They believed in immortality, and the torches and waterfall are immortal, but their calendar seems to contradict these beliefs.” Lara shook her head, unable to find an answer to this. “If the Maya believed the end was when their calendar ceased, no wonder they were preparing this sanctuary.”

She flipped through her notebook and stopped when she saw one of her headings, *The Five Unlucky Days*. She held it by the fire, scanning the notes she had made. “Ah, the *other* calendar,” she murmured, running a finger under the information. “The Civil Calendar, the *Haab*, similar to our present calendar. Composed of 365 days, it has eighteen months of twenty days each, and one month that is only five days. These days, *uayeb*, were considered unlucky to the Maya. Perhaps this was when they were able to

detect changes and make predictions for the end of days?” She tucked her notebook away and stared at the inscriptions a moment longer, perplexed by all of the hidden messages and theories.

Unable to arrive at any solid conclusion, Lara reached out and pushed firmly on the unlocked door, ready to explore the next area. As the door opened and she stepped inside, she was welcomed immediately by a warm glow from several torches and a large room with richly painted red walls. She walked further into the sanctum, and her eyes lit up when the body of the room came into focus. Thousands of exceedingly intricate artefacts lined the floor, bursting with artistic mastery and power. Stunning jade figurines and chert knives lay scattered about with age-old oyster shells and a vast number of flints. Richly coloured blue and gold woven cloths housed the delicate riches, while tall pedestals exhibited precious jade masks. Beautiful bowls lay scattered about the room, decorated with gods, painted in bold reds, blues, and yellows. Tall vases stood in the corners of the room, elaborately decorated with intricate borders and valuable gemstones. Awestruck, Lara moved carefully about the majestic temple. Stuccoed wooden figures, almost twenty inches tall and painted a beautiful pale green, caught her eye. She walked over to one, recognizing it from one of the earlier temples. “The god of rain,” she said, sliding a hand over its perfectly structured frame. A long short table bore a vast number of clay figurines, possibly offerings to the Maya gods. She bent down and studied each one, completely absorbed in what she was doing. Each one possessed an elaborate hat and a large beaded necklace, and had wooden pieces that had been pierced through their ears.

At the far end of the room, Lara noticed a line of small incense burners. The ancient exotic scents wafted slowly through the room. She walked over to the burners and smiled as she inhaled the mystic and unique fragrances. Each incense burner contained a small figurine housing various incense fragments. As she examined each one, she noticed the bowl in the middle was bare. She picked it up, raising her eyebrows in surprise when she uncovered a small pressure pad. The ancient mechanism proved to be reliable: one part of the wall in front of her swung open, revealing another room beyond. Lara looked back at the truly wondrous scene, and stepped through the door. It swivelled back into place behind her.

Similar to the first, this room bore bold red walls, lit up by many torches. In the centre of the room, in a circular concaved floor, a single pedestal stood tall, holding a small artefact. Lara circled it slowly, gazing at the remarkable prize. A compact replica of the massive cogwheels lay atop the pedestal, held safely on top of a blue woven cloth. The cogwheels were joined like two rings and bore tiny pictures and Maya symbols.

“Simply remarkable,” Lara breathed. Not one to load herself up with treasures, she set the remaining glass bottles she had on the floor. In return, she reached out and grasped the cloth with both hands, lifting the priceless artefact as her own. Just as the piece was removed from the pedestal, the base on which she stood slowly began to retreat into the floor. She quickly grabbed a nearby torch and stepped onto the middle of the platform, sinking beneath the floor into a small shaft. As she continued to descend, her torch illuminated the walls, decorated with thousands of precious gems. Lara reached out, plucked one carefully from the wall, and tucked it into her backpack. After a few minutes, the platform finally came to rest, and she stepped off it into a small tunnel. She

walked quickly, arriving at the end in a short time, where she immediately spotted a lever.

Without any other available options, Lara pulled it down, and the wall in front swung open. Surprised and grinning, she stepped out into Tikal's national park once again. Unable to recognize her whereabouts right away in the early morning light, she headed east, and soon realized she had emerged from a tunnel connected to Temple One. Lara turned and was unable to detect where she had exited from, the grand temple concealing the entrance, or exit, to Tikal's grandiose secret.

She continued east toward the park entrance, moving stealthily through the jungle. A lone resplendent quetzal sang softly as it watched her from above, as if it knew she possessed the knowledge of the ancient Maya, the secret of the timeless and immortal sanctum never before discovered.

Only a small handful of guards patrolled the entrance and Lara was able to sneak past easily. As she emerged from the jungle onto the dirt road outside the park, she walked over to the main gate and handed the worker the small gemstone, wrapped carefully in a cloth.

"A small token of my appreciation for Juan," she said, handing over the piece. "Tell him it's a little souvenir."

The worker accepted the parcel nonchalantly, incurious about the seemingly valueless present.

Lara turned away and began to walk along the road, in search of one of Tikal's not-so-frequent buses. The sun was beginning to rise from behind, and she glanced back, just in time to see the sun's rays spreading throughout the ancient jungle, peeking out

from behind the tops of Tikal's magnificent temples. Turning back, she withdrew the cogwheels from her backpack, carefully unwrapping her precious find from the cloth. She held the piece up in front, and the light from behind illuminated both wheels. As she had expected, they came to life and began to turn. Lara slowed her pace as she gazed at the wheels, smiling to herself. Whether or not the calendar was correct with the End of Days, the Maya were truly extraordinary, having succeeded at finding the secret to immortality. The temples, animals, the Great Pyramid of the Lost World — all immortal, preserved carefully and flawlessly, housed in the sacred city.

Only time would tell if the ancient mechanism she possessed would correctly predict the end of the world, but only *she* had been able to truly enter the world of the Maya. Only she had uncovered one of their most secret and sacred places of all.

A Room in Waiting
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