

The Symbol Chaser

by Garnt Meulendijks

It was raining. Water poured from the skies. The occasional lightning bolt shattered the heavens and thunder rolled overhead as a cloaked figure walked a lonely walk down an empty road. The smooth asphalt glistened under his boots. The cane in his right hand was there more for show than for support. The rhythmic tapping of the metal tip on the ground followed where he went. Despite the weather, the man in the cloak seemed upbeat. His stride was quick and confident, his back was straight and he had a smile on his face. Even though he was clearly soaked to the bone. He pulled his hood a bit further over his eyes as a gust of wind tried to pull it back.

The road bent through the hills. Now and then a few trees provided some cover from the rain, but most of the landscape was open grassland. The road was sided on both sides by low, stone walls. As was common in most of Wales.

Why was he upbeat? Even though the weather gave him no reason to be? He was upbeat because he was on the scent. He was on the scent of something big, something unlike anything he had encountered in a long time. He turned a corner off the main road. A small sign by the side of the road read "Mirror Farm". In the distance he could see the farm, hidden between a copse of trees and surrounded by waving fields of grain. Or they would be waving, hadn't it be raining so hard.

The scent was stronger here. And every step closer to the farm, it got even stronger. Like he had stepped through a curtain and now he could smell the smoke of a massive fire that had been held back earlier, with only minute quantities getting through. Here it was like he was in the middle of the fire. And the fire was burning brightly.

The farm was a collection of buildings surrounding a small square. The main building had lights on behind draped windows. Inside one of the barns, he could hear horses scuffling about when thunder broke overhead. The pile of empty paint cans next to a stack of lumber told him that someone had been doing some work around the house. Though, judging from the state of the wood, it had been a while ago.

He walked up to the door of the main building. It was a nicely done up, but old farmhouse. It had a thatch roof with a working chimney on the top. He could tell from the fact that smoke was actually coming out. It had been a while since he sat next to a fireplace and he hoped that he would get a chance to now. Next to the front door was a welcome sign, with a number of stickers and metal plaques from different camping and recreational organisations. The sign was poorly maintained. He lifted his cane and knocked on the door. It took a while before a man answered. He was wearing a white t-shirt and jeans, covered by a bathrobe. His black hair was wet and combed back. He looked like he hadn't shaved in a few days.

"Yes? What do you want?" He pointed his cane at the sign. "My name is Sasha, and I hear you have rooms here. I would like to rent one for a few days." The expression on the man's face

switched quickly from anger to surprise. He looked the strange man up and down, sizing up the package of cloak, hood and cane. "Piss off weirdo. We're not open for business."

"Tom, who is it honey?" The man was just about to slam the door shut when a woman came up next to him. The woman was wearing a bathrobe as well. She was running a towel through her damp, blonde hair, which clung to her head and neck as it was still wet. "No one, this man was just leaving." Tom was about to close the door when the woman stopped him. "We can't leave him in the rain, Tom. It's simply not polite." She stepped in front of him and opened the door so Sasha could enter, which he did. "Thank you..." "Lisa," she completed the sentence. Tom didn't seem particularly happy about the arrangement, as he stomped off to another room while Lisa closed the door. Inside, the farmhouse was rather large. The door opened into a hallway which was a meter wide and had no ceiling. Instead, one could see the rafters holding up the roof of the farmhouse, indicating that the separating walls making up the hallway had been put in well after the farmhouse had been built. "Can I take your...coat?" Lisa asked Sasha. He nodded, dropped his cane in the umbrella stand by the door and opened the clasp that held his cloak shut with a flick of his wrist. He took the soaked piece of cloth and handed it to Lisa, who for the first time got a good look at the man before her.

Sasha was wearing an odd mixture of old and new. Jeans were tucked into knee high leather boots. His belt, which was also leather, held an assortment of pouches and pockets, one of which was clearly meant to hold a smartphone. Most however looked like they had been around for a while. Up from there he wore something reminiscent of a medieval tunic, white linen with a V-line neck, which closed with an end of leather string. Around his neck, a pendant swung on a silver chain. An intricate Celtic knot. He couldn't be much older than thirty, or so she gathered. His face looked unscathed, his green eyes looking out at her kindly. In the middle of his forehead, a tattoo in the form of a waving line was the only really distinguishing feature about his otherwise rather common appearance. That and the fact he obviously hadn't shaved in several days.

Lisa showed him through a door, which led into a spacious sitting room. A fire was crackling in the hearth, in front of which a rag tag assortment of chairs and couches had been placed in a semi-circle. Sasha guessed it was done to add to the rustic feel of the farmhouse. It's owners didn't strike him as the kind of people not to think about their interior decoration. The fact that the walls were carefully plastered and painted, with photographs of landscapes neatly framed to decorate them, added to that conviction. "Please, sit down. Can I get you anything?" Lisa pointed at the collection of chairs, of which he chose a comfy old lounge chair to sit in. "Well, I know it's kind of late, but I could go for some food if it's not too much trouble." Lisa smiled. "Not at all. Back in a moment." She disappeared back into the hallway. A few moments later he heard noises coming from what he assumed to be the kitchen. He sat patiently in his chair, trying to get a fix on the scent. It was strong, but he couldn't quite place it in any particular spot. Yet. From another part of the farmhouse, Sasha heard a drill come to life. Someone, he imagined Tom, was drilling holes in something. He grinned. He imagined Lisa drilling holes into his food for a second.

Not long after, Lisa emerged from the kitchen with a tray of food and drink. There was a coffee table in front of the hearth, amidst the chairs. She set down two plates and a glass. One plate held a nice looking pasta, steaming hot. The other held a single piece of homemade bread. The glass contained water. Sasha looked at Lisa as she sat down in a chair opposite his. Then he looked back at the food. He took the bread, broke off a piece and ate it. Then he offered the bread to Lisa, who did the same. He washed it down with the water he had been given. "This is ritual bread. You do me great honor, Lisa. You know of our ways?" He proceeded in picking up the plate of pasta and eating it while they spoke. Lisa nodded. "My grandmother told me of the witches often. She always told stories about who your people are and what they do. I never thought I'd actually meet one though. Not a real one." She seemed excited, and at the same time slightly scared. "A real what?" Tom came in. He was no longer wearing his bathrobe. Instead his chest was bare, and not unimpressively muscular. He was also holding a hammer. He noticed the bread and the water on the table and sighed. "Oh no. Not this nonsense again. You're not telling me you think he is a witch, do you Lisa?" Before Lisa could speak, Sasha interjected. "Witches are generally women. Men mostly go by warlock. But it's the same thing." He then took another bite of his pasta. It was good pasta.

Tom glared at Sasha. "I don't give a rat's ass what you call yourself. My wife spends an hour a day in the kitchen making that god awful bread in case one of your 'kind' shows up," He turned his attention to Lisa "while it wouldn't hurt her to spend that time focussing on something important, like getting us some actual customers, you know, the kind that pays?" Sasha opened one of the pouches on his belt and whipped out a roll of banknotes. He threw it at Tom, who looked at it with a mixture of malcontent and disbelief on his face. There was a paper wrapper around the roll, which read '5000'. "I think this should cover my bill for the next few days." Sasha spoke casually in between bites. Then he pointed at his plate. "Truly excellent pasta." Tom huffed and left the room as quickly as he had come in, leaving Lisa and Sasha alone once more. Sasha finished his plate and set it down, taking another sip of water before speaking again. "Your grandmother told you of our ways. Who was she?" Lisa's eyes lit up. "Her name was Elisabeth. Elisabeth Josephson. She was great. Always telling me stories, teaching me things like cooking and such. She would have loved to meet you, she was always going on about how there weren't too many real witches anymore and those that were mostly kept to themselves." Sasha nodded. "But you, you're the real deal, aren't you? Gran always said I'd recognize a witch or warlock instantly. You made it real easy. What's with the clothes anyway?" Sasha laughed. "Oh, yes. That. It tends to reinforce belief when I need people to believe what I am. Most everyone else stays away from me because they think I am insane. It's a great double edged blade that way."

He put his empty plate down and finished his water. Lisa shot up to clear the table and quickly came back with a pot of tea which she had obviously been brewing already. She poured two cups. The third one, Tom's cup, was left empty. "Gran used to tell me that there were orders among witches. And you could tell what order someone was in by the mark on their head." She pointed at the symbol on Sasha's forehead. "What order does that signify?" Sasha couldn't help but glance up, even though he couldn't see his own tattoo for obvious reasons. "That is the mark of the Vânător de Simboluri, or as your people would call us; the Symbol Chasers. We roam the

world looking for symbols of power and gather them up.” Lisa’s next question didn’t surprise him. “So, what brings you here then?” He took his cup of tea and smelled it before taking a sip. Earl Grey. “I am here, because I have reason to believe there is a symbol of power somewhere close to your farm, maybe inside of it. And I intend to find it to determine if it is harmful, or helpful. In any case, I intend to take it with me.”

Tom came back in. He had once again donned his robe. He sat down, poured himself a cup and gulped it down. “I finished up the wall in the second guestroom. We should be able to paint and decorate it tomorrow.” Sasha took a sip of his tea also. “Big renovation going on?” Lara smirked. “Sometimes.” Tom didn’t seem to appreciate the comment, but before he could say anything, Sasha stood up. “It is late and I am feeling tired. If I could be shown to my room I will turn in for the night.” Lisa got up. “Ofcourse. Right this way.” They left the room, leaving Tom to mull over what had just happened. Sasha was shown to a room at the back of the farmhouse, which was small, but cozy. It had a bed, a table and chair, a small cabinet with a tv on top of it and an adjacent bathroom. Almost like a hotel room, but without the hotel to go with it. “Should you need anything, we are right down the hall. Breakfast is served at eight.” Sasha nodded. “Thank you Lisa, you are a most gracious host. We shall speak more tomorrow morning. For now, I wish you a good night.”

The next morning, when Sasha came into the kitchen, Lisa was there working on breakfast. It was seven thirty. The kitchen was nice and big. A large table stood in the center with ten chairs surrounding it. Lisa was cooking breakfast on an old-fashioned stove that looked to be a wood burner. Sasha smelled freshly baked bread. “Good morning Lisa.” Lisa flipped the eggs she was preparing, then turned and flashed him a smile. “Good morning, did you sleep well?” “Like a baby.” Sasha looked around. “Tom is not here?” Lisa shook her head. “No, he headed out early today. Said he wanted to go to the city to buy supplies for the renovation. Please, sit down. Breakfast is almost ready.” Sasha took her up on that offer. Breakfast smelled good, and tasted even better. It wasn’t until they were finishing up when Lisa decided to continue what they had started the previous evening. “So...you’re going to look around for that symbol today?” Sasha nodded, a mouth still full of eggs on toast. “I’ve been wondering. What kind of symbol is here exactly?” Sasha shrugged. “I can’t be sure until I find it. And it could really be anywhere. But these symbols are generally old, so I usually start at the oldest places and work out from there. Once I find it, I can tell what it does.”

He had been wondering about something as well. “You said your grandmother told you about witches. And she was named Elisabeth. Did she have a second name, or something they called her?” Lisa nodded. “Yes. She was called Elisabeth Tamarinde Josephson. I know because my parents named me after her.” Sasha nearly choked on his tea. “Is something wrong?” He shook his head. “No...nothing.” It took him a few seconds to compose himself. “Alright, I’ll help you clean this up and then I was hoping you’d allow me to take a look around your home.” “Of course. Not a problem.” After they cleaned up the kitchen, Sasha went out into the hallway. The sun was shining brightly. The rain had passed. His cloak was still soaking wet, so he took it outside and draped it over the stack of lumber near the door, where he reckoned it would dry

much faster. Lisa had said he could look around, so he started to wander the grounds around the farmhouse for a bit. The scent was strong, yet hard to pinpoint with accuracy. He looked at the buildings. The farmhouse itself must have been at least a hundred years old. The sheds and barns were younger, so he decided to have a look at the farmhouse itself first. He walked around it, eyeing the walls up and down, looking for what he sought. But he found nothing. "Time to pull out the big guns," he said to no one in particular. He reached into one of the pouches on his belt and pulled out a single, black stone. It was perfectly smooth and glistened in the sunlight. He held it to his lips, whispering something, then placed it on the ground.

"What are you doing?" Lisa's voice sounded behind him. Sasha did not take his eyes off the stone as she walked up next to him. "Well, I couldn't find the symbol on a first glance, but I know it has to be somewhere close by. So I am using one of those." He pointed at the stone on the ground. "It...is a stone." Sasha smiled. "It is a resonating onyx. It soaks up energy from the surrounding area, if so motivated, and when it is full, it..." He didn't get time to finish his sentence before a bright, but brief pulse of light shot out of the stone in the direction of one of the barns. "...ejects that energy back at its point of origin." He picked it up and put it back in the pouch it had come from. "Wow. That was awesome," Lisa exclaimed as Sasha began to walk to the barn. She followed him quickly. "Do you mind if I join you?" "Not in the slightest, it's your home after all."

The barn door was open. Inside a car was parked and tracks on the floor suggested another car had been parked next to it recently. An assortment of tools hung from a tool rack on one wall. It was clearly being used as a garage. Sasha walked in. The barn was made of wood. Thick beams protruded from the ground, holding up the walls and roof. An attic had been created, with a ladder leading up to it. Somewhere in the rafters, he could hear the scuffling of rodents and birds. "This barn...how old is it?" They walked along the ground floor of the barn, while he ran his fingers over the boards making up the walls. "Oh, I don't know. It was here when we bought the place. The man who lived here said he'd been here for thirty years or so and that he'd built most of these buildings himself, so not older than that. Tom fixed up the attic to hold our stuff while we worked on the main house, so that is mostly new." Lisa followed Sasha as his eyes wandered over the ceiling. "Why do you ask?" Sasha encountered a stack of crates, blocking access to the back of the barn. He started to move them. "Well, most symbols have been around for a good long while. And they have to be drawn somewhere. So usually the surface underneath it is rather old, because it had to have been there when the symbol was created." He finished moving crates and stepped through the opening he had created, reaching the back wall of the barn. A few steps in he nearly tripped over something. "Ow!" He looked down. There was a piece of rock protruding from the floor. As he bent down to inspect it, he noticed something chalked up on one of the crates he hadn't moved. "Well I'll be damned." Lisa, who was still on the other side of the stack of crates, poked her head in to see what he saw. He pointed at the crate. On it, lined in white chalk, was a symbol. A rough cylindrical shape enveloped in what looked to be a shroud of some sort. It was roughly ten centimeters in diameter. "Is that it?" Lisa didn't think the symbol was too remarkable. "But it's on a crate. So someone brought it here?" Sasha shook his head. "No. It's far more elaborate than that. Look."

With a little effort, he moved some more crates until he was able to lift the one the symbol was on. He set it down on the ground more to the front of the barn. The symbol on the side had gone. "Huh? What? Where did it go?" Sasha smiled. "That's the beauty of it. It didn't go anywhere. Look." He grabbed a loose piece of plastic from another crate and held it up where the crate with the symbol had been. The symbol was there, on the plastic. This time it looked like it had been printed on in yellow ink, but it was the same symbol. "That is not possible." Sasha removed the plastic again and picked up a hand of sand from the floor. He sprinkled it over where the symbol had been. In the air, if you looked carefully, you could see the grains of sand form the base shape of the symbol as they fell to the ground. "This is marvelous. It's been years since I've seen a Perpetuüm." He looked at the empty bit of air, back at the ground and back at the air. He moved another crate back into position, and there it was again. As if it had always been there. "A perpetu-what?" Lisa was dumbfounded. "A Perpetuüm. A symbol that is locked in time and space. A symbol that can not be moved, no matter what you do to it's surroundings. It was most likely drawn on a wall that was once here. When that was torn down, it shifted to whatever else got close." He ran his fingers over the symbol. He could feel the raw power emanating from it. "It takes so much energy to scribe a symbol, but it takes a hundred times more to anchor a Perpetuüm. Whoever put this one here, was a really powerful scribe."

"A scribe?"

"Another order of witch. Only very few of us actually have the ability to detect and use symbols, but even less have the ability to create them. That would be the scribes." He sat back to ponder his find. "The last one of note died several decades ago. But she didn't live anywhere near here." Lisa looked at the symbol too. It looked unremarkable to her. "What does it do?" Sasha shrugged. "It's not a very common symbol. Most likely the scribe who made it, invented it himself. And the only way to find out what it does, is to dislodge it, or to find the scribe's tome." He got up. "And since I don't really see the last one happen any time soon, I'm going to try and dislodge it." Lisa frowned. "But you just said it can't be moved." Sasha dusted himself off. "Not until the anchor with which it is locked down is found and removed. And the beauty of anchors is that they can't be too far from the symbol they lock." He pointed at the rock that protruded from the ground. "Any idea where that could be from?" Now it was Lisa's turn to examine the ground more closely. "Hmm, I remember the guy we bought this place from saying that there used to be a Roman fort on this site. Maybe it was a section of wall from that?"

Sasha left the barn and looked around. Lisa followed. "What are you looking for now?" Sasha bent down and ran his hand through the dirt. It was still moist from last night's rain. "Hmm. Are there any caves nearby?" Lisa frowned. "There is an old mine a few miles that way." She pointed to a hill behind the farm. "It's part of a tourist route on the Roman occupation. Old man Clint shows people around every now and then. I have a pamphlet on it back at the house." Sasha smiled. "Guess I am going to do some sight seeing today then. Could you get me one of those pamphlets?" Lisa went into the house while he checked his cloak. It was still very much unwearable. She came out a few moments later with the pamphlet in her hand. "Thank you. It's

over that way? Right?” Sasha indicated the direction Lisa had pointed him to. When she confirmed it was correct, he started walking. “Hey, you’re not seriously going to walk there, are you?” Sasha shrugged. “No car. Besides, it’s a lovely day for a stroll.” He turned and left the farmhouse behind, following the path back the way he had come the night before. A few minutes later, he heard a car come up behind him. Lisa was in it. “Come on, get in. It’ll take you hours otherwise.”

While they were driving, Sasha decided he had to satisfy a number of questions that had risen during his brief stay with Lisa and Tom. “You’re not from Wales originally, right?” Lisa looked at him briefly to answer. “No, Tom and me came from London to start our bed and breakfast here.” London. Check. “So, your family is from London?” They turned left onto a wider road. Outside the fields of Wales sped by behind the low stone walls. Everything looked fresh and green, like it did after rain. “Yes, though my grandfather is from the US originally. He met my grandmother after the war.” Ah, the grandmother. Nice opening for the next question. “Your grandmother, you mentioned her before. She taught you about us you said. How did she come by that information, do you know?” Lisa’s eyes lit up. It was clear to Sasha she spoke of her grandmother with great fondness. “She used to tell me that we had witches in the family. On my grandfather’s side and on my grandmother’s side. She had the most wonderful tales about magic and wonders. She always spoke of it as if it was all true, but I never thought it was, thought they were just stories.” Sasha looked at her. “Yet you make the ritual bread every day.” She nodded. “She always said; One day, a witch will show up at your door. You won’t know when, but if you want them to take you seriously, you give them this bread before anything else. Grow the grain, grind the flour by hand, bake it on open fire. Don’t use machines.” Tears welled up in her eyes. “If only I could tell her she was right.”

They pulled up to a parking lot in front of what looked like a schoolhouse that had seen better days. Some of the windows were cracked and it could use a paint job. She quickly dried her tears. “We’re here. Shall we?” They got out of the car. Sasha decided not to push the topic, though he had most of what he wanted. A single question still lingered in his mind, but that could wait until another time. As they walked up to the building, the door opened and an elderly gentleman with a broad smile on his weathered face came out. “Morning Elisabeth.” His voice sounded strong. He looked Sasha up and down. “Who is your friend?” Sasha extended his hand, which was firmly gripped by the old man. “Clint, this is Sasha. Sasha, this is Clint Weathering. He’s lived here most of his life and knows everything about the area.” While Sasha and Clint were locked in their handshake, Sasha saw the old man sizing him up, gripping his hand tightly before letting go. “A pleasure to meet you mister Weathering,” Sasha decided to conclude their meeting. “Sasha...you’re not from around these parts, clearly. Where are you from dyn dieithr, estron?” Sasha thought about his answer carefully. There was something about this man. “Right now? I’m staying with Lisa and Tom. Originally I’m from Romania, though I haven’t been there in many years.” The man huffed. “A teithiwr?” He decided to turn his attention to Lisa. “How can I help you two?” Lisa sensed the tension between Sasha and Clint, so she was quick to respond, but made sure to remove as much attention from Sasha as possible. Plus, she figured telling Clint the truth wouldn’t help in getting them what they wanted. “Sasha arrived recently and he is

interested in local history, so I told him about the tourist program in the area and insisted we go here first.” Clint looked at her, one eyebrow pulled up in disbelief. Then he obviously decided he had no reason not to believe her. “Sure, of course. We’ve got a few more people coming in a bit for a tour actually. Come, you can wait in the museum until they arrive.

The shabby schoolhouse turned out to be a museum. It had at one point been a school. One of the classrooms was turned into a gift shop, with a counter to buy tickets. The others were all filled with display cases full of artifacts from different periods of history. The inside actually looked better than the outside, though it was clear that this was not a very busy and well funded museum. Sasha reckoned that Clint actually did most, if not all of the work to maintain it. While Lisa lingered in the gift shop, Sasha perused the different rooms of the museum. One in particular caught his attention; the one detailing the history of the mine, it’s uses and layout. On one of the walls, a map had been drawn of the entire mine, which apparently stretched for several miles below the surface of Wales. “So what is so important about this mine that we had to come here? I thought you were looking for something down by the farm?” Lisa had apparently gotten bored of waiting by the souvenirs. “Well, like I told you; a Perpetuum has to be anchored. The more powerful the symbol, the stronger the anchor.” He pointed at the map. “Now, sometimes it isn’t enough to just make an object to anchor a symbol to. To complement the power of the anchor for a particularly powerful symbol, it has to be put in a location as close to the earth as possible. And nothing says close like deep inside a cave, or a mine in this case.”

Lisa looked at the map. It depicted a maze of tunnels, shafts and ventilation ducts running all through the hillside between the school and the farm. “And how on earth will you know where to look, or what to look for even?” Sasha smiled. “It’s simple: The anchor will be somewhere close to the farm, in the one place that is guarded.” The door to the school opened and closed. “It sounds like the rest has arrived. Are you coming?” Sasha left the room and headed for the main entrance, leaving Lisa behind who was still digesting what he said. “Wait, what do you mean, guarded? Sasha?” She rushed after him, hoping he would answer her, but there was a group of people in the main hall, gathered around Clint. She decided this might not be the best time to discuss these matters. Once they had joined the rest, Clint surveyed the group and got started. “Now that we are all here, we can begin. My name is Clint Weathering and I am the curator and custodian of our local museum of Antiquities and History. Welcome. First I will take you around the museum to tell you a little bit about the history of the area. Then we shall go into the actual mine which is situated behind the museum for a sneak peak at some actual historically significant remnants of ancient times.

The rest of the group seemed to take his words with mixed levels of interest. It consisted of a group of mostly elderly people who had arrived by bus, or so Sasha determined by looking out onto the parking lot. Some of them seemed genuinely interested in what Clint had to say, others were too busy with other conversations and some seemed to be so near death they didn’t care either way. Sasha didn’t care much for the group travel concept. He did most of his travelling alone and that suited him just fine.

Clint took roughly two hours going through the museum with the group, telling tales at most every display case in every room. He was a very gifted storyteller, but even that couldn't prevent Sasha wanting to shoot himself about halfway through. As gifted a storyteller as the man was, most of the local history was entirely uninteresting. It wasn't until he took the group outside and into the mine that Sasha's interest peaked.

The mine entrance was locked up tight. A fence prevented people from entering. In the fence was a small door, which was held shut by a metal rod which in turn was padlocked to the door itself. "No way to get in without the key, no way to get out either," was the commentary Clint provided as he opened the door and led the group inside. There were some giggles. He hit a switch near the entrance. A generator whirred to life and along the tunnel leading down into the mine, lights flickered on. As the group descended behind their tourguide, Lisa and Sasha fell behind a bit. Sasha pulled a compass from one of the pouches on his belt. "Now, if I am not mistaken, your farm is south of here, so we should look for a way south. If memory serves, there are several tunnels leading in that direction down the path." Lisa pulled her phone from her pocket, swiped and tapped the display of it a few times, to show him a photo of the map inside the museum. "That one looks good for it." She pointed at one of the tunnels on the map. Sasha smiled. "Good thinking." They followed the group for a while longer as Clint regaled of Roman digging and World War bomb shelters, until they came upon a closed off tunnel leading in the direction they meant to go. "This looks promising," Lisa said. Sasha looked through the gaps between the boards sealing off the tunnel. He nodded. "Let's wait a bit." The group continued further down the lit path, which came to a corner not far down. As they rounded the corner and disappeared from view, Sasha pulled something from another pouch, whispered something and then took Lisa by the hand. "Let's go." Before she knew what was going on, Sasha pulled her through the boards as if they weren't there. On the other end he dropped whatever it had been back into its pouch and pulled out something else. "How did you do that?" Lisa tapped the boards. They were still solidly in place. "Oh, I picked up a Symbol of Fog a while ago, allows you to pass through things otherwise impassable." He whispered something to whatever it was in his hand this time, then he threw it in the air. At first it looked like a handful of dust, then the dust lit up as it swirled in mid air to form a ball, which hovered before Sasha briefly before starting to move slowly down the tunnel. Before Lisa could ask, he explained. "Symbol of Light."

They followed the floating ball of light deeper into the tunnel. It was clear that no one had been here in a long time. Dust was piled almost a foot high, cobwebs hung from the sealing here and there. Some of the support beams were cracked or even broken completely and the floor was uneven and cracked as well, requiring them to step carefully. "So, these symbols. You catch them and then...you use them?" Sasha nodded as he extended his hand to help her over a large boulder he had just climbed. "And the one we are after right now, the powerful one, you will take that one too?" Again, Sasha confirmed her question with a nod. "So...why exactly do you do that? Catch symbols I mean. Aren't they better off where they are?" Sasha shrugged. "Some are, and if that is the case I usually leave them be. But most are created for purposes that are no longer served by the presence of the symbol. So I remove them and put them to use elsewhere, where they can be of more use." Lisa considered his words a few moments. "So basically, you are a

janitor. You clean up the mess other people make, or fix things other people can't fix?" Sasha laughed. His laugh echoed down the tunnel. "I guess you can put it that way, yes." They came to an intersection. The ball of light lingered in the middle of it. Sasha looked at his compass, but it was whirling incomprehensibly. "Hmm, too much iron in the rock here. This thing is no use." He put it away. With a quick gesture of his hand, he cut the ball in half, which reformed it into two smaller balls of light. Then he sent each in another direction. "Let's give it a moment." They waited for a few minutes. Then, one of the balls of light returned. "Alright, so we go that way." Sasha pointed in the direction the other ball had gone to. "Why that way?" Sasha motioned the ball to hover in front of them. "Because of the two orbs I sent out, this one came back unhindered. The other one did not. So something stopped it from returning. And that, is where we need to go." Lisa got it. "Because that is the corridor which is guarded?" They continued down the other path. "So, what exactly do you think is guarding the anchor?" Sasha moved some cobwebs out of the way. "Oh, can be anything really. Traps, beasts, men. All depends on how powerful the witch or warlock who put this thing here was."

Lisa nearly tripped over something on the floor. "Men? But won't they all be long dead by now?" Sasha smiled. "They could be. But that might not stop them." Lisa shivered. "Wait, what?" They rounded a corner and ran into a wall. The ball of light hovered into it and vanished, leaving them in the pitch black darkness of the mine. "Oh, great. A dead end. And no light? How are we going to get back now?" Sasha ran his hand over the cold surface of the wall. "We are not. We are going forward." "Forward? But there is nothing here." Sasha rummaged in another pouch and pulled out a diamond that shone with a dim light of its own. "Wow. You have diamonds in your pockets? What else do you have in there?" Sasha put his finger to her lips. "Ssh. Quiet." Then he held the diamond to the wall, which rippled, then vanished. "Symbol of Clarity. Removes illusions." He tucked the diamond back into the pouch. Behind the illusion of the wall was a small cavern. The two balls of light hovered perfectly still in the center of it, above what looked like an altar of sorts. The walls of the cavern glistened, water dripping down onto the ground below. A small pool had formed around the base of the altar. On it was a book. Sasha and Lisa approached the altar carefully. Once they were close enough to see the book clearly, Sasha gasped in awe. "No way. This can't be." Lisa had no clue what this was about. "What can't be?" Sasha pointed at the book. "That is a tome, the main tool a scribe needs to create symbols. It is also the anchor to the Perpetuum at your farm. I can sense the energy emanating from it." He hovered his hand over the book. "So much power. This symbol was the scribe's dying creation. No scribe would use their own tome for an anchor unless they never planned to use it again."

Lisa felt something as well, but she couldn't really tell what it was. "Back on the farm, you said that the tome would contain the meaning of the symbol. So with this you can look it up, right?" Sasha walked around the altar, as if searching for something. "Yes, but if we disturb the anchor, we will probably trigger its defenses. And I would like to know what those are before we do." He ran his hands over the altar, looked in the water and then expanded his search outward to the walls of the cavern. Lisa remained in the center. "Almost impossible to find anything. The walls are covered in years of crystal deposits from the water. If there were any symbols etched there, we can't see them now."

Lisa heard footsteps behind her, coming from the tunnel they had emerged from. "Sasha, someone is coming," she whispered. But he didn't seem to hear her. She looked at the tunnel as the footsteps got louder. Then Tom emerged into the light of the orbs hovering near the ceiling. "Tom? What are you doing here?" Tom didn't look at all pleased. He was carrying a shotgun. "I could ask you the same thing Lisa. What are you doing here with him?" He indicated Sasha, who seemed oblivious of Tom's entry, with the barrel of his shotgun. "So what, I turn my back for a day and you go and have an affair with the first witch you come across? Hmm? Guess you like that huh? Having one of those freakazoids show up after all those years, and then go off on an adventure, leaving me to rot back at the farm?!" Tom was now yelling, his voice echoed loudly through the cavern. Still Sasha didn't seem to have noticed him. Tears welled up in Lisa's eyes. This was the conversation she had feared. "No, it's not like that, you don't understand." Tom didn't seem to want to listen to reason. "Oh no? Well, maybe you will understand this!" He primed the gun, aimed it at Sasha and fired a round at the oblivious warlock. The shot rang loudly through the cave as the round penetrated Sasha's abdomen, exploding on impact, nearly tearing him in half as he fell to the floor hard, where his blood mixed with the water of the pool around the altar. "NO!" Lisa rushed to Sasha's side, but there was nothing to save. He was dead.

"You, you monster! You killed him! You actually shot and killed him!" Lisa turned to Tom, getting up to assail him with her bare hands, but he primed the gun again and aimed it at her. "Oh, so I am the monster? You are the cheating whore who goes around playing nice with witches and their evil kind. Who knows what you two were up to while I was gone. Was he any good, hmm? Did he make you squeel?" He walked up to her and bashed her against the head with the stock of his rifle. Lisa screamed in pain. She felt a trickle of blood going down her ear and shoulder into her shirt. Then, out of nowhere, she heard a voice.

"Lisa, Lisa! Snap out of it! Lisa!"

It was Sasha's voice. But it was distant. She thought she was imagining things. Tom stood over her, now pointing the gun at her head once more. "Let's see if your blood matches his, hmm?"

"Lisa, Lisa! Oh for gods' sake! Lisa!"

She felt something cold on her lips, and the next thing she knew, Sasha was leaning over her. She shot upright, gasping, looking around frantically for Tom. He was nowhere to be found. She touched the side of her head with her fingers, where Tom had hit her. There was blood on her fingertips. "What happened?" Sasha pointed at something near the altar. It was a misty figure encased in some kind of semi-transparent stone. "I guess you found the guardian for the anchor. It's a phantasm. I managed to trap it using up some of my most powerful counterspell symbols, but I don't think the trap will hold." He tried to hoist her to her feet. "Can you walk?" She steadied herself. She felt a bit shaky, but it felt okay to stand. "A phantasm?" Sasha walked to the altar and picked up the book. "A creature of pure energy that takes the shape of your worst fears and kills you using your own mind. You were almost dead before I even knew what was going on, as it usually takes on one target at a time. It wasn't until you started bleeding out of thin air when I

figured it out.” He took her by the hand. “Let’s get the hell out of here.” The two orbs shot back into the tunnel as Sasha and Lisa started running towards it. Even though they had traversed it once, that didn’t make it easier this time. They were going faster and vision was still limited. Behind them it remained eerily silent as they stumbled and rushed back to the entrance to the mine. “I don’t think it is following us,” Lisa gasped. “We can slow down, right?” But Sasha didn’t slow down. “A phantasm doesn’t need to follow. It knows who we are and will attack us when we least expect it. We need to get out of this mine before it…” He stopped, making Lisa pile into him. “Ouch, what was that about?” Sasha summoned one of the orbs that lit the way. “Don’t you see anything odd here?” Lisa looked around. “No?” Sasha pointed at the ground. “There are no footprints in the dust here. If we had been here before, our footprints would have been in the dust.” Lisa instinctively looked around. They hadn’t passed the crossroads where they had chosen to go towards the cavern, yet the only footprints in the dust were those they had just made. “How can that be?” Sasha sighed. “The phantasm broke free of my spell. It must have made us miss the intersection, or is now making us think we did so we will backtrack. No way to tell. Do you have the map of the mine?” Lisa pulled out her phone and summoned the map with a few moves of her fingers. “If the map is accurate, the other tunnel should lead to a lower level. But there is a ventilation duct leading to the surface somewhere along it. If we can find that, I can get us out of the mine.” Lisa pointed at the book Sasha still held tightly in his grasp. “And what about that? What if we just drop it, or destroy it, or whatever. Won’t that get rid of the phantasm?” Sasha shook his head. “Anchors are usually fairly fragile, which is why they must be hidden and guarded. But whoever put up the symbol, used their own tome as an anchor. And tomes like these are virtually indestructible. No, the only thing we can do is get the tome to the symbol it anchors, break the link at the source and hope that will do the trick.”

Lisa was about to comment on the ‘hope’ remark, but Sasha had already started down the tunnel once again. And since the light moved with him, she had no choice but to follow. It took fairly long before anything happened after that. They had been walking down the tunnel for a good long time, when Sasha pointed up. “Here. The ventilation duct.” He indicated a narrow pipe, half a meter wide, which seemed to go straight up behind a steel grate that looked to be firmly bolted to the tunnel ceiling. “You want us to crawl through that?!” Lisa looked at it, and decided that this was not going to work. “And how long is that pipe anyway?” Sasha rummaged through his pouches. “If the map is accurate, it is about thirty meters long. We’re still very close to the surface here. But I in no way intend for us to climb it.” He had taken what looked to be a small blue chunk of something and a tiny feather from their pouches, whispered to them, and then mashed them together. A swirling mist surrounded the two of them, at the same time shrinking them down and lifting them off the ground. “Symbols of size and levitation, combined for effect.” He took Lisa by the hand. “Going up.” And with that they shot up through the grate and into the duct. They were tiny, so it was easily big enough to hold both of them as they soared at high speed to the light at the end of the tunnel.

They were roughly halfway when they heard a rumbling noise coming from below them. Lisa looked down. She couldn’t see into the darkness. “What is going on?!” she shouted over the gusting wind in both their ears. Sasha looked down as well. “Oh, shit.” Lisa looked again after his

not so promising remark. Now, the duct was brightly lit, as a raging monster of flame and molten rock, claws and teeth extended towards them, rushed its way through the duct towards them, destroying the duct and the stone around it in a deafening rumble. "That is one pissed off phantasm. Quick, keep going!" They continued their path up, but the phantasm accelerated and gained on them rapidly. "We can't outrun it, it's going to get us!" Lisa's voice trembled with dread. "That is what it wants you to think! It manifests fear! We have to keep going, don't give in to fear!" But Lisa found it very hard not to fear something that seemed to destroy the entire mine below them as it raced to catch up with them. The beast extended its claws and raked her leg, causing a sharp pain to shoot through it, making Lisa yell out. She lost her grip on Sasha's hand. "No!" Right at that moment, they reached the end of the ventilation duct. Both Sasha and Lisa flew out of it at high speed, followed by a river of molten rock and fire, with the claws and teeth of a ferocious animal. The ventilation duct apparently reached the open air amidst a small copse of trees and bushes next to an open stretch of farmland. Needless to say, that copse was no longer there after flames consumed it. Sasha and Lisa fell to the ground, rolling away onto the open field as their normal size was quickly restored. The phantasm roared as it bent over Lisa, who was closest, preparing to strike. Sasha quickly jumped to his feet, looking for something to stop the beast with. "Lisa, no!" But the beast already engulfed the young woman in flame and molten rock.

Only to stop short, and vanish as if it had never been there, leaving a flabbergasted Lisa and Sasha. He quickly rushed to her side. She was unharmed, save the clawmarks on her right leg. The area around her was scorched, the ground still hot to the touch. But Lisa and the ground she was on was unscathed. "Ow, ow, ow! She frantically started grasping at her chest. "What, what is it?" Sasha had no idea what was going on. "My necklace, it's burning, get it off!" Sasha looked. There was a thin chain around her neck. He grabbed it, and pulled it off her neck. It was searing hot, so he couldn't hold it for long before having to drop it. Lisa breathed a sigh of relief. "Thank you." Sasha got up, walked away and came back with a small stick in his hand. He used it to pick up the necklace. It was a thin chain with a pendant that looked like an uncut piece of rock, set in a silver hanger. It glowed briefly with a reddish sheen that seemed to come from within, before going dark. He touched it. The stone was cold. But he did sense something else. "This pendant. Do you know what it is?" Lisa shook her head. "My grandmother gave it to me. She said it would keep me safe." Sasha weighed it on his hand before handing it back to her. "It is a ward stone. Extremely rare. It wards off magical attacks, absorbs the energy, thus protecting its wearer." Lisa looked at it with a new sense of respect. "Your grandmother. She never did tell you who she really was, did she?" Lisa frowned. "What do you mean?" But then Sasha realised something else. "The book! Where is it?!" He looked around frantically, then breathed a sigh of relief as he found it a bit further away in the grass. "We are close to the farm. We should get back there and break the anchor so the symbol can be removed." Sasha took the book and returned to Lisa. With his knife he cut a few strips of cloth from his tunic and bandaged her bleeding leg. "Can you stand?" Lisa nodded. He helped her up, then they both walked in the direction of the farm, which was visible in the distance on the other end of the field.

They entered the barn where the symbol was still neatly in the same place where they had left it before. "Alright, a moment." He pulled out a sheet of something that looked like hand-made paper and held it over the symbol, which shifted onto the paper almost instantly, as if it had always been there. "Could you hold the book for a moment, right there?" Sasha indicated a place next to the piece of paper. Lisa took the book, doing as she had been asked. Sasha pulled out a small knife, which he whispered something to before moving it vertically between the paper and the book. Then he put the knife away and moved the sheet of paper. The symbol remained on the paper, rather than staying in its place. "It is done." Sasha folded the paper and put it in a pouch. "That's it? You couldn't have done that without the ordeal in the mine?!" Sasha shook his head. "There would have been no way to tell where the tether was. This was the only way, since we couldn't destroy the anchor." Lisa looked at the book she now held. "And this?" Sasha ran his hand over the cover. "I think you might want to open it." Lisa frowned, then opened the book. On the first page was a message.

'To my dearest granddaughter,

When you were born, I gave you my name and with it my power. With finding my tome I know the time has come for it to be used once again. May you use it well.

- Tamarinde'

It was her grandmother's handwriting. "Your grandmother was a witch. And not just that. She was a scribe." Lisa's jaw dropped. "And you didn't bother to tell me this sooner?" Sasha got up. "I wasn't entirely certain until I saw the tome. The cover has her symbol." Lisa looked at the cover. On it was a Celtic knot, a different one from Sasha's. "When you told me your parents named you after your grandmother, I suspected something. This message confirms it. She gave you her powers before she died. And now you have her tome to learn her skill too. You should be proud, she was a magnificent witch, the greatest of her generation according to many."

They walked back to the farmhouse and went in. They decided to go to the kitchen where Lisa poured the two of them drinks as they sat down to look at what they had found. Lisa leafed through the book, finding page upon page of carefully drawn symbol, along with explanations and almost mathematical equations next to them. Her eye fell on a page with a familiar symbol, the symbol Sasha had caught. "Symbol of Mirrors" it read on the page. She didn't understand much of the text next to it. "Do you know what this means?" She showed Sasha the two page list of equations. He looked at them with great interest. "This is a true work of art. This symbol was designed to keep everyone away from its location, except for several very specific people. Look, can you see the equation here splitting off in two directions? One indicates herself, the other everyone else." Lisa nodded. "Well, that explains why no one ever came to visit us when we opened the B&B here." He perused the information a while, his finger following lines of formula. "Look at this: It's an if, else if formula, supposed to make sure that no one but you would find the book. My presence in the cavern triggered the phantasm, which doesn't discriminate once it is activated. She linked the symbol to a whole string of different events, very intricate. I have never

seen such detail.” Lisa took his words for truth without question. She had seen him do enough to value his knowledge of the topic. But something did bother her. “But if the symbol was meant to keep everyone but me away, how did you find it?” Sasha pointed at a particular scribble in one of the page margins. “That right there is a safety trigger. It was built in to make sure the book was found at a specific time. If you hadn’t come across it before then, it would start degrading the symbol’s hiding properties just enough for someone with the proper training to catch on to it, making sure that a scribe or a symbol chaser would find it.” He took the piece of paper from the pouch he had put it in and unfolded it. The symbol was gone. “I figured as much. It has completely degraded now that the tome has been discovered. Shame. A hiding spell like that would have been very useful.”

Sasha closed the tome and handed it to Lisa. “But what if I hadn’t been there with you? You could have just taken the book and run. Or someone else might have come along to steal it.” Sasha smiled as he leaned back in the chair he sat in. “Well, I am fairly certain that little gizmo around your neck,” he pointed at her necklace “wasn’t given to you by accident. I am actually quite certain that without it, I and anyone else who tried, would have been royally fucked up by that phantasm.” He took a sip of his drink. “How are your wounds?” Lisa had almost forgotten about them. She looked down at her leg. Her pants were torn, the strips of cloth were soaked in blood, but the bleeding seemed to have subsided. Her headwound was also not bleeding anymore. “Seems fine, but I need a clean bandage. Could you get the first aid kit from the top shelf?” Sasha walked over to the shelf she indicated and grabbed the bright red first aid kit. He was just about to start removing the blood soaked cloth when the door opened and Tom came in. “What the fuck is going on here?!” he exclaimed as he looked from Lisa, to Sasha, to the first aid kit and back to Lisa. “What the hell happened here?! What are you doing to my wife you asshole?” Sasha got up just as Tom walked up to him. He grabbed Sasha firmly by his shirt and intended to punch him, but Sasha was quicker. With a swift move of his left arm he blocked the incoming swing. Then he grabbed both of Tom’s arms, twisted them outward and up, forcing him to his knees. “You should learn to wait for answers to your questions before jumping to conclusions, Tom.” With those words he released Tom, who snarled at him, but didn’t make another move. Sasha turned to Lisa. “Lisa, thank you for your hospitality. It has been a truly educational experience, but it seems I have outlasted my welcome.” Tom got up and made room as Sasha walked to the door. “You need to get your wife to a doctor. She is injured. Or maybe you had noticed but chose to ignore it?” Lisa wanted to say something, but before she could, Sasha was gone. She got up from her chair, but the adrenalin that had kept her going from the mine to the farm had worn off and the pain forced her back into her seat. She heard the front door open and close. And there she was. One day after he had come into her life, she was so much the wiser, but with even more questions she had wanted to ask. Tom turned to his wife. “Are you okay?”

Several years later, Sasha was sitting in front of a bistro in central Paris. It was a warm summer day and the ice tea he had ordered tasted heavenly. He had just successfully obtained a rare symbol from a nearby mansion, in the shape of a piece of amber with something encased within. He was looking at the stone, twisting it between his fingers to let the light shine through it, when a

woman came up to his table. "Mind if I join you?" It was Lisa. "No, please. By all means." She pulled up a chair and sat down. A waitress came up to take her order. "I'll have what he's having, thanks." The waitress left, to return moments later with a full, cold glass of ice tea. "It's been a long time Lisa, how are you?" She extended her right leg out from under the table. She was wearing a skirt underneath a loose fitting white blouse. He could clearly see the scars from where the phantasm had mauled her. "All healed up. I didn't get any prettier for it, but it only hurts when I laugh." She laughed. "You are a hard man to find." Sasha smiled. "I get around. How did you find me anyway?" Lisa tapped the bag she had set down beside her. "I have learned a few tricks since last we met. My grandmother was a genius at detection spells." The both of them sat in silence for a while, drinking their ice tea while watching people stroll by. "And how is your husband?" Sasha continued. Lisa put down her glass. "He is no longer my husband. After the symbol was gone, business finally picked up. He got so engrossed in it, I doubt he even minded much when I told him I wanted to do something else." Sasha nodded. "And what exactly is it you want to do?" She shrugged. "After our adventure, I read my grandmothers tome. It has been a good read and I learned a lot, but a lot of it still makes no sense to me. I need a teacher. And since you are the only expert I know on symbols, I was kind of hoping you would teach me." Again they sat in silence for a while. Sasha finished his ice tea. When the waitress came to collect his empty glass he paid for the both of them, then got up. Lisa looked at him questioningly.

"Well, are you coming, or not?" he asked.