

Horcrux Raider

She stood alone on the balcony and looked down into the foyer of the mansion. She could see her goal in the centre, protected by enough security systems to deter even the most hardened thief.

She slowly raised her hand and pulled her long black hair into a tight ponytail, a few deft twists of her wrists tied it in place with a black band.

With a deep breath, she took a few steps forward and jumped off, her arms out stretched for balance. As she started to fall, she leant forward, controlling it with the ease of long practice.

Ten feet above the ground the cord around her legs tightened, slowing her descent, so that she was able to land without breaking anything major.

On the floor, she looked around carefully, before pulling out an aerosol. She sprayed and smiled as the laser security protection was suddenly visible, the light bouncing of the particles she had just released.

She took a few steps backward, before launching herself into a flowing forward roll, landing slightly sideways so that she could spring to her feet, jump over the next one, before continuing into a series of back flips that took her past the rest of the lasers.

She allowed herself a small smile of triumph, before she examined her goal. It was the largest emerald she had ever seen, rumoured to have been the focus stone of Merlin. She pulled out a suction pad and a glass cutter from her back-pack, and made quick work of creating a hole in the case.

With a deep breath and a steady hand, she pulled the emerald out of the box only for an alarm to go off.

She cursed at herself, a pressure sensitive pad - that was a rookie mistake, she knew better than that. She dropped the emerald into her backpack and slung it back over her shoulders - the need for silence now long gone.

In front of her and to the sides, steel shutters rolled back, revealing mechanical nightmares with obvious cylindrical chambers. She bit of a curse as her hands moved around her back and her two Desert Eagle .44 magnums seemed to jump enthusiastically into her hands.

"Show time," she whispered and started to move.

The movement attracted the attention of the automated machines that turned as one and started to fire.

She jumped forward, landing and rolling behind a stone pillar, as chips of marble exploded around her head. She turned, took a deep breath, and at the first change stepped out and fired; four bullets rocketed out of each gun, smashing into the robot. She was aiming at the only glass she could see, hoping that would be a weak spot.

She stepped back behind the pillar as the first robot started to rotate wildly, spraying bullets indiscriminately. The other robots turned toward it and fired, heavy calibre bullets reducing it to scrap metal within seconds.

She peeked around the corner, four more machines. Eight more bullets before she needed to reload. She chose the one to her far right, and rolled out of her cover, trying the same trick again.

The machine raised its left appendage, blocking the bullets, causing them to bounce into the air. "Great, artificial intelligence as well," she groaned. She slid along her side toward a stone statue and hid before it, ejecting the spent clips from her guns with the ease of long practice. Her hands moved automatically, reloading from her belt without her even thinking about it, the routine locked in her brain.

She exploded out of her cover, dodging the bullets that came perilously close to ending her young life and used a chair as a spring board, twisting in the air gracefully, landing on the back of one of the machines. The others, seeing her, fired, not caring that they were hitting one of their own. She dropped to the ground behind it as it returned fire, its AI insisting that it defend itself against a hostile attack.

Two more down, two to go.

One was to her left, moving toward her slowly, the other straight ahead. She looked up and ducked again, avoiding the barrage of bullets sent her way.

She ran to the right, shooting as she ran, careful to keep her wrists locked against the unforgiving backward motion of the slide, as she fired above the machine that had been in front of her. Sixteen bullets flew out of weapons as she used all her ammunition in one go.

It was enough. A heavy statute toppled forward, its support ruined, and landed on top of the robot.

She turned and dived to her right as a large table came flying at her, she hadn't expected that, and cursed as she dropped her guns. They slid on the floor, tantalisingly out of reach.

She started to go for them, but a burst of bullets persuaded her that was a bad idea.

From her boot she pulled out a Gerber knife and smiled grimly to herself. She scampered away from her guns, keeping as low as she could as she silently circled the machine, before dashing into to attack it manually.

She concentrated on the cylinders, doing everything she could to stop it being able to fire. She jammed her knife a foot behind the barrel and prayed - a clicking sound suggested that she had succeeded.

She felt something wrap around her stomach and throw her away. She twisted, moving her hands out for balance and landed on her feet. These machines always seemed to throw her, and never use their strength to squash her - something she was very relieved about.

A dull clicking came from the robots chest, as its gun continued to misfire. She smiled at it, until it's right arm seemed to rotate on itself and a the whirring of a chain-saw filled the air.

She smiled to herself and wandered over to her guns. Only an idiot would take it on in a fair fight, and her one small mistake earlier did not make her an idiot.

She nodded at the machine and reloaded, before emptying them into the robot.

"Damn it, Lara," Bryce swore. "You were supposed to take it on without your guns."

She shrugged, placing her guns on his proffered tray. "Thanks, Hilary," she said with a smile as she took the towel. "A nice workout."

"Indeed," he replied, looking distastefully at the mess. "There is a visitor for you."

"Oh?"

"I asked him to wait in the conservatory."

"But he refused," a new voice said, causing her to turn, her hands flying out and grabbing her guns back. She pointed them at him, her fingers on the triggers.

He looked faintly amused, as much as she could tell; his eyes were covered by a pair of expensive looking sun glasses. "I believe those will work better with ammunition," he offered with a smile.

She growled under her breath, her hands flashing down, ejecting the clips again, the guns moving toward her belt.

"Please, Countess," he said dragging her attention back to her. "I'm here to talk, not fight."

"Then why didn't you stay in the conservatory?" she asked, continuing to reload, only without the same speed.

"I have good hearing," he shrugged. "And a degree of curiosity."

"Curiosity killed the cat."

"But at least it died finding out something new."

"It would be better to live."

"If that was true, my Lady, then you would never have found the Philosopher's Stone."

Acting on instinct she raised her hands and pointed her guns at him again. She could feel Hilary and Bryce back away.

"You have me at a disadvantage, Mr...?"

"Yes, I do," he nodded. "Shall I wait for you in the conservatory while you change, or are you happy to talk now?"

"Do I offend you?" she asked warily, her hands not moving, despite the weight of the guns in her hands.

"Quite the contrary," he said cheerfully. "I'd rather you didn't, personally."

"You do know that these guns are capable of creating very large holes in your chest?"

He smiled at her, "They could," he agreed. "But then you would go forever not knowing why I was here and why I want to hire you, wouldn't you."

She absently rotated her guns around her fingers and holstered them. "Indeed."

She followed him as he walked confidently through Croft Mansion and into the conservatory. He pulled one of the straight back chairs from a table, spun it around, and straddled it, resting his arms across the top.

"Why do you sit like that?" she asked.

"Because it looks cool?" he offered.

She shook her head, hiding a small smile.

"Because it stops a knife to the stomach, and it's easier to get out of."

"Better," she nodded. "Who are you?"

He took a long look at her and slowly removed his glasses.

At first glance he appeared younger than her, maybe eighteen to her twenty-two, but that was before she met his eyes. The colour reminded her of the emerald she had just practised with, it was a vibrant green of the like she'd never seen on a human before. But it was beneath that, beneath the colour that got to her. The eyes were hard, guarded, they were the eyes of someone forced to grow up too fast, someone who had seen things that he had no right to see. He was a survivor, a fighter. She knew this, because she recognised his eyes.

She saw them every time she looked into a mirror.

"My name is Harry James Potter, my dear Countess."

"Titles?" she demanded.

He smiled at her and nodded, acknowledging her instincts. "Lord Potter and Lord-Protector of the Ancient and Noble House of Black," he said with a mocking bow of his head.

"Lord Potter," she mused. "Most people think that you are dead."

"Just with relatives followed by boarding school."

She nodded, trying to remember what she knew about his family - which wasn't much. "So, what can I do for you?"

"Tell me," he said. "Have you ever heard of a Horcrux? It's just that I've misplaced a few, and I urgently need some help finding them."

"How seriously?" she asked.

He looked at her seriously. "End of the world serious."

She smiled slowly. "My sort of business," she allowed. "Let's talk business."

"Tell me, Ms Croft, do you believe in magic?"