

Symbol Chaser
The gallows of Changbai
by Garnt Meulendijks

“Sasha.” The sound of Lisa’s voice interrupted a blissful sleep. “Sasha.” The warlock decided to comfortably ignore the distant words. “Sasha!” This time the words were shouted too close to his ear to ignore. He shot upright, banging his head against the top bunk. Lisa was standing at the window of the compartment they had stayed in for the past few days. “What?” he grumbled. “We’re there.” He got up, rubbing his head. He was sure it’d bruise. Outside the landscape glided by slowly. The rhythm of the train was less rushed than it had been when Sasha laid his head down, indicating they were approaching a station. It was dusk. A pale strip of sunlight was visible over the horizon, providing a nice contrast between the intense darkness of the Chinese countryside, where modern conveniences like street lighting didn’t appear to have taken hold, and the last remnants of daylight obscuring the stars in the night sky.

Sasha sensed it now that he was fully awake. He felt the presence of symbol magic. It was faint and distant still, but he could sense it. And once the scent was with him, he knew it was only a matter of time before he found what he was looking for. It had been an interesting development, this trip. Usually he had to hunt symbols based on ancient information, or simply because he arrived somewhere in the world and his senses told him there was a symbol nearby. But this time they had been summoned. Summoned to a remote Chinese province, to the side of a volcano, where apparently someone needed help of a magical nature. What exactly the problem was, hadn’t been specified. But the provided first class tickets for both the airplane and the train ride from Shanghai to Changbai made it easier to go and take a look. Now that he was here, he was happy he had done so. The magic he sensed was powerful. And more to the point; it felt young, alive even.

The train came to a halt. Sasha and Lisa gathered their things, checked the compartment to make sure they weren’t forgetting anything and then disembarked. There were only a few passengers getting off at this stop. The platform was dimly lit and as the train pulled out again, the two companions were left to their own devices. “So, our mystery contact was supposed to meet us here?” Lisa inquired. Sasha nodded. “According to the letter I received, someone should be here to meet us and point us in the direction of the ‘issue’.” He looked around. There were a few people on the platform aside from them. Across the tracks was another platform that also had a few people either waiting for a train or walking around doing, well, whatever it was they were doing. Focussing back on their own platform, his eye fell on a young woman who seemed to be looking at them. When their eyes met, the woman started towards them. “I think we have found our contact.” The woman stopped a few feet from the two. She was a local, dressed in a green dress with golden embroidery flowing up and down the length of it. Her hair was tied back into a bun. Sasha estimated her to be about twentyfive years old. “Good evening Sasha, Tamarinde. I am glad to see you. I trust your journey was a pleasant one?” The woman spoke English flawlessly. “My name is Mai. We have much to discuss. Would you follow me please?”

She invited them to follow her and guided them off the platform. Sasha and Lisa were travelling light, so all they needed to carry with them were their backpacks. Sasha’s cane tapped the ground rhythmically as he followed their mysterious hostess away from the station and into the city of Changbai. Changbai wasn’t a large place. By all accounts it might as well be called a village. The streets Mai guided them through were clean and well lit.

There were many hotels, bed & breakfasts and other tourist oriented businesses around. Sasha had read up a bit on the area. Changbai had a number of very popular tourist attractions. The volcano that towered over the town to the northwest being one of them. Another was a waterfall. The area was also rumored to be the birthplace of a number of founders for a very well-known imperial dynasty the name of which now eluded Sasha. Chinese names very much sounded alike to him. The culture fascinated him though. The Chinese people had evolved many a technology well before many other civilisations. Not to mention the vast amount of magical history. Sasha had always meant to travel China in search of symbols, but there were a number of very powerful organisations at play in the country that didn't very much appreciate outsider interference in their affairs.

Mai led them away from the tourist center and into a more residential area where they passed through a couple of streets before they entered the door of what turned out to be a very modest home. It was clean and well kept, but small. There were two rooms, with the front door opening directly into what might be referred to as the living room. It also served as a kitchen and bathroom, with a shower tucked into one corner behind a curtain with a very un-Chinese floral pattern. In terms of furniture, the only things worth mentioning were a coffee table, a couch and a small cupboard that seemed to hold everything Mai owned. A small and very old tv sat on the floor next to it. The second room seemed to function as a bedroom.

"Please, sit down. I will make us some tea." Lisa and Sasha sat down on the couch while Mai proceeded into the kitchen area and put on a kettle. She spent some time preparing a tray and a few minutes later the three of them were enjoying a freshly made pot of Chinese black tea. They sat in silence for a while, drinking the tea. Once Sasha finished his cup, Mai refilled it. He left it on the table, tapped his cane a few times while looking around, contemplating how he would enter into the conversation. Luckily for him, Mai beat him to it. "I am certain you are wondering why you are here." Both of them couldn't help but nod in agreement. "First I will tell you who I am. My name is Mai Chen. I am an agent for Gǔrén, the Ancient. And we need your help." Sasha frowned. He had heard of the Ancient. More to the point, the Ancient were exactly the organisation that had kept him from hunting on Chinese soil before. They were well known for their aggressive approach at defending Chinese heritage. At least among those that sought to mess with it. And if anyone had not heard of them and decided it might be a good idea to steal a piece of art, or a priceless artifact from the name-a-dynasty, they would soon find out that cutting off hands from thieves hadn't died out after all. If that was all they cut off.

"And why exactly would the Ancient want the help of a symbol chaser? Isn't it a bit counter-intuitive to allow a 'thief' in to steal something?" He decided to air-quote the word thief, since he didn't think of himself as one, but knew that many did. "Because the alternative is a lot worse." Mai stood up, walked over to the small cupboard and retrieved a scroll from it which she handed to Sasha. He took it and opened it. It was blank. He gave it to Lisa, who looked it over a few times before putting it down on the table. "That scroll used to contain a symbol, which was specifically scribed to protect the city from the volcano. Ever since it was created many centuries ago, it hung in the town hall and there haven't been any eruptions since." Lisa looked at Sasha. "A symbol chaser?" Sasha shrugged. "I get the

feeling there is more to the story.” Mai nodded. “A few months ago, the scroll was found empty by a clerk at the town hall. No one thought much of it, the scroll being ancient superstition to many people nowadays. But ever since, there have been increased reports of seismic activity in the region. The water in the nearby lake has become polluted by sulfur, turning it yellow and toxic. Some people claim they have seen smoke coming from crevasses on the far side of the volcano. All in all, a big problem.”

Sasha picked up the scroll again, looking it over. He didn't sense any residual magic in the scroll. “So what is it you want us to do? You want Lisa here to scribe a new symbol?” Lisa wasn't thrilled at the idea Sasha suggested. Even though she had been practicing for a while now, a protection spell of this magnitude would require skill she wasn't sure she had yet. “Not exactly. You see. About a month ago, the mayor found this on the steps of town hall.” Mai produced a small, rectangular, black object. There was Chinese text on it. When Sasha touched it, it felt smooth, cold. Like glass. He sensed some magic lingering in the cold, dark artifact. “The text says that the people of Changbai are in danger and that only payment in labor will save them from doom. Failure to comply will result in the destruction of the city.” He turned over the object. A single symbol was etched into the back. The symbol of death. “The mayor died that night, in his sleep. That is when I was called in and started to investigate.” Sasha handed the object to Lisa. “And what have you found thus far?” Lisa looked over the object. She could see her reflection in its surface. “I believe we are dealing with an artificer.”

Lisa couldn't help but react to this new bit of information. “An artificer? What is that?” Sasha turned to her. “Artificers are another order of witch. Like symbol chasers and scribes. They specialise in the creation of magical artifacts that have special properties, depending on the magic imbued into them.” He pointed at the object she was holding. “Their preferred material? Obsidian, or volcanic glass.” Mai nodded. “Indeed. And we believe an artificer has taken up shop in Changbai, holding the city hostage while he or she harvests enough obsidian to do whatever it is they are planning to do. Something the Ancient are not willing to allow.” “So you want us to confront this artificer?” Mai shook her head. “Not exactly. I want you to help me infiltrate his operation, so I can stop him and get the people he has already claimed to safety.”

A thought bubbled to the surface of Sasha's mind. “Alright, I guess we can do that. But what do we get out of it?” Mai apparently had anticipated this question and produced a business card which she handed to him. It held two Chinese characters; Gǔ rén. “If you help me out with this, the Ancient are willing to allow you unrestricted access to China, provided you respect our cultural heritage and relinquish any artifacts you find to us.” Sasha took the card. He knew the significance of this gesture. Giving a symbol chaser a free pass on Chinese soil was like giving a five year old a credit card without a spending limit and dropping them in a toy store. He wondered why the Ancient were so generous. He had expected monetary compensation, or perhaps a free grab in the treasure chest, if any, during the mission. But this, this was out of proportion. However, he wasn't going to pry. It was a massive boon and he would be happy to traipse around the country looking for the legendary symbols of the Forbidden City or the Foundation Stone of the Great Wall of China. He handed the card back. “Deal. So how do we begin?”

Mai smiled and put the card away. Most of the tea cups were now empty. She cleared them off the table, then walked over to the small cupboard and withdrew a pouch which she placed on the table and then folded open. It contained a number of items which looked like burglary tools to Sasha. Some very old-skool, like lock picking tools. Others were more sophisticated and high-tech. Mai took a small tablet, swiped it on, tapped a few apps on it, hooked up a small device that looked like a projector, and then put both back on the table. Above the table, a 3D image sprung to life, which seemed to be a map of the area. Both Sasha and Lisa were surprised at the vivid detail the image provided of the city, the volcano and everything around it. Like they were looking at a -slightly transparent- live feed.

“From what I have been able to learn during my time here, is that the artificer sends his demands for labor directly to the town hall. Every week on tuesday when the first employees open the doors, they find an envelope in the mailbox, telling them how many people need to be gathered and where they must go. I haven’t been able to read any of these notes. They are always given to the police before anyone else can look at them. I don’t have an exact number on the amount of people that have been sent to him either. That is being kept secret by everyone involved.” Lisa shook her head. “To avoid a panic no doubt.” Sasha looked at the hologram, which Mai directed to show images of the town hall at the moment. “But how do they find people to go work for this guy? I mean, if people were told they had to do forced labor for a maniac, they’d just skip town, right? I mean, I would.” Lisa couldn’t help but frown on the strange situation of an entire city being held hostage. “Well, that is why they don’t ask people. As far as I have been able to tell, the mayor has the police round up every beggar, prostitute, vagrant, criminal, anyone no one will miss really, and send those to the artificer.” Sasha grinned. “Making the situation work for them, smart.” Lisa punched him in the arm. “Yes, until they run out of poor people and abused women and go for the regular people.” Sasha rubbed the sore spot he now had on his upper left arm. “That hurt.” Lisa stuck her tongue out. “Serves you right, insensitive jackass.” Sasha grinned. Lisa and him had been travelling together for several months and they had developed a rep. He knew what she meant. Ofcourse, if not he could always turn her into a brick or something else that was really quiet.

“More to the point; Where do they take the people once they are ‘collected’?” Mai tapped a few points on her tablet. In the projection, several points lit up as an overview of the city limits popped into view. “I managed to get a job inside town hall so I could be close to the action. Every time I was able to find out where a ‘shipment’ was being taken, it was always somewhere on the northern edge of town. Never in the same place twice though and whenever the police organised a stake out of the drop site, they always came up empty.” Sasha smiled. “Let me guess; They left the truck or whatever in that location and then sat on it, waiting for someone to show up. No one showed and after a while they checked and found it empty?” Mai nodded. “How did you know?” “Well, that’s what I’d do. This artificer is probably using a ‘pocket watch’ or maybe a ‘sandman’ symbol. Very clever. And hard to come by magic too.” Sasha had been around for years. He had developed his own language for describing symbols. The ancient names were often too complex for his liking, or just didn’t have the flair he liked to convey when trying to impress people. Women, more to the point. “If we want to find out where these people go, the only way to do that is to be on one of those shipments ourselves. Otherwise we will just be spellbound before we can act.”

Mai continued: "I went to the drop sites and talked with the locals there. There were a lot of stories going around about people disappearing, even before the incident at town hall. According to the local whispers, the people that vanish go to a place they aptly named 'the gallows'. Pretty much because it is presumed to be a death sentence. Once you are taken, you do not return. But here's the interesting thing; Most people I talked to aren't worried about being taken, because the only ones abducted are people who are not originally from the area, who roam the streets after dark."

Sasha couldn't help but slap his knees. "Hah! This is almost too simple. So all we need to do to be abducted, or to find out how it happens, is to go outside right now?" Lisa looked at him with a concerned frown on her face. "You're not seriously considering getting us abducted? Who knows what they will do to us." Sasha stood up and rapped his cane on the floor. "Come now. Where is your sense of adventure? Besides, you have your magic, I have mine. What could go wrong?" Lisa got up aswell, mumbling as a sort of semi-objection: "Famous last words." Mai seemed reluctant. "Not to seem forward, but aside from the fact that it's monday and there has not yet been a new ransom demand, you have just travelled a long way. You must be tired and hungry. I have set you up in a hotel across the road. Perhaps it is a better idea to take in some sleep, prepare and try your idea tomorrow night?" The prospect of an adventure had gotten Sasha's blood going, but thinking a little on it made him realise Mai had a point. "True. We shouldn't go into this half-arsed. A shower, a meal and a day's rest should give us the energy we need to tackle this artificer. If you would show us to the hotel then Mai?" They proceeded out of Mai's tiny house and indeed, only a short walk away was a hotel. It wasn't fancy or overly large, but it had all the amenities a traveler would want. "I will be at the town hall tomorrow. Should you need to contact me, here is my number." Mai handed Sasha a business card that only had a telephone number on it. "And if you need to contact us?" Mai smiled. "I will know how to get in touch with you. No worries." And with that she left the two alone for the evening.

Mai had arranged for them to have adjacent rooms on the first floor of the hotel, overlooking the street they had just crossed. Each room had, aside from the obvious bed, a modest bathroom with a sink and a shower. There was a tiny dresser and a small table in each room. There was no television, but they did have internet access. Not that they cared much for it. Sasha and Lisa decided to freshen up, grab some food in a restaurant they had spotted down the way and then retire to their rooms for the night. Where Sasha fell asleep in his room quite quickly, Lisa stayed up a while longer, leafing through the pages of her grandmother's tome and through her own notes she had compiled over the past months. She was a scribe. So, considering what little information Mai had presented them with, she decided to prepare a few little tricks.

The next morning, Sasha met Lisa at the breakfast table in the hotel's restaurant. It was clear the restaurant catered to westerners more often, since the buffet lacked most typically Chinese dishes but instead served an assortment of different rolls and bread. Lisa was already sitting at a table, a cup of coffee and a book in front of her. "Good morning Lisa, sleep well?" Lisa looked up and smiled. "Not really. I couldn't help but think about what we're going to do today. I prepared a couple of things I was hoping you would take a look at." She took a number of sheets of paper out of the book and handed them to Sasha. He had

already sensed Lisa's magic coming down the stairs. Hers was a very potent magic with a very distinct aroma. His magical senses could easily distinguish symbols she inscribed from those of other witches by now. When he took hold of the sheets however, he couldn't help but shudder a little bit. The sheer power flowing through the pages was enough to level an apartment building. "Wow. You didn't make short work of these, did you? Let's see..." Sasha looked over each page. Lisa had scribed one symbol per page. Some had footnotes and scribbles that only elaborated on the magic present in the main symbol. He had only met Lisa a relatively short while ago and he had only heard of her grandmother, from whom she inherited her name and her powers. But from what he had seen of Lisa, he could only conclude that everything he had heard about Tamarinde had not been exaggerated. After a few minutes he handed the symbols back to Lisa. "These should serve us well."

After breakfast they had little to do but do some sight seeing. They couldn't help but pass by city hall, which seemed peaceful, just like the rest of the town. There was no sign of Mai and they decided not to go looking for her.

Changbai was as good a place as any to be. The scenery was beautiful and if you ignored the fact that it was being held hostage by a power hungry Artificer, who might let the volcano in the background erupt any day now, it was even peaceful. Now that they were aware of the situation, they did indeed notice a decided lack in vagrants and other 'undesirables'. Most tourists would likely call this good city management. Little did they know...

As day turned back into night and after a good dinner at a restaurant close to city hall, Sasha and Lisa took to the streets. They decided to simply wander, pretending to be a tourist couple, out for a night on the town. They went in and out of a few bars and after the third one, they found Mai leaning against a wall opposite the entrance to the bar. "Showtime people. There has been another ransom demand and the police is out scouring the streets." Sasha smiled. "Alright. Time to draw a little attention to ourselves then." He rapped his cane, muttered a few words and all the windows in the entire street shattered. Car alarms went off everywhere and people started screaming and shouting. Lisa and Mai looked at him. Sasha shrugged. "Oops?" Lisa took out one of her pages and muttered an incantation. A bright spark flickered over the page briefly, then doused. In her hand she now held miniature versions of all their belongings, which she put in her pocket. It only took a few minutes for a number of patrol cars to arrive. When they saw the three of them standing in the middle of the street, the police walked upto them and started shouting at Sasha in Chinese. Mai was about to answer when Sasha indicated she should stay quiet. "No speaka di English?" He started, with a broad smile on his face. He was clearly enjoying himself. This infuriated the police officer in front of him, who started screaming even louder. "I don't understand what you're saying, motherfucker, speak English or go away." The police officer didn't understand much of what Sasha said, but he had understood the word 'motherfucker' quite clearly, because the next thing they knew, all three of them were in the back of a patrol car with handcuffs slapped on their wrists. "Easy as pie." Sasha commented as the patrol car took off.

As they expected, instead of being taken to the police station, which they had passed on their daytime stroll, the car took them north to an abandoned industrial site. It looked like there had at one point been a refinery of sorts here. Large metal towers with elaborate piping leading to a large factory structure, with all the windows broken and the metal sliding doors

hanging crooked from their fixtures. There was no lighting here, apart from the light provided by the patrol car. The officers got out, opened the back doors and ordered them to “Ge ou.” So they did. The three of them were led into the dark factory, where they were cuffed to a rail, next to a number of other unfortunate souls. In the limited light they managed to discern a number of scruffy looking Chinese men and women and a few caucasian men in their mid twenties who were drunk off their asses and passed out on the ground. “Well, at least we’re in good company” Lisa remarked sarcastically.

Sasha sensed the magic before he noticed its effects. It was powerful. A mixture of temporal and spatial manipulation magic. When the sensation subsided, they were no longer cuffed to a bar in a factory, but in a small space that looked most like a sewer entrance. They were sitting on a large metal grate, beneath which was nothing but black emptiness. The walls were solid, lacking any openings. The only way out of the space was a metal ladder leading down into the darkness. “Lisa, our things?” Lisa took what she had shrunk and shook it in her hand. When she opened it, they watched as Sasha’s cane, Lisa’s tome and several other vital objects like Lisa and Mai’s purses and a handgun Mai had insisted on bringing enlarged again. Mai looked at it in awe but decided not to comment and just took what was hers. Sasha took his cane, rapped it against the bar they were cuffed to, which dissolved and then got up. “Let’s go see what’s behind door number one.” And down the rabbit hole they went. The others seemed less inclined to do the same, staying behind as Sasha, Lisa and Mai descended into darkness.

At the bottom of the stairs, which was quite a ways down, they were greeted by a couple of armed soldiers. They wore what looked like some kind of hazmat suit, with heavy machine guns slung over their shoulders and oxygen tanks strapped to their backs. They did not seem to bother with them at the moment. The hoods were down and they were smoking a cigarette when Sasha, Lisa and Mai set foot on the hard rock below the stairs, which felt warm to the touch. “Oh look, we have a couple of eager beavers,” one of them said in Chinese, so only Mai understood what he was saying. Sasha looked at her. “What did he say?” Mai shrugged. “He said we seem eager to get down here.” Sasha turned to the men and grinned wickedly. “Oh, yes.” He tapped the ground once firmly and said a single word neither Mai nor Lisa understood. A ripple seemed to run through the ground which then proceeded to wrap itself around the men, like vines of rock growing from the floor. Within seconds, none of them were able to move. “We’ll take those, thank you,” Sasha said as he relieved the men of their weapons, which had been conveniently left outside the rocky growth. He handed the weapons to Lisa and Mai. “What am I supposed to do with this?” Lisa asked. Mai had, by that time, already checked the clip, released the safety and loaded a round into the barrel. “Just hang onto it. We might need them.”

They proceeded through what turned out to be a large cavern, which looked like it had been hacked out over a long period of time. Strangely though, not many people were actually working in the large cave. A waterfall of mucky, yellow water cascaded down one wall, hitting what looked to be an active lava flow. Roughly two dozen people, dressed in suits similar to the ones the soldiers had been wearing, were laboring at the bottom of the falls, retrieving chunks of the black glass where they were able to obtain them. “This is insane. Those people won’t last long working so close to that kind of heat,” Lisa commented. “Which is

probably why our Artificer needs a fresh batch every week or so,” Sasha concurred. Along the perimeter of the excavation area, a number of armed soldiers patrolled up and down, mostly keeping their eyes on the people in the compound, rather than on the outside. Apparently they thought it far more likely someone might want to try and get out, than they might try to get in. “Lisa, your turn. I expended my good symbols. Got anything for those guys?” Lisa pondered her options as she leafed through the sheets she had brought. Then she handed him one. “You could try this?” Sasha’s face lit up like it was Christmas morning. “Oh, don’t mind if I do.” He put his hand on the page, absorbing the symbol, which nestled itself right in the palm of his hand, like a glow in the dark tattoo. “Hey! You guys!” Sasha shouted. The soldiers turned and looked. “Yes, you! Wanna dance?” The soldiers started shouting at him, pointing their guns in their direction. Mai aimed hers, but Sasha indicated she should lower it. “Let them come to us.” The soldiers came closer, shouting loudly and waving their guns around. Sasha put his hands up, as if to surrender. Lisa and Mai followed his example. Then, when they were only about five meters away, he clapped his hands and all hell broke loose. Sharp spikes erupted from the ground right in front of them. Shards of volcanic rock fell from the ceiling and boiling lava made its way through the cracks that formed. Within seconds, the area between Sasha, Lisa, Mai and the prisoners had become a complete disaster area.

Then he clapped his hands again, and the madness ended. All that remained were the impaled, scorched and very dead bodies of the soldiers, along with several still usable firearms, which they subsequently collected. Sasha glanced at Lisa while they were doing so. “Remind me never to piss you off.” Lisa simply smiled.

All the while the people below them, near the steam covered edge where water met lava had tried to ignore what was going on. But when Sasha and the others approached them, a glimmer of hope shone in their eyes and they dropped their tools. Sasha and Lisa handed out what weapons they had recovered from the guards. “I’m assuming the guards can get out somewhere. Can you ask them if these guys know where?” Mai nodded and asked. The prisoners, now filled with hope that they might actually escape their tormentors alive pointed to what looked to be an opening further up in the cavern. There did not appear to be any guards there. “Alright, let’s get these people out.” Lisa turned. “What about the people still up where we entered?” Mai interjected: “I’ll go get them. You get these people to safety.” Mai turned and wanted to go, but Lisa grabbed her arm and handed her something small, whispering in her ear. Mai nodded, then ran back the way they had come, while Sasha, Lisa and a now armed band of prisoners made a break for the exit. It was surprisingly easy to get them there and even as they made their way through winding passages leading up towards the surface, there was nothing to stop them. Finally they came up for air near the shores of the lake with the sickly yellow color. There were a number of people working here, loading crates filled with obsidian onto a large truck, guarded by soldiers. The former prisoners erupted from the passage and simply started shooting, filled with frustration, rage, hope and elation. The soldiers didn’t stand a chance, but a number of fellow prisoners got caught in the crossfire. After a few seconds, silence fell over the site. Then a voice called out from above. Everyone turned to find a figure, cloaked and hooded in black, standing on an overlook a little above the area they were in now. “Well, well. I thought I had made it clear when I erased the mayor from this life that I did not want any interruptions to my little endeavour? And here I find an actual breakout taking place. Employees gunned down,

workers shot and my precious obsidian damaged?” The last sentence came out like it mattered more to him than the previous ones. “Tsk, tsk. That just won’t do. Now I am a man of my word and I warned the good folk of Changbai that I would destroy their little town if they interfered.” He produced a small obsidian artifact from beneath his cloak. Sasha sensed the spell captured within. It was the protection spell that Mai had spoken of. Powerful magic. Lisa sensed it too. There was no getting around it. “Too bad. Now I will need to find another source of obsidian.” And with that, he smashed the artifact into the wall behind him, cracking it. Sasha could feel the magic dwindle, dispersed on the wind. Such a shame.

And then...nothing. The cloaked figure stood there, looking at the mountain, along with the others when Mai exited the passage with the few remaining prisoners. She nodded at Lisa, something Sasha caught. “What were you two up to?” Lisa smiled, and answered just a little louder than she needed: “Well, I figured since the city was being held hostage by a madman who was pointing a volcano at them, and it’d take me too long to scribe a proper replacement spell, I decided to go a different route and used a sleep symbol. I had Mai take it and hide it somewhere inside the mountain. That thing won’t erupt for a long time.” Sasha laughed. Then they sensed another surge of magic. Looking up, the cloaked figure had gone. “Looks like our friend there decided he had enough fun.” They turned and checked on the prisoners. They were tired, some were wounded, but they were alive and happy to be out of the volcano. “What shall we do with the obsidian?” Mai checked the truck. There was a lot of raw obsidian there. “I’ll get someone to collect it.” “I guess that concludes our business then? People freed, operation shut down...” Mai nodded. “It’d have been better if we’d actually captured the Artificer, but this will do. On behalf of the Ancient, thank you. I will apprise my superiors of what has happened here.” Mai got in the truck. “What about our agreement?” Mai smiled. “You are free to roam China and look for symbols, Symbol Chaser. Just remember; the Ancient will allow it, but that doesn’t mean China will.” She started the truck and took off, leaving Lisa and Sasha alone amidst the mess they had created.

“Now what?” Lisa asked. “Well, she said we had a free pass. And I picked up a scent...” He rapped his cane on the ground. “No time like the present.” He held out his arm. “Shall we?”