

Quest for the Sacred Tome

by [Mark Silcox](#) (November 2023)



I had a theory. “There were two separate keyholes in the door to the Depthless Cavern. Remember? We got the first key from the mouth of the Stone Gargoyle. I bet the second one’s somewhere similar!”

I had to stop talking to swallow the rest of the Twizzler I'd just shoved into my mouth. Cassie turned away from the computer screen and gave me a look. I could tell she thought whatever I was going to suggest would be beneath contempt. But I was feeling inspired and decided to press on.

"So. We never properly worked over that Statue in the Abandoned Courtyard. And its mouth was open! I think I definitely remember it was open. I might even remember seeing something shiny inside. I know it'd be a lot've backtracking, but..."

"Dude!" Her voice quivered with impatience. "Don't you remember what it said on the scroll we found under the Step Pyramid?"

I'd have been more impressed by her tone if there hadn't been hot chocolate stains down the front of her pajamas. I struggled to recall what she was talking about, but my brain was misted over from sleep deprivation. "Um." I took another piece of licorice.

"Yah ... *didn't think so!* It said on the scroll that the Sacred Cavern could only be entered by a true descendent of the goddess Persephone. And the only way we can trick the Ancient Ones into believing that we qualify is to swipe the Golden Sheaf of Wheat we saw in the Professor's Study. I bet we won't get anywhere *near* the second key until we've done that first."

"Ah. Right, yeah. Forgot about the wheat sheaf thing. Maybe you're ..."

Cassie laughed, then put down the game controller and leaned back to bump her nose against my cheek. "No worries partner. You'd suck pretty bad as an archaeologist though. How about some more cocoa?"

"How about coffee instead? I need a jolt, apparently."

She grunted a yes and turned back to face the screen. The game was paused on the image of a wooden fertility totem with a secret compartment carved into its belly.

Outside the fogged glass of my apartment's one window, nothing was visible but a ceaseless whirl of snow and a few airborne leaves nobody had bothered to rake that autumn. A glacial wind rattled the drainage pipes and frozen tree branches.

The two of us had planned to spend most of that weekend at the college library, but after the weather turned hostile we'd holed up together in Cassie's apartment playing *Temple of the Doomed Prophet* instead. We rented the console from a local game store and I'd borrowed the game CD from some guy in my class on *The Post-Colonial Novel*. We had been at it more or less non-stop since Friday evening, apart from snacks, pee breaks, and one drowsy make-out session the previous night on her ratty sofa.

I stood up slowly and walked to the kitchen. After getting so absorbed in the game's goofy storyline, it was almost physically painful to step away from the screen. Neither of us had been arcade rats growing up, but these complicated adventure games full of brain-cramping puzzles and surreal imagery were more addictive than we'd been ready for.

As I staggered down the hallway, I nudged the microwave with my elbow. The pile of textbooks sitting on top of it teetered, but did not collapse. I had been through all of the tomes that were sitting there at least once earlier on that term. But with finals two weeks away, the sight of them in a wobbling heap made me feel itchy inside.

"Maybe when the wind clears up we should head over to Java Larry's and read awhile?" I shook coffee grounds into a paper filter.

"Mm. Storm's still pretty bad." Cassie was doing that thing with the game controller where you tilt your whole torso from

side to side as your perspective shifts. "Whoa! Fuckin' ... *aargh!* Fell into the river! Is it going to make me start again or ... oh, ok, phew."

The coffeepot started to burble while I watched her do her eccentric private dance. It was more fun guessing at what was happening in the game from her body English than trying to catch a glimpse of the screen.

From the kitchen table, Cassie's cellphone shrilled out a few bars of hip hop: "Die, muthafucka!" etcetera, with machine gun accompaniment.

She giggled. "Oh shoot, how embarrassing. I totally meant to replace that ringtone with a Bach cantata or something."

"The illegal firearm does have a good beat, though." How could somebody with an IQ of 141 enjoy listening to that stuff?

"Who's the call from?"

I looked down at her screen. "It's a message from Terry—wants to know if you're 'keeping your toes warm?'"

"Ew."

"D'you want to ...?"

"Oh *hell* no. He can see my damn toes in Latin class tomorrow—*shit!* Into the river again."

Terry was an extensively freckled, earnest coffeehouse poet type who had grown up in the next town over from Cassie's family. They'd both come to college on scholarships, and he had taken a class schedule that suspiciously overlapped with hers. Not an out-and-out *rival*, exactly, but after three months of dating her I was still insecure enough to be relieved when she didn't reach for the phone.

I snagged a paperback from the top of pile and brought it back

with me, along with two steaming plastic mugs.

"Okay, I think I'm almost through to the—*aargh!* Splash. That time I was pretty close, though." She glanced back at me over her shoulder. "*The Mayor of Casterbridge*—Brian, for reals?"

Something had passed across her face just then that brought me right to attention. I tossed the book aside, quickly as I could. "Well, then, give me the damn controller. I can only watch you drown so many times before I start to get bummed."

"Oo, so masculine!" The scary look very slowly ceded space to a smile. "You really want to try this rafting sequence? Your ass will sink like a stone."

The plastic controller was still warm from her hands. I found the sensation I got from holding it arousing for some reason. I hit the restart button, leaning forward and crossing my legs to hide the evidence.

My on-screen POV extended out over a swirling river full of whitecaps and sinuous eddies. On the right shoreline was a featureless wasteland; over to the left were several spooky, Easter Island-ish stone faces staring into the distance. The front edge of a crude wooden raft poked out at the bottom of the screen. "So how do I navigate this thing?"

"You're carrying a long wooden pole, ha ha," she said, reaching into my lap and giving me an aggressive tweak.

I yelped, and my avatar immediately tipped forward into the water. The console made a morbid, bubbling noise as I drowned, which I hadn't heard while Cassie was playing. I felt a wave of nausea settle overtop the beachhead of my lust; the past couple of days' bad eating was catching up with me. "Just leave the artist to his work here, all right?"

"Artist! I guess I think of you more as a stunt double."

The game wanted me to navigate my tiny raft past the slick

boulders poking out of the water until I reached some waypoint far off in the gameworld. Having Cassie there next to me was a distraction, and on the first couple of tries I crashed and drowned in almost no time. But after the slurry of licorice and coffee in my stomach had settled a bit, I took a couple of deep breaths and concentrated. For reasons I wouldn't have been able to name at the time, it suddenly seemed important that I do well at this.

"Lookoutlookout, there's a boulder under the ... oh, well done!" Cassie swayed and flinched and wrung her hands as my avatar ducked back and forth through the rapids. She was a squirmer and a face-puller at movies too, but I had never seen anything like this. She'd told me over toaster pastries that morning that the reason she got so excited playing games was because of the way you yourself actually *are* a character in the story. That struck me as an odd way to think about it. I regarded the little animated adventurer onscreen more as a tool – a smiling virtual GPS built to guide me through the gameworld–rather than as some kind of alter ego.

I was floating along pretty well until the river took a sharp bend to the right and I didn't compensate for the raft's inertia. My avatar smashed his head against one of the stone faces, then dropped straight into the drink. Another loud splash and a hideous gargle.

"Keep trying, Bri. It looks like you might actually beat this thing!" She patted my left hand. "Imma go potty."

Left to myself I was able to focus. About thirty seconds into the sequence, I found a little groove in the water that was a lighter color than the surging, foamy breakers all around me. It carried me through with almost no interference. Not the sort of luck or providence you would ever encounter in the actual world, of course. The key to doing well at those sorts of puzzles is always to forget about whatever real-life process it's supposed to simulate and remember that you're

just fighting a machine.

"How're you doing?" Cassie called out from the toilet.

By that time I had already washed safely ashore onto a short wooden pier. Stone steps led up a grassy hill. I ditched the raft and started to ascend.

"Hey, what's that music?"

The jaunty up-tempo rapids melody had been replaced by slower, more ominous minor chords and the distant hum of electronic cicadas.

"Did you ... oh, for fuck's sake, *really*?"

"Child's play!" I shouted at her through the bathroom door. "Hurry up or you'll miss the next big reveal!"

I heard the toilet seat *thunk*. "Don't you dare go on without me!"

I was surprised that she thought I would pull such a nasty trick. Did it *matter* that I was better at the game than she was? I couldn't tell from her expression when she got back. I could have asked, but the question might have sounded a little too couples-therapy.

About fifteen minutes later we were leaning back together on the sofa, both starting at the screen agog.

Before us stood a high golden door set into the wall of a stone hovel. Two pixelated eyes peeked out through a window near the top. As the dreary chord progression continued *ad nauseam*, we had been scrolling through our inventory, trying to shove absolutely everything we had in our possession, one item after another, through the tiny window. Following each attempt a surly, muffled voice had said "*Pah! You offer me garbage! Do not return until you have the Mystic's Talisman!*"

"Try the fertility totem again!" said Cassie. "Maybe he just ..."

"All right, but I'm telling you ..."

"Pah! ..."

Cassie tossed *The Mayor of Casterbridge* against the far wall. "God damn it! What does the grouchy little troll want from us? I don't remember anything at all about a 'Mystic Talisman'."

"Me either. Do you think he's really a troll? I just had him down as vaguely Eastern European."

"This is *serious*, Brian!"

I gave her a sideways look; she blinked, then laughed.

"Well, OK, maybe not really. But *aargh*, though. What are we supposed to ..."

"We could check online, maybe?"

The internet let us down. The game was still pretty new and nobody had written up a walkthrough yet, at least that we could find. Deceptively gentle freezing rain pattered on the roof as we crouched over my laptop, swigging tepid coffee and cursing the worldwide gaming community.

"What do we do?" I felt genuinely lost; a little panicked even. Our weekend had been a pretty big success against the odds so far. But this stupid game with its narrative illogic might end up ruining everything.

"Is there anyone we know who might have already played it?" Cassie's voice was tense with the expectation of disappointment.

"Most of my friends like shooters and wargames better. Except Dougie K; he's got that big collection of *Myst* clones ..."

"Dougie K! Always liked that guy. Call him, willya?"

My friend Douglas turned out to be studying for a statistics exam. He had heard of the game but hadn't played it. "What's the urgency?" he asked me.

"It's complicated."

"He's playing with a *grrrrrrl!*" Cassie screeched from behind my shoulder.

"Congratulations, dude," said Doug, who hadn't had much luck dating since high school. "It appears that you have won the lottery."

"Indeed."

"Actually, I just thought of something," said Cassie after I'd hung up. "Remember last time we were at *Books 'N Things*? When you were looking for that birthday present for your mom?"

"Sure."

"So didn't they have a whole 'Computer Games' section in the magazine racks? Right next to the stuff about sports or home decorating or whatever?"

"Huh."

"I bet some of those magazines might have hints in them."

The bookstore she was talking about was actually called *Scholar's World*—everybody on campus called it *Books 'n Things* because two thirds of the floor space was devoted to household kitsch and overpriced sweatshirts.

"They might! But ... you don't seriously want to go there *now*, do you?" I glanced out the window again; icy streaks of rain were descending at a forty-five-degree angle like a cascade of sewing needles.

Cassie was sponging at a couple of the chocolate stains on her chest with a damp cloth. "I really am pretty confident they'll have something useful."

"I really don't think there's much chance of ..."

I stopped because she was already struggling into her parka and lace-up boots.

"Brian." She pointed at the TV screen. "Does this seem to you like we're in the middle of some sort of goddamned milk run? We're looking for the Mystic's Talisman!"

I was never going to get used to the way she talked about these games like they were *really happening*, right in the middle of a world full of foul weather, unwashed dishes, library fines, and yoga pants. But I wasn't equipped to argue with her.

The freezing rain was letting up a bit, but the wind outside was like a kick in the stomach. It cut through the miserable barrier of my cotton slacks, making me moan and stagger as the apartment door shut behind us. Cassie was already stomping down the cement stairwell to the parking lot.

My car below was invisible, buried in white.

"Agh!" She karate-kicked a fat icicle off bottom edge of the banister. "We'll never dig it out without a backhoe!" The icicle smashed against the rear bumper of some poor slob's Hyundai.

"Wow. That is a real shame, for sure." I made a half-turn back toward the front door. "I guess maybe we'll have to ..."

Just then a salt-smeared city bus trundled around the corner and pushed its way doggedly toward us along the unplowed road. The transit shelter was maybe two dozen yards away. From under the hood of her parka Cassie gave me a look of friendly pathos, like she had known I was about to abandon the quest,

but was willing to be indulgent. I tried not to think too hard about how often I made her feel that way. Which was actually easy enough to do, given that my toes felt ready to fall off.

The bus was packed with a motley corps of weatherworn nomads, apparently trekking to or from unwelcome errands or livelihoods. A silent couple sipped from a shared paper coffee cup. One hefty dude in a grey parka was tipped over sideways in his seat, and may in fact have been dead. I thanked the bus driver, as I always do. He turned his huge overbite in my direction and murmured a reply that sounded a lot like "Fuck off."

Cassie plunked down in a window seat. Her pajama cuffs were poking out under her sweatpants and the sleeves of her jacket. When the bus hit a patch of frozen slush and skidded leftwards, she squeaked and grabbed my arm, which was sort of nice.

"Does this bus even go to the Wildmoors Mall, though?" I asked her.

"You could go ask Mr. Fangs up front"

I decided to hang tight for a bit instead and eyeball the situation through the murky windows as we chugged along, just to see if we were at least headed in the right direction. We were not, of course. About five minutes later, the pair of us were cowering in another Plexiglas shelter clutching delicate paper transfers in our fists. The wind outside the enclosure was going straight-up Ninja.

"This may have been a bad idea," said Cassie.

When I opened my mouth to speak my chapped lips cracked, so all I managed was a tiny puff of vapor.

The snow crunched from somewhere nearby. We turned to watch a faceless figure wrapped in layers of old clothes shuffle past

along the sidewalk. Faint eddies of powder rose into the air from behind his heels as he lifted each boot out of the snow. I was hypnotized by his steady implacable progress for a minute or two, until he disappeared behind the corner of a duplex.

It gave me an eerie feeling. "I wonder where ..."

"Who knows?" said Cassie. "Non-player character."

The next bus arrived just as our teeth had begun to chatter. This one was empty, but some psychopath had left a side window open, so it was hardly better than being outside. We huddled together and watched the as the ragged strip malls and abandoned-looking houses slid by outside. A rusty snowplow growled along behind us for a few blocks.

Cassie sat in the same position for so long I thought she had dozed off. But her eyes were open.

"What're you thinking about?" I asked her.

"The game."

I had been thinking about the last time we'd had sex. But once she reminded me, my imagination restocked itself with some of the fantastical 3D landscapes we had both been staring at for the past forty-eight hours.

The world we'd been exploring was supposed to be entirely unearthly, but much of it reminded me of the eastern Mediterranean. I'd been on a school study tour to Cyprus two summers before and place had really lodged itself in my visual cortex. Hardy bushes, twiggy trees, rocks jutting right out of the earth, and lots of blue, blue water. When we first started playing I had driven Cassie nuts asking her to slow down with the controller so I could watch the scenery. But fighting the monsters and scouring the magical temples for bags of gold coins had been fun too. And then making out afterwards, more

slowly and thoughtfully than usual, as though we were both still halfway inside the made-up universe.

My head tilted sideways against the glass. Cassie ended up having to nudge me awake when the bus rolled up outside the bookstore.

Indoors there was classical music and the smell of fresh coffee. The place was packed with well-groomed, peaceable characters from the tony neighborhoods that surrounded the mall. I just stood there for a moment and watched them sipping drinks, gently wrangling small children, and in a few cases actually reading. It was like the frozen hellscape outside wasn't even a thing.

Cassie made for the bathroom. I set off toward the magazine racks. A few of the other patrons close by gave me a quick once-over, and I remembered my sketchy weekend attire. I zipped my parka higher to cover the Pop Tart stain on my sweatshirt.

The dreaded Terry was known to lurk disconsolately here on weekends when he didn't drive back out to the sticks. I did a quick scan of the room before remembering his call had come from an out-of-town area code.

Then I found myself veering over toward the Fiction and Lit section. There was still a pretty good selection there in spite of the threat of displacement by Stars and Stripes coffee mugs and dragon-shaped bookends. A woman in a blouse was peering at the Anita Brookners up near the top of one bookcase. I stood there next to her and just scanned the titles back and forth for a while. The haze that had settled over my mind on the bus was still lingering. Eventually I spotted a new novel by a funny British writer my parents had raised me on. I pulled it off the shelf and started reading the blurb.

The woman startled me by stepping closer and peering at the

book over my shoulder. "Oh, I like his stuff!" Pearl earrings, and just a little perfume. "Lots of good jokes. But I found his last one a bit the *lewd* side." Trace of a Scottish accent—real or faux, I couldn't tell.

"Lewd in the right way, though."

She gave a sharp laugh and I turned to look at her. Perhaps half a dozen years older than me; no wedding ring. She had already picked out a few things to buy: a travel book about Costa Rica and a Michael Chabon short story anthology. Glancing down to check out her haul felt a little intrusive from this close up, and sure enough when I looked at her face a second time she grinned and winked. Just the ghostliest pretense of real flirtation. But I was impressed with myself for pulling it off while I was dressed like a hobo on walkabout.

"Brian!"

Cassie was peeking at me from around the edge of the greeting card shelves. I felt as though I'd been caught stealing—not because of the Brookner fan, who had already stepped carefully away, but because of how I had strayed from our quest. During the ugly last days before she dumped me, my ex from high school had accused me of "hiding in books." I knew Cassie would never say anything quite so gauche, but the look she was giving me right now—the same impatient, slightly panicky expression that came over her whenever she got an inkling I wasn't fully in on the fun—was enough to make me want to burn the whole store down.

She took a step toward me and gave my upper arm a squeeze. "Bri? What's wrong?"

"Nothing ... nothing."

"Honest? You looked super-sad there, for just a second."

"I'm *fine*." A couple of heads turned toward us, and I realized I was over-compensating. "Just a little gas—must have been the red licorice. So," I asked her, swallowing, "checked the magazines?" Maybe she'd forgotten that was supposed to be my job.

She held up the cover of a glossy phonebook-sized publication with a pixelated shot of the Dark Prophet's Temple on the cover. The look of concern on her face evanesced into a grin. "Only seven bucks, dude! Or we could split a blueberry scone and read it in the café."

Ten minutes later we were sitting on the same side of a polished wooden table behind two vanilla lattes. The difficult thing turned out to be stopping ourselves from reading ahead.

"It says the talisman appears in the Valley Shrine, surrounded by; no wait, *shit*, that's later on." She flipped over the cover when I tried to lean in to take a look. "Come on, Bri—it's no *fun* if you know what's going to happen in advance. It makes the game too easy."

"I like easy."

"Aw, no—you don't, though, really." This time her expression was crafty, a little knowing, and exciting to see from across our crumb-covered table. "You're the kind of guy who's up for a challenge."

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