

## Past explorations

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He thought it was difficult before – gazing on a child he'd failed.

He was wrong.

There was something far more painful.

Now, every time he let himself look at her, he found he was actually facing his long-gone friends. Dick and Amelia. He didn't think it was possible but somehow she managed to embody both of them at the same time.

Of course, the lion's share of the resemblance went to Amelia. Roth remembered joking with Dick about how that was a good thing given the alternative. It was shortly after Lara's birth, when the squashed, squirming newborn was starting to become a distinct person. Even back then it had been obvious that she would be a beauty, mirroring her mother with her high-set, soulful eyes and voluptuous lips.

A good dozen years had passed since then though, and Roth was having difficulty reconciling the fledgling stunner sitting before him in the London café with the cute little girl he used to remember tailing after him on dig sites.

She caught him staring at her from across the table.

"Sorry," he apologised, before settling on truth for the content of his explanation. "I just can't get over how grown-up you look. A right young lady. Not that tiny thing toddling about in her penguin pyjamas."

She chuckled. "I'm well over fourteen now, Uncle Roth."

"I know."

He'd made sure to call her on her last birthday; pencilled a reminder on his wall calendar and everything. He knew how hard special occasions were for her now. The last thing he wanted was a repeat of that first Christmas without her dad. Winston had told him all about it – how she'd snuck away from her uncle and aunt's place and returned to Croft Manor. After much panic among the caretaker staff, they eventually found little Lady Lara in the library. She was purple-lipped and shivering as she slept, curled up on a divan with her father's journal clutched to her chest.

As usual, the thought of that brought a silent curse to his lips.

*Damn you, Dick, for leaving her...*

*And leaving me with the task of watching over this sweet, sad-eyed girl.*

Because even when she was smiling, as she was then, there was unmistakable melancholy in Lara's gaze. The challenge was working out how much was grief and how much was just the awkwardness of her age.

Their drinks arrived then. An orange juice for her and an ale for him.

It gave him a chance to direct his thoughts away from his own sadness. As he sipped on his pint, he murmured, "Fourteen years old, 'ey? In that case you can drop the Uncle if you like; call me Conrad instead."

She pulled a face. "That feels weird. Can't I just call you Roth?"

"Whatever m'lady desires."

She flinched. "Please. M'lady desires you keep your voice down. It's bad enough everyone at school knows."

He was surprised at her shame. "Lara, you're a Croft. Your family has fought in wars, crushed rebellions, captured notorious highwaymen, sat in the House of Lords, explored the globe; not to mention unearthed ground-breaking archaeological finds. That's something like twelve generations of the most heroic and accomplished lords... and ladies."

"That's great," she scowled, while her fingers reflexively sought out the pendant around her neck.

During such moments, Roth always recognised Dick in the girl.

Lara was quiet and contemplative. That combination stemmed from her dad. The only thing that had ever really animated Dick was his work, or several pints... until he met feisty, fun-loving Amelia at least.

Roth imagined Lara would be much the same. She'd need someone outgoing to drag her from her head and remind her that she had a heart beating in her chest.

Right then, though, the teenager seemed hell-bent on disconnecting herself from the latter. Her brow remained knit as she said, "I don't want to be treated any differently, Roth. Everything I accomplish, I want to do on my own. I want to know that *I* worked for it; *I* earned it with my sweat and blood. Not with my bloodline opening doors for me. "

*Where had this come from?*

"That's admirable, girl. Truly. But you should never be ashamed of where you come from."

"I'm not. It's just – "

This was where Roth failed horribly as a substitute parent. He was sure Lara expected some encouraging words to coax out the rest of her admission. He just had no bloody clue what they would be. So he simply sat there, while the silence became a chasm between them.

Eventually Lara was able to bridge it alone.

She shook her head. "It's just if I can do it on my own, maybe I can leave the memories behind one day."

As she finished, a tremor passed through her shoulders. The last thing Roth wanted was for her to burst into tears in a public place. Then he really wouldn't know what to do.

He had a natural rapport with people, if they didn't grate against the gravel that was an ingrained part of his personality. He was all too aware these days, however, that his was a military-honed relationship style – ill-suited to interacting with a sensitive teenage girl.

Lara softened him though. He felt his battlements start to crack and crumble. It was her damn eyes.

"It's alright for it to hurt," he murmured. "I miss them every day."

He reached out and squeezed her hand.

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He remembered another time holding her hand – at Richard Croft's funeral.

Lara had always been a serious child, but in the aftermath of the incident, she had retreated into herself. Roth's years in the Royal Marines meant he was all too familiar with her condition. She was shell-shocked.

Ana, Dick's current squeeze, was far too devastated to be of any real comfort to the girl. So it was Roth who stood by Lara's side during the service, and let her clench his fingers throughout.

Given the circumstances surrounding Dick's death, there were few people present. Some stayed away out of principle – they clung to the view that Richard Croft had become a madman who brought their profession into disrepute. Others avoided the memorial clearly out of guilt, acknowledging that they were among the pack of wild dogs who'd torn him apart.

The reception at Croft Manor was similarly tainted by stigma. It was short and subdued, hurried along by Lara's knob of an uncle – the girl's official legal guardian – who clearly had no interest in being there.

After some obligatory handshaking, Lara made her escape when she believed no adult was looking.

Roth followed the eleven year old outside. When she sat down on the steps leading to the hedge maze, he joined her.

Lara simply stared ahead at the estate grounds. The ex-soldier gave her the silence and space he thought she needed. It was complete guesswork though. He'd never had to console a grieving child before.

Eventually Lara turned to him.

Her voice was practically a whisper. "Uncle Roth, I – I fought with him just before. It's my – "

"No!"

Realising he had startled the girl with his bark, Roth moderated his tone. "Don't you ever think that..."

*Because it's my fault.*

If Roth had accepted Dick's last expedition proposal, the archaeologist would have been preoccupied with work when the tsunami of ridicule struck. Except, in reality Roth had scoffed at the man's final theories. Abandoned, Dick had drowned. Leaving his daughter essentially alone in the world.

Lara swallowed. "But what if I tipped him over the edge?"

Roth placed his palm on the girl's shoulder. "Lara, your father was a man obsessed. He had his... demons. What happened had nothing to do with you, I promise. You were always the most important person in his life. He adored you."

Lara extracted Roth's hand, and shook her head slowly. Bitterly. "Not enough."

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Still, Lara had been so strong. She accepted her orphan status without tears, and simply got on with things.

So Roth was a fool if he simply saw her as a poor little rich girl.

She was more than that. She always had been.

Believing she was disempowered was a dangerous underestimation that he had to be careful about, particularly for the young Croft's sake. She was at an impressionable age, and the last thing he wanted was for her to start thinking she was weak and inconsequential.

*Internalising her inadequacies* and all that head-shrinker tripe.

A waitress appeared to place their food orders on the table. Lara seemed to be studying the freckled redhead as she served them. When the young woman was gone, Lara draped a paper serviette over her lap, and tucked in.

It gave Roth further opportunity to scrutinise his charge.

She'd shot up since he last saw her. He noticed it immediately when they met at Paddington Station that morning for their lunch date. When he put an arm around her, the crown of her head had almost aligned with his shoulder. Eight months back, she'd barely come up to his chest.

As she reached for the tomato sauce, he noted a full two inches of skin showing between her jacket sleeve and wrist.

Lara was going to be taller than her mother, he was certain. She would be lean and leggy like prior generations of Crofts, female and male alike.

Roth thought the teenager was too thin though. But then again, that could just be because her puppy fat was freshly burnt off in addition to her stretching out.

Despite all the stories of posh girls' schools and the pressure they put on students, he didn't really believe he had to worry about Lara developing one of those eating disorders. He'd barely touched his Dagwood while she was already almost a quarter of the way through her BLT and side of chips. Her appetite was certainly healthy.

He picked up his sandwich and bit off a mouthful.

*Give her a few months*, he decided while he chewed. By then her body type would have settled, and he'd know if he needed to take any action.

Already, he realised, there was a lot for him to keep an eye on.

Sitting at a table diagonal to theirs, close to the entrance, were two slick-looking men in their late twenties. They were bankers, brokers, or some other polished prat in a suit that Roth had always loathed. And they were shamelessly ogling Lara.

Roth felt himself bristle. Appetite was replaced with anger.

He wished he was wearing his holsters just then so he could run his palm over them for extra menacing effect. But alas. He was in civvies so as not to scare the soft Southerners. His glare alone would have to serve as discouragement.

It turned out to be quite effective on its own.

By the time a curious Lara followed his scowl, the bankers were in conversation like nothing had happened. The schoolgirl shrugged and got back to her food.

*God, he could do with a fag.*

Roth ran a hand over his close-cropped skull. His once dark hair had turned almost entirely steel-grey but he could imagine it'd be white by the time his friends' daughter was fully grown.

It wasn't his official responsibility to watch over Lara – to guide her – but he had realised early on that nobody else would do it. Lara's remaining relatives, along with the estate custodians, were happy for the girl to live at school until she came of age. Lara didn't seem to mind, but Roth was loathe to let that kind of half-life happen. He owed Dick and Amelia.

Their one true, living legacy was their daughter. She would remain behind even as the couple faded from memory; as acknowledgement of their accomplishments slipped further into back pages and footnotes.

Yet Roth knew he was a poor substitute parent. Frequently away on the other side of the planet, usually unreachable by phone, he realised how unreliable he was in an emergency.

Hell, he couldn't even sustain a real relationship. Reyes evidently had more of a casual attitude about what they were than he did. And since having Alisha, she rightly had other priorities than a grizzled Pommy treasure hunter with a wonky left ankle.

What kind of role model was he, really?

How did he think he could properly shepherd a young lady to adulthood?

It was about more than simply preparation. There was the issue of protection.

Already, Lara embodied desire. If Roth was a boy her age, he certainly would have pursued her. His brash younger self would have embraced the challenge of coaxing a kiss from the blue-blooded knockout a whole world out of his league.

That triggered a troubling thought.

He blurted, "Do you have a boyfriend?"

Lara almost choked on her orange juice. She blushed violently as she groped for another serviette to dab her mouth. "No."

"Good. Keep it that way for as long as possible." He stole one of her sauce-drenched chips. "Concentrate on your studies."

"I'm not interested in boys, Unc... Roth."

"You will be one day."

She pulled a face.

A further slap of worry.

He leaned across the table and murmured, "Lara, do we need to have The Talk? The birds and the bees?"

The girl stiffened. Then she smiled shyly, "No, it's alright. They made us watch a video at school. And we've been resoundingly lectured."

"I like the sound of your school."

Lara chuckled, "The boys at our brother establishment are horrid. I couldn't imagine..." She flushed again then, realising who she was confessing to. Finally she whispered, "...snogging one of them."

That pleased Roth no end to hear. He'd hoped Lara was sensible like her mother, and less of a dreamer like her father had been. From what she'd said, she definitely had her head screwed on right.

Sensible, and smart as a whip. But also shy and soft hearted. Lads could take advantage of that if Roth didn't instil some healthy scepticism in her – teach her not to let her guard down with boys who played on her sympathies. He made a mental note.

Lara was frowning through the table's surface all of a sudden.

"What is it?" Roth prompted.

"My mum and dad," the girl said, before lifting her gaze to his. "Did they *know* from when they first met? Dad never liked to talk about it."

*Roth, you fool. You opened this door with all your talk of boyfriends.*

At the end of the day, Lara was still a teenage girl – enticed and excited by tales of romance.

The captain wasn't sure how much was suitable to tell her, but he supposed she had already endured enough in her short life to handle the truth neat, without mixing in some syrup to make it more palatable.

"I can't speak for your mum, Lara, but your dad certainly was smitten from the start. He told me about it afterwards."

Roth explained, "Your father had girlfriends before of course. But there was never anyone truly special. Dick had reached a point where he thought there never would be. He'd pretty much given up on the idea of finding someone to share his life long-term. Your granddad was still alive back then, and while your father was home between expeditions Richard Sr. insisted Dick attend some sort of upper crust event or party; I can't remember which. Your dad hated it. So he couldn't wait to be out of there; counting the minutes until he could leave without seeming rude.

"Then your mother breezed in. A right breath of fresh air as your dad saw her. Amelia DeMornay. She wasn't highborn but she came from money so she'd moved effortlessly in those circles her whole life. She knew how to play the game. And that was always something about your mum – she liked to have fun."

He remembered her grin; the naughty delight in her eyes.

"Your dad had never met her before because she was quite a bit younger. But they were the perfect match. Well-travelled Amelia, with five languages under her belt. Very, very bright, much more than your father actually, but the stories always put her in his shadow."

Truthfully, it was more than looks that Lara had inherited from Amelia. Dick was no academic slouch, but the bigger serving of brains had clearly passed from mother to daughter. That and natural ease handling a firearm. Richard Croft had always been hopeless in that regard.

Roth cleared his throat and returned to his story.

"Anyway, after staring at her for ages, eventually your dad built up the courage to introduce himself and manoeuvre your mum away from the crowd."

*Always so smooth, Dick.*

"Your parents got to talking, and quickly discovered they were like-minded people. Same ambitions; same attitudes to life. Of course, being your mum she made Dick chase her for a while afterwards – made a sport of it – but, well, you know how it worked out. Love, marriage and a baby carriage."

By the time he finished the tale, Lara was grinning from ear to ear.

Roth cocked his head. "Trading in those dry old history books for bodice rippers?" he teased.

That shook her out of her daze.

"I'm not," she pouted. But her offended frown was quickly replaced by one of the soft smiles that usually curled her lips. "It's just... your stories make them feel like real people again."

The teenager had started unconsciously fingering her jade pendant once more. Her other hand was clenched next to her plate. She addressed the table, "It's been almost three years, and sometimes, well, I forget things. Mum I don't remember, but with dad, every now and then I find the details are slipping. Other times, it feels like he's just away on a dig and any minute I'll be called to the school reception hall where he's waiting to present me with some ridiculous souvenir."

Lara looked up then, straight at her unofficial guardian.

"You're the only one who can *really* tell me about them, Roth. And truthfully. I know you're not hiding anything from me. Thank you."

*He'd never found her mother after what happened. He hadn't saved her father from himself. But this. This he could do for her.*

"Any time, lass."

Roth reached across the table, and placed his palm over her still-balled fist.

"Sir?" Their waitress approached. "Would you or your daughter like anything else?"

The misinterpretation of their relationship startled the both of them. Roth felt Lara jerk.

Though when he glanced in her direction, it apparently hadn't been an unpleasant surprise.

It wasn't for him either, if he was being honest.

He'd be proud to have a daughter like Lara.

He beamed at the girl before muttering to the waitress, "No, I think we're good."

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Out on the street, Lara watched disapprovingly as he lit up.

He tried to distract her by regenerating the conversation, and focusing it entirely on her.

"So what are you up to this fine Bank Holiday weekend?"

"The solicitors sent me some money." She thrust her hands into her pockets, sulkily. "But I *have* to go clothes shopping because I outgrew everything this past term."

Roth almost dropped his cigarette. "Uh, do I need to – ? Do you want me to – ?"

A shopping expedition with a teenage girl was an even more daunting prospect than The Talk.

Lara read his discomfort plainly. "Oh, no. No. I wouldn't do that to you, Roth. I was just going to go on my own. Hopefully, if I have enough time afterwards, I can visit a bookstore or get into the British Museum. They've got a special expanded exhibit on bog bodies at the moment, from across Europe. Along with a display on the latest technologies in forensic reconstruction."

The way her face lit up when she talked archaeology – Dick had got his wish of a protégé after all.

Roth asked, "You going to see Ana?"

"No, she has some family thing."



Roth murmured, "I'm sorry work came up this weekend. During the Summer holidays we'll go climbing though. Carry on with our own Three Peaks Challenge by tackling Ben Nevis next. What do you say?"

She gasped, "Really?"

"Why not? It'll be a good refresher on mountain safety for you."

Lara nodded; then added with a bare-teethed, pleading smile, "And then the rest of Summer on the Endurance?"

"Maybe when I'm leading my own expeditions and I'm not simply a hired hand, lass."

Getting permission from Lara's uncle wouldn't be a problem. He didn't care. But business hadn't exactly been booming since Dick's death, forcing Roth to accept contracts with several very unsavoury clients. There was no way he wanted an enticingly pretty brunette – barely out of childhood – exposed to their grease and slime.

Lara at least accepted his reasoning without further probing. "Okay."

Once Roth had finished his cigarette, the pair started ambling down the road.

"What else do young ladies do in London these days when they're released from boarding school?" He added with a wink, "Or do I really want to know?"

Lara chuckled, "It's not that exciting really. I have a sleepover tonight with some girls from my year."

"Your friends?"

She shrugged. "I suppose so. They're nice. It's Gwen's family's place. She's in Rifle Club with me."

"Rifle Club?"

He knew about her archery, but he had no idea she had taken up shooting too. He'd left his grubby old comprehensive school in Fifth Form but even then all it had offered boys was football, and fistfights behind the woodwork shed.

"I'm impressed. Have I told you how much I approve of your school's extra-curricular programme?"

She grinned, "I thought you would."

A heartbeat later, her smile faded.

There was a flicker of sadness in her pupils, before the unmistakably sheen of steel shined through. "I just have to be prepared, Roth. If I'm going to do this my way."

Roth's hand settled on the nape of his charge's neck. It was so slender cupped in his palm.

"Lara, I have no doubt that you will accomplish anything you put your mind to. But you never have to do it alone. I'm here for you, girl. Always."

He wasn't expecting it when she suddenly turned into him, and clasped him in a hug – with her arms tight around his middle; her cheek against his chest.

He felt awkward with this kind of physical affection, especially where anyone could see, but the girl clearly needed it. He rested his chin on the top of her head, stroking clean hair that smelled like Aloe, until she finally disengaged.

He kept his mouth shut while she rubbed her eyes. She needed non-judgemental silence from him just then too.

"I'm going to take the tube from here," she eventually announced. They were standing across the street from a station entrance.

"Alright."

"Please say hi to Grim for me."

"I will."

*The old bugger would spit out his Irn-Bru if he saw you now.*

Roth knew it would embarrass the teenager if he said it, though – and end their afternoon on a sour note – so he kept the remark to himself.

Lara was looking up at her guardian again, with all seriousness. "Roth, thank you. For everything."

"It's been good seeing you again, girl."

"You too."

She grabbed her backpack straps in both hands, hefted her luggage higher on her body, and smiled one final time. "Bye."

Roth watched her go.

His heart ached for her, but at the same time, after their lunch together, it felt lighter too.

He didn't have to worry about Lara.

Life hadn't been kind to her so far, but its battering had tempered her; he could see it.

She was turning out fine.

More than fine.

Even if she didn't believe it of herself, she was strong and razor-sharp; focused and self-sufficient.

It had nothing to do with Roth's guidance.

It wasn't because she was a Croft.

It wasn't even because of everything Dick and Amelia had instilled in her, consciously or otherwise.

It was because of who *she* was. Who she was destined to become.

And Roth was going to be there the entire time. He looked forward to it.