

A Thoughtful Gift



The clatter had echoed through the entire house. When Lara picked up the parcel she had spent quite some time wrapping before attempting to put it on the top of her wardrobe, it made a rattling sound. It was at most a few hours before the last of the staff would take their leave over the holidays. This year, even Winston would leave along with them for a few days to visit family overseas. Over the many years he had been attending her, he had proven an invaluable asset in his function as head butler, but also had become a close friend of hers. Lara had wanted to present him with a little gift upon his leave, but judging from the noises coming from the box in her hands, Miss Croft could tell that this plan had just gone south. She needed a plan B, and quick.

Her mind was racing. Ordering something on the net was out of the question, because the delivery people would never make it to the remote estate in time. She would have to find a solution to the problem at hand somewhere in the house. Lara knew that Winston wasn't a big fan of artifacts. In fact, he had once confided in her that he thought of some of them as mere dustcatchers. That was before he had recommended Lara have her entire collection put behind glass, "for security reasons," as he put it. Presenting him with an artifact thus wasn't an option either. That made things a bit more challenging, but fortunately Lara was a natural when it came to improvising. However, while creating a weapon from anything at hand stated no problem to an experienced adventurer as herself, Lara had to admit that she was all butterfingers when it came to crafting. Though the present that now contained nothing but broken bits had needed only a

comparatively small sheet of shiny red wrapping paper, Lara had used up half a roll of it in several negative attempts to cover the small cube-shaped box in an intact layer of it. What other options were there?



A knock on the door interrupted Lara's thoughts. Surprised, she let the parcel fall to her feet and kicked it across the room, where it landed under the bed with more clatter. If its contents could have been saved before, they sure were beyond repair now. Lara silently cursed her rash action. From the other side of the door she could hear Winston's worried voice, asking if everything was all right in there, and if he may come in.

Lara spurted to the door and opened it. "Sure," she said, "I was just disposing of some garbage." Winston eyed her with an expression she knew all too well. That was the look he had given her whenever he'd known she was up to something as a kid, only that now his ever so familiar face looked much older. Deep wrinkles framed his soft smile as well as those dark eyes that seemed almost black except for a sparkle of blue illuminated by the morning light coming in through the lancet windows in Lara's bedroom. Apart from that, he still looked the same with his worn-in but highly polished shoes and flawless tuxedo uniform. "Before I make the arrangements for tonight, here is something I would like to give to you, Lara" he said, sliding a hand into his tuxedo and producing a tiny parcel with a note attached to the bow on top of it. Lara took the gift Winston held out for her to take. "Thank you, Winston." Her voice was unusually low. The head butler nodded as he turned on the doorstep and made his way down the corridor.



Lara closed the door and sat down on the edge of her bed. The note on top of the parcel was folded into a small envelope. She took it off and unfolded it carefully to read:

Miss Croft,

I found this among the books Mrs Hollingsworth never managed to pick up when I unshelved them to have them put into storage. As your tutor, she taught you history in a very sophisticated way that you seemed to find very inspiring. This is why I retrieved what I think could still inspire you today. It seems to me, however, that Mrs Hollingsworth omitted giving you an important piece of framework, if I may take the liberty of saying so. Given the course of your young life, which has known it's ups, but also terrible downs, I would therefore like to give you something to think about along with this fragment of your past:

We are more than our personal history. The human condition entails a physical experience in every single move we make and it is the experiences we have that make our story so much more meaningful and vivid to ourselves than words could ever possibly convey. As a consequence, our memories are not made of mere historic facts, but also the feelings attached to them. These feelings can be uplifting keepsakes, or haunting aftermaths of the physical experience one had when the memory was made. Either way, I have learned to understand that our memories have a way of shaping us. But always remember that you have the power to let them change you for the better.

That being said, I wish you a merry yuletide. (!)

Faithfully in your service,

Winston

She let herself fall back onto her bed and thought about what she had just read. This note was definitely graver than your average Christmas



card message. She did not know what to make of it, for now, so she rolled over onto her stomach and began unwrapping the parcel. Inside was a leather-bound booklet with a blue tail band hanging out of it. Lara browsed through the pages. They were filled with illustrations of exotic herbs and texts describing their typical features. When she reached the page marked by the thin strip of cord, she recognised her father's handwriting in a side note. *Edible only when blanched*, it read. Next to it was an image of a plant native to North America. Lara had almost forgotten that her father had been fond of botany, once. Obviously, Mrs Hollingsworth had granted him access to her private book collection. Now fiddling with the end of her braid, she thought about the note and the book in her hands, but no matter how hard she tried, she could not quite fathom the meaning of all this. It was a bit much to digest.

Meanwhile it was almost noon and Lara decided to put the enigma Winston had given her aside for the time being. She needed to find a replacement for the battered giftbox under her bed and time was running out. She stood, crossed the room and put the note between the pages of the booklet before starting into the secret passage that led to the attic, which was the first place that had come to mind.



Some particles of dust hovered in the air within the light cone of the attic lamp, and where the sun shone in through the small dirty window. Lara breathed in the chilly air. It was pregnant with the sweet smell of aged wood from the roof beams and floorboards. There were crates covered with dusty sheets of cloth next to the chimney. She started into the room and towards

the crates. Her steps made silent creaky noises on the floorboards. The air was a little warmer on the other side of the attic, but still below housing temperature.

Glancing over the crates, Lara noticed a pile of wooden boxes behind a big crate in a dimly lit corner. She pushed the heavy case a little to her left and sidestepped it to get to the boxes. She pulled back the cloth covering the top of the pile and inhaled some erupted dust. After her coughing had ceased, she cleared her dry throat and began to scan the contents of the boxes for something that would catch her attention.

Sure enough, the fourth box she opened contained a few valuable Egyptian trinkets and ceremonial objects from the twenty-fifth dynasty. Lara picked up a small faience amulet in the shape of an ankh and was holding it in her fist as a sudden thought shot through her brain, accompanied by a sinking feeling in her stomach: She had almost died in Egypt.

When Lara heard the amulet hit the ground with a faint noise, she realised that her thoughts must have trailed off for a moment. She looked down to her feet and saw that the ankh was still intact. Then she noticed something glint in the box next to it. She dug her hand into the jumble of loot and pulled out a heavy metal plate. Once she had turned it over, she saw the engraved inscription:

Lara Croft

Once and Future Adventurer

Winston must have kept the plate after Lara saw to the memorial erected in her memory at the time she was missing being demolished. After all, she had returned. That thought in her head, something clicked into place in her mind. Now she understood what Winston had meant to say with his unusual gift and note.



Winston put down his luggage and offered her a vague smile when Lara came dashing down the stairs and past the big Christmas tree in the hall to meet him at the main doors. "I see you have changed" he said. Indeed, Lara had had to get changed after her trip to the dusty attic. Now she wore an ensemble in white and grey that highlighted the turquoise blue ankh she wore on a leather cord around her neck. "And may I ask what revived your interest in Egyptian bijouterie?" he continued. "Did you know that the ankh is a symbol for life?" Lara asked, holding up the ankh between two fingers and her thumb and coming a little closer. The old man eyed the amulet briefly. "Someone has pointed that out to me at some time, yes."

Their eyes met and Lara was groping for words. "Your gift was very thoughtful," she started and retrieved the booklet from her back pocket. "It has helped me put some things in perspective." Winston's eyes grew wider and he tilted his head, encouraging her to go on. She held up the book to him. "Father gave up his passions and limited himself more and more until there was no incentive left for him but his obsessive search for answers. He was driven by his pain, and it blinded him." Her voice broke and she cleared her throat to continue. "I think that maybe I've been blinded for a while, by an insatiable thirst for adventure. In Egypt, it took just one reckless act that almost cost me everything." She opened the booklet and pulled out a Polaroid snapshot of her and Winston in front of the manor house. "I will try to let my memories be a vehicle to help me make better decisions in the future." She finished with a shy smile and handed Winston the photograph. He was beaming at her. She had proven to him that she had understood and accepted his advice, and it was enough to make them both feel a certain warmth inside.

November 2015,
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