

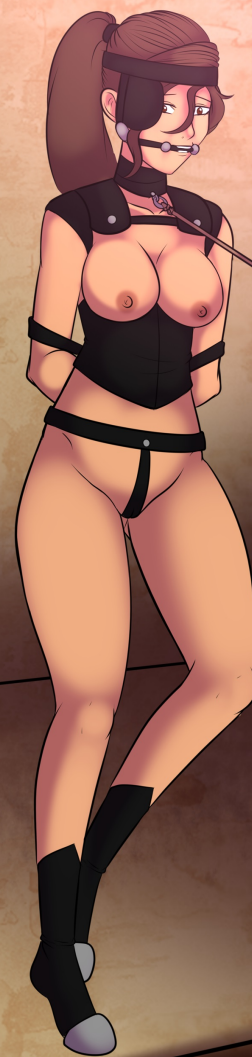
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REINS OF THE

TOMB RAIDER

- REMASTERED -

Chapter 3 : Stop Thief

“Good morning, Zamir, my friend.”

The Earl of Faringdon came to me the next morning, well rested and eyes clear. There was a halo around him that I had seen surround brave men in the harshest winters, after those warriors had bested the unending snows and howling winds that assailed the mountains. He smiled and clasped me on the back, rocking on his heels when I did the same to him. He no longer winced when my palm met his shoulderblades.

“James, my good friend, good morning,” I answered, pulling him into a tight embrace. “You look well slept. Have you taken food or drink to break the fast of sleep?”

“I have not, my friend, but if that is your invitation I will accept it,” he said, grinning. We went in and helped my lovely wife complete an adult's meal, we all dancing around the children as they cleaned the remnants of their feasting. She gave my friend a wry look, commenting that his figure was like her own, and he flexed and stood back, placing his hands on his hips, saying that she was his ideal. We all laughed, the sound rich and loud, and the children laughed with us.

After the meal, we tended the garden outside together. There was a comfortable pattern we fell into knowing one another, collecting avocados and pomegranates until the sun reached its zenith. I handed him a towel to wipe the sweat from his brow as the children took the baskets towards our house. When he offered me a drink from his flask, I took it, though the whiskey within was weak like water. It was an import, he told me, from the conquered neighbor of his homeland, Scotland.

“I was wondering if I could talk to your cousin,” he said. I handed him back his flask and matched his grin with one of my own.

“Of course!” I said. We paused only to make the proper offering to Bacchus when we passed his fountain, and my cousin came out to meet us with wide arms and a wider smile. The cameras that covered our land gave him ample time to prepare. We all embraced, each of us in turn, clasping one another in proper custom.

“Do you wish to look at the Croft woman?” Ivo asked. “We are recording all the evidence we might need.”

“No, no, nothing so base,” James said, leaning closer to us, his smile born of secrets. “I would like a chance to speak with her, show her the local cuisine.” There is some concern here – Ivo and I wondering if he might be trying to warn her out of some misguided softness, but he assures us both that our winters have made him hard.

“I did not know myself until I came to this great nation,” the Earl of Faringdon tells us. “By blood, I am a noble of some far off land, but my soul belongs to glorious Parmistan. In fact, I urge you to watch in on our dinner, and to record every word.” The glint in his eye made Ivo think that perhaps our friend had some ulterior motive.

That very night, my friend approached the inn in Routard, feigning surprise when he found Lara sitting down to a traditional Parmistani meal. He had switched back to the drab clothing of his homeland, kept apart from his normal wear and yet still hardy from disuse. Lara looked delighted to see him, standing up and pulling him into a warm embrace.

“James!” she said, and when she stood back, she looked at him with clear affection and ran one of her fine-boned hands through his hair. Her voice, even in excitement and surprise, held a smoky quality, and she pulled him to her table, sat him down, stared at him with a steady and confident gaze. “What

are you doing here?”

“I took an ambassadorship,” James said, bowing his head in a demure fashion, so very much like the woman he resembled. “I heard there was an Englishwoman staying here, and it seemed prudent to look in on... Amelia DeMornay, was it?”

“I’m something of a celebrity now,” Lara chuckled and shrugged, her elbows on the table. I swallowed, felt my cheeks flush – this was a woman for keeping warm in winter, I thought, and I could see the effect she was having on my cousin and on my friend. “I prefer travelling incognito these days. But you? Here? An ambassador?”

“I needed to get away from home after you left for Syria.”

“The country has been good to you,” Lara said, her grin infectious, her eyes roaming him all over. As lovely as the picture of her was, I found that she was yet more beautiful in motion, at once wild and dignified. “Have you looked into the history of this place at all?”

“A bit,” James shrugged, though I knew he had gone deeper than that. We people of Parmistan are proud of our heritage, and any one that claimed our nation as their home would know much of the land and those that lived upon it, from one century to the next. I wondered at the purpose behind this charade, but trusted that some game I did not know was being played between them. “I know it was founded twenty-hundred years ago by one of the Roman emperors.”

“Gaius Caesar, though he’s better known as Caligula.” Lara’s eyes flashed with excitement, her accent cultured. I felt myself harden wondering what it would be like to ride such a mare. “The place they call the Village of the Damned is where he lived, and where he was finally buried. Did you know that? They snuck his remains all the way out here and buried him out there.”

“I didn’t,” James said, and his smile was a sly thing. “Please, go on.”

And she told him: that Parmistan had started as a pleasurable escape for that long dead Emperor, that his wildest excesses had been brought to life here. This was why Bacchus smiled upon us, even to this day. As to our human beasts of burden, well, that was why we paid homage to Neptune; there had been no way to bring larger domestic animals up the difficult terrain, so criminals and slaves had been turned into low beasts of burden in their absence.

And that tradition we had kept alive since the most ancient of days. Our line of Emperors traced their blood back to Gaius Caesar himself, and every child of Parmistan knew the stories: the institution of the monarchy, the fights for independence, the history and majesty of our proud country. The establishment of the Great Game, and the refinements it had undergone. The means by which we had become a hidden world power in the Cold War, a power kept hidden by our desire to be left alone and our holding of all the world’s political secrets.

“I should warn you, the people here take the law very seriously,” James said, leaning closer to her, resting on his elbows. He looked and sounded bored. “Their location and political position makes it difficult to protect foreign nationals. Be careful, okay? Don’t break any laws while you’re here.”

Ivo sucked in a harsh breath at these words, thinking we were being betrayed, but I laughed as I saw the game our friend was playing. I explained it to my cousin and we both laughed and laughed, rumbling from deep in our bellies. By giving her this warning he had doomed her in any legal sense – we could backdate her crimes and make it look like he had provided consul that she had then ignored. He was protecting himself and us, for no one would doubt our right to punish her after she had been so warned.

“He has done our glorious nation a mighty service,” Ivo told me, clasping me on the back. “We must do him one in kind.”

“I have a gift in mind,” I answered, unable to keep the grin from my face. “I will talk to the Emperor.”

“I have my own preparations to make,” Ivo grinned. “Go. My wife hunted Markhor just yesterday, and the children should have it ready for dinner tonight. Will you, your family, and our dear Earl join us for dinner?”

“Myself and my family, certainly.” Looking back the monitors, I could see my friend continue his conversation with the Croft woman. “I can make no promises for our friend.”

Ivo grinned at me, nodding, and we left to fulfill our tasks, knowing that this night was the last night that Lara Croft would stand free.